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BELLENGER, G. R.

INTERVIEW #8940

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BELLENGER, G. R.

INTERVIEW.

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

Field Worker's name Virgil Coursey.

This report made on (date) October 20, 1937. 1937

1. Name Mr. and Mrs. G. R. Bellenger.

2. Post Office Address Altus, Oklahoma.

3. Residence address (or location) 403 East Liveoak.

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month _____ Day _____ Year _____

5. Place of birth _____

6. Name of Father _____ Place of birth _____

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother _____ Place of birth _____

Other information about mother _____

Notes or complete narrative by the field worker dealing with the life and story 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 12.

BELLENGER, G. R.

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Virgil Coursey,
Interviewer.
October 20, 1937.

An Interview With Mr. and Mrs.
G. R. Bellenger, Altus, Okla.

Mr. Bellenger:

In 1895, I made a trip to Oklahoma in the vicinity of what is now Jackson County. I was very favorably impressed. It was a beautiful country, good land, and offered opportunities for a young man of my calibre.

However, I returned to my home near Weatherford, Texas, and it was not until 1899 that I decided to move to Oklahoma and try my hand at pioneering. In the meantime I had married Miss Carrie Harris, and moved on a small farm near Weatherford. I made fair success on my farm, but the new country kept beckoning me to come. So I wrote to Grandpa McCord who owned land near the present town of Elmer and told him that I wanted to rent some of his land and was sending the money for him to build us a small house. Now grandpa McCord was only an acquaintance; but one seldom questioned another's integrity in those days. We soon received a letter from Grandpa McCord that everything was in readiness and we began immediately packing our furniture. All household goods

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were shipped by train to Vernon. Mrs. Bellenger's family also wanted to come along, so we packed all necessary supplies in a wagon and struck out.

Mrs. Bellenger:

Our team was afraid of trains, and we were in constant fear that they would run away and kill us. We had to tie the team to posts to keep them from running away.

Mr. Bellenger:

In those days there were no bridges across the rivers in this part of Oklahoma. When we reached the Red River, there had been a rise and the quick sand was treacherous. Several men would walk abreast across the river jabbing sticks in the sand ahead of them. Then if there were any cattle they were run across. This procedure usually settled the sand so that a wagon could cross. Men often made pack saddles to carry women across the river.

When we arrived at our destination, we found our little house built according to specifications. There was a main room, 10 x 12, with a small lean-to room running

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along one side. The beauty of this dwelling was that it could easily be moved. In fact, we did move it from time to time.

We made fine crops from the very start. In fact, as I saw it, our trouble was not in raising crops but in the marketing of them. In the first place we had to cross the river to get to Vernon and Quansh to the market and it was a long, tiresome trip.

Mrs. Bellenger:

One time Mr. Bellenger made a trip to Vernon and was on the other side when a head-rise came down. He was gone ten or twelve days and we could not hear from him. We didn't know whether he had been drowned or not. The suspense one lived in is, to my mind, the main hardship encountered during the pioneer days.

Mr. Bellenger:

Commodities brought in very small cash returns in those days. Eggs rarely brought more than five cents a dozen, and I often found it impossible to sell them for any price. One year we had corn piled all over our farm and couldn't sell it. Corn and cotton seed were burned instead of coal for fuel.

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Soon after we moved here, my brother-in-law and I decided to ride over to the mountains. As one looked out over the prairie it looked like the mountains were very close indeed. But we rode all morning and finally stopped at a farm house and asked how much further it was to the mountains. We were informed that we were eighteen miles from our destination. We turned around and went back home.

However, we did no worse than another tenderfoot who sat out walking to the mountains. He walked until he was exhausted and sat down to rest. Some friends came by and told him that it was too far to walk to the mountains and urged him to return home with them. As they journeyed along they came to a shallow creek some four or five feet wide. The tenderfoot sat down and proceeded to remove his shoes. His friends were astonished and hurriedly explained that the water was shallow and could even be jumped. "Well", replied the tenderfoot, "Judging from my experiences, one can never gauge distances in this country. I'm going to be prepared to swim across."

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We had often heard that the Indians ate raw meat, but we had never seen them. So when our first child was only three weeks old we made a trip into the Indian Reservation to be present when the government issued supplies to the Indians. They were there it seemed by the thousands. They gathered around our wagon jabbering and laughing. The squaws would hold out their hands and try to get us to hand the baby to them. Then they would turn around and point to the papooses on their backs.

Mrs. Bellenger:

The Indians were friendly, but I was frightened almost to death, for what could we have done had they suddenly decided to take our baby or harm us in some way?

Mr. Bellenger:

Our real thrill came when the supplies were issued. Cattle were turned loose and the Indians ran them down, stabbed them and began tearing the meat apart and eating it raw. Even the intestines were eaten.

On our return, Deep Red Creek was up and the wagon began to go down stream. I had one mule that would almost go into a panic at the lash of a whip. Acting quickly I

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began yelling at the team and cracking the whip. This nervous mule brought us out in quick order. However, our troubles were not over. We became hopelessly lost in the dark and had no idea where we were. The baby had the colic and Mrs. Bellenger was ill. Medicine had been brought along, but in our hurry to get away the wrong bottles were picked up. So we spent a rather miserable night.

In 1900, eighteen of us men in our community went to Ft. Sill to file claims for land in the Indian Reservation. Now we had been all over that territory numbers of times and all of us knew where the best land was. We picked out good land and returned home. Soon we received notices that certain men from northern states had filed prior to us and that it would be necessary for us to appear at Oklahoma City and fight our claim. All of us knew that this was just a scheme to beat us out of our claims, but there was little we could do about it since we were unable to make the trip to Oklahoma City. As a result all but one of the eighteen lost their claims.

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Mrs. Bellenger:

Women tried to make their homes comfortable and attractive just as they do today. Carpets for floors were made from old worn out clothing. Narrow strips of this clothing were sewed together and rolled into balls about six or seven inches in diameter. I remember that I used 32 balls of string in one carpet. A lady, whose name I do not recall, and who lived near the old Locke store, had a loom and made rugs. I took this string to her and she made a beautiful carpet that reached from wall to wall.

Now laying a carpet was no easy task. First the carpet had to be the right size. Exact measurements were necessary or the whole thing would be a failure. Next, one end was securely tacked to the floor. Then a thin layer of straw was distributed evenly all over the floor. Now came the task of stretching the carpet and tacking at the edge of the base boards. Such procedure was accompanied by much perspiration and grunting, but when finally laid, one had a floor gorgeous to walk across and a covering that would last for years.

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One time I needed a new carpet for my kitchen. I had no strings on hand, so I took some stripped cheviot and sewed it together and laid in the usual manner. Next we put up a brand new shining range and hung up neat well scrubbed cooking vessels. Then I stood back and surveyed my kitchen with a feeling of genuine pride.

Mr. Bellenger:

In the Round Timber district there used to be a number of wild horses which no one could catch. Among them was a large, black horse, a beauty that everyone in the community wanted. The farmers and cowboys decided that they would coordinate their efforts and catch this horse. One morning early when the wild horses were out a good ways in the prairie, the men began the chase. Men on horses were placed at strategic points to prevent the big wild horse from getting into the timber where there wouldn't be a chance to get him. The chase continued all day long. As horses and men tired new horses were added and the chase continued uninterrupted. About five o'clock that afternoon a cowboy succeeded in getting

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a rope over the horse's neck. As he took up the slack another cowboy from the opposite side did likewise and they held the horse until he was "hog-tied". That was the wildest horse I have ever seen. For a long time five dollars was offered every Saturday to the man who could ride the horse. Many a man was thrown, or if the horse couldn't throw the man he would reach around and bite him or drag his feet off the saddle. One cowboy was able to stay on while the horse pitched, but the horse was too smart. He resorted to going around in circles. He did this until the cowboy got drunk and fell off. Sam McGord was an excellent rider and he said that he could ride the wild horse, and backed his statement by doing that very thing.

He rode with an easy grace. When the horse resorted to his trick of biting, Sam crossed his legs on the saddle and sat perfectly relaxed. He looked as though he were in a rocking chair or was being tossed about by waves in a river.

When the town of Elmer came into existence, Sam Barr opened a general store there. It was a big store

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with about a seventy-five foot front. Mr. Barr enjoyed a good trade for he had a good, large territory. I worked with him some five or six years.

In those days we opened the store by daylight and remained open at night as long as anyone cared to loaf and gossip.

One winter night about fifteen men sat about the huge coal stove and exchanged yarns, whittled on the goods-box seats and spat tobacco juice into the sand under the stove.

Into this scene walked Rip Hollaway, always the life of the party. Rip loved to spin yarns and he loved to drink whiskey. But one hardly knew when Rip was drunk. Rip soon was the center of attraction and was relating tales of adventure. Suddenly he looked at me and said, "George, have you got any powder? I think I'll go hunting tomorrow and I want to have plenty of powder". I assured Rip that I had a whole barrel full of powder. Rip followed me to the back of the store and said in a low voice, "George, I have a trick up my sleeve. Fill a pretty large sack up with saw dust and pour about

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a table spoonfull of powder on top." Rip soon returned to the circle around the stove and stood warming by the fire with the sack of "powder" in his hand. Soon it became apparent that Rip had had a drink too many, though I personally knew that he had not touched a drop of liquor that night.

Rip talked, and as he talked he reached into the bag and threw small amounts of the powder into the stove. The powder flashed up and made small explosions. Every one became nervous as Rip continued to do this, holding the bag dangerously near the hot stove.

Finally Mr. Barr, manager and owner of the store, asked Rip to stop and explained that the whole bag of powder might catch on fire.

Rip became angry and an argument followed. At the peak of the argument Mr. Barr told Rip that he would put him out of the store, and started to rise from his seat to carry out his threat.

"All right," roared Rip, "if that's the way you feel about it I'll put the whole damn thing in the fire!" And quick as a flash the bag was tossed into the stove.

Of course nothing happened to the stove, but plenty happened to other parts of the store. Two glass showcases were broken, the door was practically wrenched from its hinges and Rip and I were left gasping at the wreckage.