

KELLER, FRIE FELLE (KING)

INTERVIEW

9701.

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

KELLER, ERIE BELLE (KING), INTERVIEW

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Field Worker's name Anna R. Barry,

This report made on (date) January 17, 1938 1938

1. Name Mrs. Erie Belle (King) Keller

2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) 246 North L Street

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month December Day 19, Year 1870

5. Place of birth Colbert County, Alabama

6. Name of Father Martin King Place of birth Alabama

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

7. Name of Mother Margie (Colander) King Place of birth Alabama

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 \_\_\_\_\_.

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Field Worker, Anna R. Barry,  
January 17, 1938.

Interview with Mrs. Erie Belle (King) Keller,  
El Reno, Oklahoma

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Mrs. Erie Belle (King) Keller was born on a farm near Leighton, Alabama, on December 19, 1870, the daughter of Martin King and Margie (Colander) King. This family continued to live in this same neighborhood until 1893 or when Mrs. Keller was thirteen years old, when they moved to Cooke County, Texas, locating near the town of Dexter. The Keller family made the trip from Alabama to Texas by rail.

At the age of sixteen years Erie Belle married J. P. Keller on September 26, 1896. Soon after their marriage this young couple, along with another young couple by the name of White, loaded their two wagons. These lumbering wagons were decked with sod plow, bedding, a few odd pieces of furniture and a coop of chickens. Buckets and pails dangled under them,

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While Erie Belle's faithful dog, Pete, trotted along behind.

This group crossed the Red River into the Indian Territory and located <sup>within</sup> a few miles of the little inland town of Lebanon. Here they rented land from an Indian. The first home of the Kellers was a little log hut, ten by twelve feet, which she helped her husband build. It was necessary for them first to locate large straight trees from which to make logs for the cabin. In the southern part of the Territory near a small creek, this was possible. If the logs were too crooked, small sticks were wedged into the cracks and the smaller crevices all chinked with mud. She recalls this had a way of drying and dropping out, leaving large openings in the walls through which the northern blizzards drifted and the dust storms blew. The fireplace at one end was made of sticks covered with clay mortar which was pounded in between the lath-like sticks until a fire-proof wall was formed between the

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fire and the log walls. The doorway was at first closed by a piece of old carpet which was in time replaced by a door made of long clapboards hung on skin hinges. At first Mother Earth served for a floor but in time a puncheon floor was laid. This consisted of a kind of heavy plank split out of logs with axes and wedges and smoothed on one side with a broadaxe. Even in this case, she said, a liberal floor space around the fireplace was left bare of wood to insure against fire. When holes were in the earth, fresh clay was pounded into the hollows. Heavy poles called ridge-poles were laid on top of the body of the house in such a way as to form the support for the home-made shingles. These were layers split from logs and were known as shakes. They were laid loosely on the poles. The same number of poles were then laid on the roof boards to hold them in place. The poles were called weights and were kept on the roof at the proper distance apart by braces from one to the other. This roof shed rain fairly

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well but the fine snow found all the small crevices and she said it was not at all uncommon for one to awake in the morning to find snow drifted about the room.

People who built larger log houses frequently partitioned them into a kitchen and bedroom by means of quilts and blankets. An attic might be divided off in the same way, giving as many rooms as it would hold beds.

After a year or two sawmills were established and lumber became less expensive and then floors were laid. Even these were rough and unplanned and had to be worn smooth. Yet these kitchen floors of ash and hackberry, scrubbed with wood ashes to maintain their original whiteness, were the pride of every housekeeper.

She recalls a frame house at this time was enough to cause the neighbors to call the occupants "high-toned." Her furniture, like her little cabin, was the rudest sort home-made chairs or stools, boxes for tables and cupboards, and trunks for wardrobes. When frame houses began to appear, stoves became numerous.

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Their first attempts at agriculture were crude indeed. She has known settlers to settle on land without even an ox or horse, who would take a spade and break the prairie sod sufficiently to plant potatoes. Many different kinds of crops were tried and cotton, corn and sorghum were grown. Her husband tried to raise tobacco, but without success; men experimented in many ways to find the best type of agriculture for the country. The usual procedure was to plant corn on the newly-broken sod. Many days she has walked and dropped corn while her husband covered it with the hoe.

All livestock were allowed to run out, while the small fields were fenced. The cows were turned out on the prairie to graze while the calves were penned up to bring the cows home at night. If their corn failed, the hogs still fared well enough. They were allowed to run in the timber and fatten on nuts.

While wood was available the earlier settlers began splitting rails for rail fences. If the farmer

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did not desire to fence clear to the ground, a stake was driven for the rails to set on, which allowed a space below the bottom rail like the common barbed wire fence. It was impossible to fence the prairies with the scanty timber found along the small streams, and since the price of rails was beyond the reach of the farmer, necessity called for experiment with hedges. The principal trees used for hedges were the honey locust and the Osage Orange. People found the Osage Orange the ideal hedge herb for fencing. It took years for these to grow as large as forest trees, but in their early stages they grew very rapidly, quickly forming a wall if trained correctly.

There were several ways of starting a hedge. One way was to buy seed from the East and plant it, the seeds sometimes being planted in a bed and transplanted when they came up. Others preferred <sup>to</sup> buy the sprouts from the local nurseries which had been established to meet the demand. Peddlers also went through the

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country selling the plants. Later, when the older trees began to bear fruit, the oranges were thrown into a pit and when the sprouts grew up in the spring they were transplanted, or the balls were soaked in water and the seed picked out by hand and planted. A furrow was run for a fence line and the plants put out on it. Great care was taken of them the first year or two. The women and children cultivated the plants with a hoe, and many times water was hauled or carried long distances to give the tender plants a good start. They cost but little and these hedges served as fences, wonderfully.

In 1886, when Mrs. Keller first located in the Indian Territory; there was no Ardmore, nor railroad close. They crossed the Red River and went to White Burr when in need of supplies. This country was where the Chickasaw Indians lived. Indian manners and customs were different from those of the whites and often when these Indians meant no harm they alarmed the suspicious white people. One of the Indian habits was to walk right

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into any dwelling without knocking. The pioneer woman, living under the constant dread of Indian attack, was naturally frightened nearly to death when she became conscious of a visitor and looked up from her work to see an Indian in her house. One time Mrs. Keller was absent-mindedly wiping dishes when without warning an Indian punched her on the shoulder and yelled in her ear. She learned that he wanted some chickens that had died from cholera. She advised him not to eat them as he might get sick also, but he took them away. He also begged her for the family dog because it was fatter than the Indians' dogs and therefore would make better eating. Many times when the Indians came in their settlement they entered every house they could and ate all they could get. Groups of Indians often visited homes, begging for food and picking up loose articles. It was a favorite saying among the early settlers that they would steal the tires from a man's wagon wheels while he was driving at a trot. If a settler spent the night at a neighbor's, he usually

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took his cow and the chickens and locked his house securely, for fear the Indians would take the property while the family was gone. Sometimes an Indian scare was started by a small group of white men who did this for deviltry or a desire to play a practical joke. Such a scare oftentimes threw a whole community into a panic.

To put down a well, usually two neighbors helped one another. The equipment needed was a rope, log windlass, and two iron-bound buckets. In some parts of the country strata of rocks made blasting necessary. One of the great dangers of well digging was from damp. Damp was simply a heavier-than-air gas which gathered in the bottom of the well and overcame the digger. These deep-dug wells not only proved dangerous for diggers and repair men but occasionally those on deserted claims became death traps for the passer-by who happened to stray into them at night. The settler, having been driven from his land by hard times, often

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took no particular pains about protecting the passer-by and the luckless man or beast who on a dark night fell into the depths of one of these wells, was unfortunate indeed. In some parts of the country it was possible to drive a well. The principle was that of driving a sharp-pointed pipe into the ground and adding lengths as it was driven. When the point struck sand which was filled with water a pump was placed on the top of the pipe. Another type was the bored well. These were put down in two different ways. The most common way was to drill the well with an expensive machine. The cost of this work varied with the difficulty of the job but it was generally \$1.00 a foot. Another method was that of using a common post auger. By lengthening the handle of the auger as necessary it was possible to dig a "post hole" perhaps fifty feet deep and secure a supply of water. The hole was then "cased" to keep it from caving in.

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The Keller family continued to live in and around Ardmore until 1917, when they moved to El Reno and her husband went to work for the Rock Island Railroad. Mr. and Mrs. Keller reared a family of eight children. On March 23, 1932, Mr. Keller passed away and is buried in the El Reno Cemetery. Today Mrs. Keller lives with her son at 246 North L. Street.