

THOMAS, DREW B.

INTERVIEW

#4479

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BIOGRAPHY FORM  
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION  
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

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THOMAS, DREW E.

INTERVIEW

4479

Field Worker's name Virgil Coursey

Report made on (date) June 16, 1937 1937

Name Drew B. Thomas

Post Office Address 706 North Spurgeon

Residence address (or location) Altus, Oklahoma

DATE OF BIRTH: Month December Day 17 Year 1867

Place of birth \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Father William H. Thomas Place of birth Georgia

Other information about father \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Mother Sarah H. West Place of birth Mississippi

Other information about mother \_\_\_\_\_

Notes or complete narrative by the field worker dealing with the life and  
history of the person interviewed. Refer to Manual for suggested subjects  
and questions. Continue on blank sheets if necessary and attach firmly to  
this form. Number of sheets attached \_\_\_\_\_

Virgil Coursey  
Investigator  
June 16, 1937

Interview with  
Drew B. Thomas  
Altus, Oklahoma

My father, William H. Thomas, was born in Georgia; my mother, Sarah H. West, was born in Mississippi. I was born in 1867.

I came to Oklahoma from a place near Fort Worth, Texas, in December 1889. I was a young man with no family and I picked up anything I could find to do, which was mostly thrashing and other farm work.

In 1890 there was a big crop of wheat harvested here. That was the first big boom in this country. However, in 1892 wheat went to 25 cents a bushel which resulted in almost bankrupting the country. There was a continued drouth for three years. Almost everyone left and the country was practically depopulated.

I was one of the number who left during the drouth. I went back home. In 1897 I returned to Oklahoma and settled one mile east of Friendship. I homesteaded one quarter of a section of land, improved it and still own it.

Originally this was Greer County and was under the

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jurisdiction of Texas. There was some dispute as to whether the North Fork or South Fork of the Red River was the boundary line. In 1896 this country was opened to homesteading. By a special act of congress old-timers were given the privilege of purchasing an additional quarter section for \$1.00 an acre if this land had been in their possession and had been improved by them. Also there was a provision that there must be no improvements on lands filed on prior to 1898.

People flocked in here as thick as flies. One man over near Mountain Park was asked where he was headed for. He replied that he was headed for Greer County where one got \$2.00 apiece for sawing off wagon tongues so every one could get in there.

In 1897 a friend and I found a half section of land on which there was a half mile of barbed wire fence. According to law we had to buy improvements before we could homestead. We paid an old cow-man \$150.00 for this half mile of fence.

One of the handicaps and hardships encountered here

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was the scarcity of fuel. It was necessary to go to the Indian Territory and steal the wood from the Indians. Practically every pioneer has been guilty of stealing wood at one time or another whether he is willing to admit it or not.

In one of my newspaper articles I made certain remarks about certain rabbit eating, wood stealing pioneers and their early day escapades, and smiled as I imagined the mirth that these reminiscences would recall to the minds of all old timers. I was surprised when the phone rang and an old lady informed me that she had just read the article and was offended at the remarks concerning her husband. I hastened to assure her that there was no intention of offending anyone and that I would be glad to make amends in any way possible. She assured me in a fresh outburst of tears that she did not want to see me. There was a climax of emotion she screamed, "What will our children think when they read that we used to steal wood? The trouble is that it's--it's so!

It is true that most of us have stolen wood from the Indians, but how else could this country have been settled up?

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One thing must be kept in mind when reviewing these facts and that is that the arrests made by the marshals and the fines imposed by them were mostly horse play. Some Indians were put out as collectors and they charged a fine of 25 cents when one was caught stealing wood. This was done mostly to satisfy the Indians and was not as a protective or prohibitory measure.

Some fifteen or twenty men were apprehended one day and carried to jail at Anadarko to stand trial. Now in this jail were bank robbers, murderers and thugs of the lowest order. These crooks swore that they would positively not allow any one who would stoop so low as to steal wood to be placed in their cells; they thought too much of themselves to associate with common wood-stealers. Some of the men had to be placed in the death cell because there was no more available space in the jail. These men went on each others bonds and were released with the understanding that they should return at the appointed time for trial. Some of these men scattered out over the country and are still out on bond, after some forty years.

Just about a year ago an old man told me of his ex-

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periences in stealing wood from the Indians. He had gone to the territory alone and had just finished loading his wagon and was ready to leave. The wardens appeared and told him to unload the wood and come with them.

"Gentlemen, I would like to make a statement first," the wood stealer said.

"No statement is necessary. Unload the wood and come along," one of the wardens said gruffly.

The old man insisted that he must make a statement, that his case was different. He was finally told to make his statement and be quick about it. He spoke as follows:

"Gentlemen, as you can see, I am no longer a young man. I have worked hard all my life. I have tried to make an honest living, to do as I would like to be done by. Now I am reduced to such poverty and am in such dire circumstances that I must stoop to this. At home I have an invalid wife, and she has been blind for years. She is a pitiful sight. Our only son does all he can to assist and comfort her, but he too is an invalid from

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twisted limbs, caused by a fall when he was small.

And then only last week, my daughter went violently insane. Gentlemen, I came for this wood so that my wife and son might have fuel while I take this daughter to the insane asylum at Terral. You have my story. If your hearts are so hard that you would take me in the face of these facts, then I have nothing more to say."

After a moments hesitation the wardens rode away with this parting injunction, "Don't let us catch you in here again."

The old man crawled onto his load of wood and headed for home. The next day he learned that the wardens had apprehended a big bunch of men and were taking them to jail. The old man chuckled, "Well, in that case they will be out of the woods for a day or so, I'll just hitch up my team and go fetch another load of wood."

The coming of the Rock Island Railroad into Mangum gave us a closer outlet, and as our supply of fuel began to vanish we commenced the use of coal. Soon the 'Frisco

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built from here and the old order of things changed. New towns sprang up, most inland villages perished, and the whole order of things was reversed.

Navajo nestled at the feet of the Navajo Mountains thirteen miles east of Altus, was in the early days a trading post for the Indians. It was founded by "Buckskin Joe." There were one or two stores, a school and church. With the coming of the railroad in 1903 Headrick was established as a railroad town, and sapped Navajo of its life. Trade moved away and Navajo was plowed up into farms. All that remains today is the old burying ground.

Six miles east and three miles south was the historical town of Dunbar, a village boasting school, church, a blacksmith shop and some stores. It also was eliminated by the railroad.

In the south part of the county, directly south of here stood Yeldell, an early day postoffice. Later on it gave way to Hess.

South of Hess was Yates. A postoffice was kept in

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a farm house here.

The big change and elimination of many post offices came in 1904 and 1905 with the advent of rural delivery. These three towns were eliminated.

The town of Elmer sprang up because the Orient Railroad built through there, running north and south.

The old town of Warren, twenty miles northeast was a business center. The post office was eliminated by the rural delivery, but the town still stands.

One mile south of the present town of Blair was a post office named Dot. Ben Zinn, postmaster and merchant, served the country in pioneer days. The town no longer exists.

The town of Martha, six miles north and three west of Altus, still stands. It was among the first post offices of the country and was an early-day trading point. Luckily it was on the railroad and still retains its post office. It has a fine school building and two as fine churches as would be seen anywhere.

Olustee was at one time known as Klondike and there stood a gin, a store and a blacksmith shop. This town

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never gained any prominence until the advent of the railroad.

William Vale was a post office five miles south of Olustee.

West in the gyp hills was the old town of Odema, a post office and store. Later on the railroad went through and the town was named Creta.

At the old camping place of Elexanders, sprang up the town of Eldorado.

Duke, an old town fourteen miles west of Altus, served in the early days as one of the first post offices. It, too, luckily is on a railroad, and still exists.

Aaron, a post office six miles west and two south of Altus, was an early trading center boasting a few stores. All that is now left is the school building.

Altus, first settled two and one half miles west of its present site, was in the early days known as Buttermilk Station. Uncle Joe McClearn, one of the early settlers, used to supply passing tourists and cowboys with buttermilk. When a post office was established there, the

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town became known as Frazier, Texas. It became one of leading towns of the country, with a fair line of business, boasting a saloon, hardware store, drug store, hotel and everything that goes to make up a good frontier town.

In 1890, June 5th, what is known by all old-timers as the June flood came; a two-day incessant rain covered the face of the earth. Water stood over the tops of counters and even over the tops of some buildings. No lives were lost. However, over on Turkey Creek a number of people perished.

In July of the following year the town was moved to its present site of Altus and was known as Altus, Texas. Later on after the town became better settled, to please some railroad officials the town was named Leger, Oklahoma Territory, later Leger, Oklahoma, and finally Altus, Oklahoma, by which name it is now known.

In the year 1891, I had been with a thrashing crew in the Horse Branch Country where Victory now stands. After the season was over I had occasion to make a trip to Dunbar. I had no horse and walked from my headquarters

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three miles west of Martha. I had on some heavy, rough shoes and when I reached Altus my heels were blistered and I was tired. I wanted awfully bad to stop and rest, but I had pushed on toward my destination, taking all the short cuts I could. However, dark overtook me and I was so weary and tired that I finally found a place in a hay stack and fell asleep.

Sometime later I was awakened by the sound of a fiddle and heard the cry "balance all." I was thirsty, my how I craved water! I walked as rapidly as I could toward the music, walked blindly because it was so dark that I could scarcely see. When the music ceased I stopped until I again heard the squeak of the fiddle. Then I made all possible speed in the direction of the dance. I reached a dugout just as the dance wound up. To my utter surprise I had reached my destination, I was at my journey's end.

The old man ran a blacksmith shop and we were at the shop by sunup. Soon we saw a wagon, and the team was being driven at top speed. The news had leaked out that a white boy had killed an Indian near Navajo. It was fear-

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ed that there would be an uprising by the Indians. Wagon after wagon passed carrying women and children to points of safety.

I began to think of leaving but about ten o'clock we received news that every white man was requested to take a gun to the scene of trouble. I began to feel very uncomfortable indeed as I saw good guns brought out, oiled up and put into shipshape condition.

The postmaster at Dunbar owned a good Winchester, and he got it ready to take to the scene of trouble. However, he thought of his duties as postmaster, and held the gun out toward me saying, "Young man, take this gun of mine, and go with the men." I told him "No," that I must soon get on my way back to Altus.

My hostess looked surprised and said that she had expected me to stay a few days, but that I surely would remain for dinner. I did manage to stay for dinner though I felt that I had urgent business at Altus. I took leave of my host at the earliest possible time after the noon meal. When I was gone I pondered where I could be assured the greatest possible protection. I decided on Altus,

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and arrived here just before sundown, footsore and practically exhausted. But this town was deserted save for a few women and children. All the men had gone to the scene of trouble at Navajo. No protection here!

There was an old mill on the Creek at Frazier. I reasoned that on the north side on the platform would be a good place to spend the night, at least I would be up out of the snakes, and Indians surely wouldn't look for anyone in an old mill. So I covered this distance as quickly as possible and climbed to the platform to get a good night's rest. I may have slept a little, I don't know; but every grasshopper, every frog sounded like a dozen Indians and I expected them to pounce on me any moment with their tomahawks.

I decided there were too many Indians at the gin, so I struck out for a little school house three miles north of there. I reached the door absolutely exhausted, and realized that I could go no further. It was definitely decided for me that here I would spend the night. I opened the door and found an old broom beside it. I crawled under a bench and used the broom for a pillow. Then I

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relaxed, no use of struggling further. I slept like a baby all night.

The next morning the excitement was not so high. It finally developed that the Indians came over and got their dead chief and took him across the river into the territory. The sheriff from Mangum came down and selected two men and accompanied by them went over to see what the Indians were going to do. After a parley the Indians agreed that if the whites gave them a beef they would be friends. The beef was soon furnished them. The Indians killed the beef, had a picnic, and that was the end of the uprising.

My house, like Solomon's temple, was erected without saw and hammer. With the aid of my wife and a team I went to work and improved my place. I lived on the place for seven years and got a deed to it.

I had a four year contract to carry the mail from Alfalfa to Altus daily except on Sundays. I carried the mail for one year. In the meantime rural routes were established and I took the examination to be a rural mail-carrier.

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I carried mail on the rural route for twenty-eight years, retiring in 1938 at the age of sixty-five.

After that I worked for the Jackson County Chronicle in the circulation department. Last year I was elected to the legislature. I have just now finished up that work and am working in the circulation department of the Times Democrat.

I had for years planned spending my time fishing and doing other things I never seemed to find time to do, but strangely after my retirement I found it necessary to work in order to find contentment, and I expect to continue working until I die. The next time I hear of another frontier place I'm going there, homestead and start all over again.