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INTERVIEW

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Anna R. Barry,
Interviewer,
July 13, 1937.

An Interview with Albert W. Keith,
117 North K. Street, El Reno, Okla.

Our family is another mixed-blood family, one which bore the Creole-French name of Poisel. The original progenitor of this family was Jules Poisel, a young Creole-Frenchman of St. Louis who was a member of General William H. Ashley's party of trappers and traders that went to Colorado in 1824. A year or two later Jules Poisel became a naturalized citizen of the wilderness by espousing as his wife a young woman of the Blackfoot Indian Tribe whom he found living with the Arapaho Indians. She had been captured by the Arapaho people while somewhere in the northern states.

It is understood that the railway junction town of Julesburg in northwestern Colorado had its name from Jules Poisel who once had a trading post on its site. The first child born of Jules Poisel was a daughter

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who married Thomas Fitzpatrick, noted Rocky Mountain fur trader.

Fitzpatrick became the first Government Agent of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes with headquarters at Bent's. Agent Fitzpatrick died in Washington, D.C., in 1854 while there on official business. His widow made her home among the Arapaho Indians after his death; she was known as Mrs. Adams, an interpreter for the Arapaho Tribe at the Medicine Lodge Peace Council in the Autumn of 1867. Her Indian name was Snake Woman. Jules Poisel's wife was my grandmother, or my mother's mother.

As I have often heard my grandmother talk of the Medicine Lodge Peace Council I will tell a little of it. The Peace Council was held in the valley of Medicine Lodge River, in southern Kansas, just a few miles from the Oklahoma border, during the latter part of October 1867. It was a notable

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assemblage. Most of the leaders of the principal tribes of the southern plains were there, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche, Kiowa and Plains Apache. The Government Commission was the largest and possibly the ablest that had ever been sent out on such a mission; there was a large military escort and an abundance of rations and supplies for the Indians, and as a result they formulated the treaties by which each tribe was given definite locations in Indian Territory.

Another important provision of that treaty was that the hunting grounds of the Plains Indians should be protected by the Government from hunters on the frontier, and thus the buffalo were saved from destruction. The buffalo were soon killed off; these beasts were just as much the food supply to these Indians as the extensive wheat fields and other crops are for the present inhabitants of the west. It was considered by the Indians just as much an intrusion to destroy their

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hunting grounds as it would be for an invading force to lay waste to the fields of the white man. The hide hunters killed buffalo simply for their hides, leaving the carcasses on the prairies to decay and, after transporting the hides to the markets, received only a small amount for them, while the sportsman coming from the eastern portion of the United States slaughtered these animals by the thousands simply for the thrill of seeing them fall and to observe the dying struggles of these beasts of the plains. These Indians, being held in restraint, were compelled to witness all these things which were done in violation of their treaty. It is true that we Indians had a different mode of living than the whites. This mode of life, which the Indians had followed until it had become a part of their very existence, was being crowded out by force and by the intrusion of a different race.

My grandmother was a full-blood Blackfoot Indian. She was captured by the Arapaho Indians when a small

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child and was brought to Colorado where she married a white man by the name of Jules Pöisel. My grandmother spoke just a few words of English. My mother was an educated Indian and dressed like the white people. My father, Ben Keith, was a white man, a trader among the Indians; he traded for buffalo robes. Years after my parents married the Indians were driven out of Colorado to the Indian Territory. I have forgotten this date, somewhere near 1867 or 1868, soon after the establishment of Darlington.

My father then established one among the first ranches in Canadian County known as the Keith Ranch on the north side of the Canadian River, not far from the little town of Banner. Here on this ranch I was born August 10, 1884. I was the youngest of thirteen children.

The cattle business in the Indian Territory was an industry developed from the establishment of the Chisholm Cattle Trail; this trail passed near our ranch.

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Practically all the cattle that were held, raised or fattened on the pastures of the Indian Territory traveled up this trail; without any exceptions the grass that grew upon the fertile plains of what is now Oklahoma produced the finest pasture and made the country the finest grazing region in the west. These were the days of the open range. There were no fences, but the borders of each range were ridden by line riders and the cattle were kept in bounds the best that could be done under the circumstances. As the prairie grass would burn in late summer, the great menace to these cattlemen were prairie fires. Fires on the range early in the season would ruin the winter pasture, and the owners of the ranges would have nothing on which to winter their stock. The country at that time, except the lowlands, was covered with buffalo grass. This is a short curly grass running on the ground instead of growing upright. Late in the season, when it becomes dry, this grass

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dies at the root first, retaining all the nourishment in the stem, and cattle grazing on this grass will fatten even when the grass has dried. Then, the cattle would live on these ranges the year round.

My father, being a pioneer cattleman, used careful conservative methods, instead of the plunging means resorted to by many of the cattlemen of that day. This brought him a steadily increasing success, and without going into debt he extended his cattle interests until in a few years he grazed some of the largest herds in this section of the country and was known to reap constant profits from his business.

The Cheyenne and Arapaho Reservation of some four million acres was opened to settlement in 1892. The Indians retained allotments for homes. These allotments are scattered over the country. In the allotment of land an Indian minor child, unmarried, received forty acres of land; an Indian of age, single, received eighty acres, and a married person received

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one hundred and sixty acres. We children being one-fourth Indian received our allotments which we relinquished and before the opening took up one hundred and sixty acres each, near Kingfisher.

How well I still remember going to Darlington Agency to receive our money issued in silver to the Indians. I was just a small tot at this time, but I still remember going in the wagon with my mother and several others, my brothers and sisters. Each member of the family would draw around seventy dollars. My mother would count this money, put it in a flour sack, throw it in the front end of the wagon, and drive home. We were never afraid of being robbed. The Government also issued us rations and clothing. To the persons who knew Darlington Agency in the days of its activity and prosperity, it is now sad to visit the place. It reminds such a one of a deserted village or an ancient ruin, it requires no great amount of imagination to see the blanket Indians strolling around investigating everything.

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The Cheyenne School at Caddo Springs, now Concho, some two miles north and east of the old Agency, still stands and the Indian children congregate on the bank near the railway and watch the trains stop and take on or put off passengers. These passengers are principally children attending the school. Visitors to the old Agency and its associated places see things as they appear today. The ones who knew it in the past (especially the Indians) can stand and meditate for hours and see the scenes of forty and fifty years ago pass before their vision, until they arouse themselves to realize that they are only scenes of their earthly activity. Some of them rest in the cemetery on the hill; others of them have wandered far away, and lie buried in strange lands.

Another thing we took great delight in was the beef issue. Around five hundred cattle were delivered each month to be issued to the Indian families. The issue pens were located a mile west of El Reno. Later,

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when the white people, attracted by the issue, came to be so numerous, their safety was endangered by the Indians pursuing the released steers and the pens were moved on the farm at present occupied by Mr. Price, about eight miles northwest of El Reno.

The cattle issued by the Government had to stand for twelve hours in the corrals before being weighed for the Indians. The groups of Indians would inspect the steers and make the selections. These would be released and the Indian men would chase them on horseback, shooting them with guns, revolvers or arrows. The Indian men would then retire from the scene and the Indian women would proceed with the butchering.

As my grandmother and mother had lived among the Arapaho Indians most of their lives, they were adopted by the Arapaho Tribe, and in 1897 my folks sent me to school at Haskell Institute at Lawrence,

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Kansas. I stayed at this school for three years. At this time Haskell had an enrollment of nearly eight hundred, and every tribe in the United States was represented there. We were placed in companies according to our size; we went to school three hours each day, and each was taught a trade.

The Indians are now scattered over the surrounding country and live on and cultivate their farms, using modern machinery and appliances the same as their white neighbors. They no more bear the striking appearance of the slender, straight, erect warriors of the plains. Instead they are now, most of them, stylishly dressed while some of them still cling to their blankets of many colors.

A few of them now possess large farms and are prosperous. As they pass, I who have lived among them all my life, often wonder whether they are really happier than in the olden days. They now have all they can eat and they come to town usually in a good car and have all the comforts of life.

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It is true, that the grass has effectually grown over their warpaths and their battle trails and battle-fields have been plowed under.

In 1905, I married Edith Bell Walker.

We reared four children, three boys and one girl, and in later years I sold my allotment, moved to El Reno, bought a modern home and educated our children.