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BORDEN, FANNIE E.

INTERVIEW

#8925

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BORDEN, FANNIE E. INTERVIEW
BIOGRAPHY FORM
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

Field Worker's name Zeidee B. Bland

This report made on (date) Oct. 19, 1937

1. Name Mrs. Fannie E. Borden

2. Post Office Address Altus, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) _____

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month December Day 3 Year 1863

5. Place of birth Mississippi bottom on a 600 acre plantation

6. Name of Father A.S. McGee Place of birth _____

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother Mary Elizabeth Bell Place of birth North Carolina

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 21.

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Zaidee B. Bland,
Interviewer,
October 19, 1937.

An Interview with Mrs. Fannie E.
Borden, Altus, Oklahoma.

I live with my children now, sometimes in California, sometimes in Texas and sometimes in Oklahoma, but the years from 1877 to 1885 I spent in this country almost all the time, for I insisted on accompanying my husband on the trail when he would start north with his cattle in the fall.

In 1876, I was ready to go away to school. I lived in Ellis County, Texas, with my parents.

Cattle dropped in price to where a good, prime, fat three year old would bring only two or three dollars. Father raised cattle but never drove them north to market, always selling to some herd boss as the cattle came through on the way to market.

It was out of the question for me to be sent away to school with cattle at that price. I was moody and despondent.

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Mr. Borden had been driving his herd through from farther west for several years and we felt that we knew him quite well for his herd always moved slowly; for several years he had planned to have his herd winter between the Red Rivers and drive on into Dodge City in the spring. His cattle would get on the market early and be prime beef if they were not too long on the trail.

I had an older sister, and in those days it was not proper for a sister to go alone even with an escort so, while never having beaux right out, I had been with sister so many times that it seemed I knew all about society. I was large and well developed for my age. No one realized that I was only thirteen.

Mr. Borden had always admired me and had often stayed at our house three or four weeks while he bargained for cattle in the local neighborhood. He always said he had his eye on me, just waiting until I had finished school so when he found me despondent he was afraid to go away again without obtaining my promise to wait for him, or marrying me then. I was willing

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but when he approached my parents and found out my age he was very much surprised but insisted on marrying and so he promised to leave me home with my parents for two years, and that he would come and stay as long as he could and as often as he could.

In February, 1878, our first son was born and I did not know where my husband was, except that he was somewhere to the north with his cattle. Letters were very uncertain and there was always the fear of Indians. Mr. Borden always assured me that he went far to the west of the Indian reservation and never had any fear, but nevertheless, I was afraid for him.

When he came home I laid the law down. I was going to accompany him. Where he went I would go; his dangers would be my dangers; his joys my joys; his sorrows my sorrows if I was to be his wife; I would not have it any other way.

Between the Red Rivers, north and west of Vernon somewhere there was a stream which we called Boggy because the cattle were always bogging down in it. About two miles away from Boggy Creek, Mr. Borden had

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his cowboys dig us a hole in the ground and line the walls with white flat rock that was in abundance everywhere over the country, even building the rock walls two or three feet above the ground. This became his headquarters for more than six months out of every year until after 1835. Since our son was not quite a year old, we persuaded an old negro mammy who had been one of my father's slaves to come with us that first fall.

All through that winter and into the spring Sid (my husband) was home often and I was not so lonesome for I had our black mammy, and the chuck wagon always brought our provisions when they went out for theirs and we tried to bring in enough to do two or three months at a time. When the herds moved north to market, Sid waited until the herd was well into Kansas before he followed, then he got on his favorite saddle horse and pushed on rapidly to be there with the herd to sell.

After selling he was to hurry back to me

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and then we would go back into Ellis County near my people for the summer.

My nearest white neighbor was ten miles away. I had never seen her but Sid said there was a man over there in that dugout who had a woman with him. I never did see her.

The spring opened up blustery. How the wind did blow! We had only surface water. It was hauled in barrels for the house use.

The cattle market broke; instead of Sid getting back in six or eight weeks, he was gone over three months. Baby had sickened. I did not know what was the matter with him. Nothing would stay on his stomach. The May rains came and hot sultry days followed. Mammy or I hung over the baby all the time. He was burning up with fever. We kept wet cloths on his head and bathed his little body with water.

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Nothing relieved him. He grew weaker, finally one morning, Sid rode up and was completely surprised to find us up and alarmed over the baby. All speed was made to load a wagon and start south with him but it was too late. Ere the sun sank he breathed his last.

On a little rise not too far away, Sid dug a little grave and we fashion^{ed} a box the best we could and wrapping him in his best dress we laid him to rest. There was no one to mourn with us except the old negro mammy. She crooned a lullaby, and I tried to read from the Bible but tears blinded my eyes so there was not much reading. Our first born. I could not bear to leave that spot; only a white stone at the head and foot marked the place, after a few weeks I was more reconciled and we went back to Mother's. But when fall came again, it was too lonesome for black Mammy and she refused to come. I came on alone anyway. I knew Sid would try harder to get home everynight if I was alone and I was to be near the baby's grave and I was not afraid someway. I never saw him from daylight

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to dark but if there came a stretch of several days of bad weather Sid would stay home with me. I was always left a gun and I could shoot as good as most of the men and I often went fishing. There was not much to read. I had my Bible, a few books and newspapers. Sid's people in Alabama were good about sending books and seldom did anyone go to Vernon for supplies that they did not bring me back something to read. His sisters sent a book or two.

There was a little stream about three quarters of a mile from us that I sometimes fished in but I usually went to Boggy. It was only two miles away and I always got fish if I went to Boggy. There was a rumor of a pair of lions or panthers in the country. They were playing havoc with the young calves.

There were several herds always grazing through this country. Sid said to me one night, "Listen dear, until these cats are killed, won't you promise me you will not go far from the home, never as far as Boggy

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to fish?" I promised. One day several men came riding up and asked Sid to go with them on a hunt for the Cats. He readily agreed. Kissing me goodbye, he said "Now don't look for me until you see me coming, for we will not give up until those cats are captured or killed and we may have to run them several days for we do not know just where they are holed up". All that day I was lonesome and night came and he did not come. The next day the wind was blowing a hurricane but it was not very cold, I seemed to be more lonely than ever. I said to myself, "I know what I'll do, I will get my hook and line and get a nice mess of fish for supper. Surely Sid will come home some time today". I stopped at the branch but the wind was so high that no bite could I get. I was determined not to be outdone so rolling my line around my pole I went along to Boggy. I had hardly set myself down and cast my line into the water before I remembered that I had promised Sid not to go so far away from home. "Well", I thought, "now I am here I might as well stay". There was a plum thicket

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just across the creek from me and as I sat there I began to think what a wild lonesome place this was and to wonder what if those cats had chosen that very plum thicket for a hiding place.

The wind was so high and blustery that not even birds were hopping about chirping as usual. The eeriest long drawn out wail I had ever heard came to me seemingly from just beyond the plum thicket. I seemed almost paralyzed with fright. Then it came again. I did not wait for the third wail; I threw my pole down and sped up the bank as fast as I could and ran for home.

Of course I had heard of the yell of a panther but had never actually heard one. There may have been doubt in my mind as to what had uttered the cry but there was no doubt about me being the most frightened I was ever in my life. I ran and ran the entire two miles. I was out of breath and hardly had I gotten down the steps of our home until Sid rode up and called.

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I did not have my sunbonnet off and was all out of breath but went up to see what he wanted. He leaned from his horse and offered me my fishing pole and line; "This is yours, is it not?" he said. "I cannot stay. We are on the track of the panther and just where he crossed the water he made a track right by this pole and I thought I recognized it so brought it by to see if you were all right." He turned his horse and galloped away and was not gone an hour before he was back with the largest Mexican lion that either of us had ever seen. When the other men heard about my line and pole being right where the cat had crossed Boggy they gave me the pelt. We tanned it and made a rug to go by the bed that lasted many years but I could hardly look at it for a long time without a shudder, remembering that eerie cry and wondering what would have happened had I not run.

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Summer with my parents came again and with the fall came our second baby (a girl). It was out of the question for me to bring so small a baby into the wilderness and after losing our first one, I reluctantly consented to be left behind with my parents again.

When the next fall came baby was nearing her first birthday so I refused to be left behind and came into the wilderness again.

It was not so lonesome with baby always with me. The cowboys who loved to visit at the dugout rigged me up some kind of cradle for her. "Carrie" we called her for short. Her full name was Caroline Lucille. I always said the cradle was made from the end gates of wagons for that is what it looked like to me but I never knew. I could put Carrie to sleep and run out for the little outside work I had to do if Sid was away.

One morning I put Carrie to sleep and hurried out to hang or more properly spread on the grass some clothes to dry. She was just crawling good and learning to pull up by anything she could grasp. I thought I had not been

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outside long enough for her to get her nap out when I heard her scream. I ran down the steps as fast as I could only to find she had gotten out of the cradle and no doubt crawled toward the fireplace where the wood had all burned to red hot coals. Possibly she had tried to stand alone. I do not know but she had tumbled into the fire and her two little hands were buried in those red hot coals of fire and I was afraid her face was in them too. I grabbed her up with some of the coals sticking to her hands yet, but her face had not hit the fire. I knocked the coals off but could not touch the hands. They looked like they were burned to a crisp. Baby was screaming to the top of her voice. The nearest neighbor was ten miles away. Sid was gone for the day. We never had many remedies in our primitive homes. I did have plenty of nice syrup and a lot of soda. I laid baby down, grabbed up a diaper, tore it in two and poured a generous supply of syrup on two pieces and I placed a hand full of

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soda. I tied each hand up separately in this mixture. I walked the floor with her all day and part of the night. Sid came in about midnight and then he took turns walking her. We had syrup all over us both. She quieted along about daylight, and went to sleep. I let this syrup stay on the hands three days. I was afraid if the hands began to heal without each finger wrapped separately the fingers might grow together.

So the third day we unwrapped them as carefully as we could and took a look to see what we might do. I will never forget the sight. There was scarcely any flesh left on the bones in the palm of her hands at all. I prepared nice soft white rags, spread a generous coat of lard (the only pure grease I had) and wrapped each finger separately. I dressed the hands every three days until they were healed. They healed without a scar but I always thought her hands very small and thin but they were never disfigured in anyway or stiff, for which I was very thankful.

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Sid's oldest brother was drowned that summer in Alabama, leaving a son about twelve years of age, whose mother had died at the boy's birth. A maiden sister came out and brought the boy, Fred, to us. When the time came to go north again, no one wanted me to go. I had a pretty good idea where the camp was and the direction to go for I had made the trip several times, though there were no real defined roads a lot of the way. I let them go without me. I might say "start without me" for I had a plan in my head. If the maiden aunt would consent to go with me, I intended to load my wagon and take Fred and head north and be at the stone dugout before Sid. We always left everything in it when we went back in the summer and since we had made several trips there were a good many pieces of furniture, tables and chairs, a rocking chair and many dishes accumulated. I would have to take in the wagon only our clothes, enough bedding to do the nights we had to camp out and food for the trip. Traveling light I

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felt sure we ought to be there ahead of Sid, after giving him three days start. Fred and little Auntie were willing for the adventure. We had to go away out of the way to avoid some of the boys recognizing the team but we made the trip ahead of them and great was Sid's surprise when he neared our dugout to see a light. Supposing someone had only stopped for the night he rode up. Although we had no real legal right to the location, usually people of the far places respected what was not theirs and anything left was safe. You never knocked at a pioneer's door, you always "hel'lo-ed". We knew his voice of course so I sent Fred up to answer, thinking maybe Sid would not recognize him in the half light that the stars gave. He did though and came tumbling down into the dug out. He was so glad to see us all safe and well that I did not come in for much of a scolding. That was quite a journey for two women, a baby and a boy of twelve to make in those days.

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My third baby came that winter, another girl. I had not just realized what it would be like to have my baby away from doctors and friends. When we knew she was expected, Little Auntie gave her hand made yards and yards of lace and made dresses from pure linen petticoats that belonged to her, for as she said, "If I am to live in this faraway country what use will I ever have for linen petticoats?" So my prairie baby had the most elaborate layette of any of the other children.

So my prairie baby was a good six months old or nearer nine months old before her birth was ever registered for that could not be registered until we were in Ellis County again.

The Tarantulas and snakes gave me the most scares. Sid's brother Ben came to this country and hunted up his brother's camp. When it began to be warm I was sitting in the rocker nursing my baby when I happened to look down at her head and right on my arm, coming to rest when it reached the baby's head,

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was a very large tarantula. I did not want to move for fear it would bite my baby. I had on a light dress and you could see the spider very clearly. I called Ben who came to see what was wanted. It was not quite dark above the ground. I told him to find the matches and light a light and then come and kill a tarantula on my arm next to the baby's head. That excited him so he could never find the matches. At last I said, "Come and kill the tarantula, I am sure you can see it against my white sleeve for I can. I never really knew whether the spider bit me or whether Ben hit so hard that it caused my arm to rise and a knot to come up on the baby's head. The force of the blow crushed the spider, it was quite dead.

I was very glad to have my sister-in-law with me for I had never been taught to cook. So many of Pa's negroes refused to be freed and followed us to Texas; we were really negro poor for a long time for Pa could not bear to see them go hungry and would feed them without the right to work them.

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It was expensive for me to learn to cook so far away from a base of supply. Sid often said he thought I fed him better cakes for two years after I began to cook. They were good though and he did not tire of them for every meal he happened to eat at home. He never knew how many times I had tried to cook something good to eat, only to make a failure and run and throw it away and hurry to make my batter-cakes so he would never know I could not cook.

The frontier men were always courteous and I have fed many of them when they would come riding by. They were always invited to "light and eat." If Sid was home, all right. If not, all right. It was all the same. If it was a stormy night they were invited to stay in the dugout and usually stayed. We had curtains to put up around the beds which were built with one side and end always fastened to the walls. We called them "bunks".

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As the years went by more of the women came with the men. I never had a neighbor nearer than five miles though.

Once when my neighbors were butchering hogs, it was cold and windy and their little son Claud, four years old, got tired of staying alone. He came up to see what they were all doing and taking one of the large butcher knives he began to play ^{with} it. Half reclining on the top of the dugout, he dropped the knife right across his nose, slicing it off as clean as you please. As he screamed and all ran to see what was wrong, his grandmother grabbed him and breaking an egg she stuck the nose back into place, bandaging it and tying his hands behind him so he could not rub it off. The nose grew into place beautifully with only a slight ridge to show it ever occurred. The child, ^{man now,} a is still living and a stranger would hardly notice the ridge. The man is a grey headed grandfather himself now.

Those first years we never had chickens and it

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was a part of my pleasure to go hunting for bird eggs for the home use. I had to learn to know by the color of a prairie chicken or duck or hawk egg if it was fresh enough to be eaten or if the mother had already started her setting, for I did not like to disturb a setting bird and the eggs were not good either. A bad ^{egg} had a slick yellow cast. I petted everything I could get to stay with me. I even had bottles of spiders that I would feed and watch by the hours. I have often wondered if I did not have a black Widow without knowing it, for I had quite a variety, often carrying them in my handkerchief to the house if I happened to find one when I was out walking or hunting eggs.

Some way I could never learn to eat a terrapin or turtle, but have eaten prairie dog, rabbit, coon, squirrel, bear, deer, antelope, possum, hawk, owl, and my black mammy fixed snake the winter she was with me. I ate it not knowing what I was eating. She

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roasted it in the coals. It tasted all right to me but I never cooked one myself.