

CUNES, ELIZABETH THOMAS INTERVIEW #1114

371

CUNES, ELIZABETH THOMAS. INTERVIEW. BIOGRAPHY FORM

Form A-(S-149)

1114

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

372

Field Worker's name Amelia Harris

This report made on (date) March 19 1937

1. Name Elizabeth Thomas Cunes

2. Post Office Address 322 Northwest 7th Street

3. Residence address (or location) Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month May Day 3 Year 1868

5. Place of birth Wayne County, Iowa

6. Name of Father David M. Thomas Place of birth Iowa

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother Ellen Furgeson Place of birth Iowa

Other information about mother Mother's father was a merchant in

Wayne County, Iowa.

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 8.

Amelia Harris
Field Worker
March 19, 1937.

Interview with Elizabeth Thomas Cunes
(nee Elizabeth May Thomas), 322 Northwest
7th Street, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Elizabeth Thomas Cunes; born in Wayne County, Iowa, in
1868.

Father passed away leaving my mother with four children,
still in school. Father served in the Civil War four years.

I finished school and started teaching in 1887.

In 1888 we read a great deal of the wonderful opportunities
out west, so that my brother, two years older than myself, could
not resist trying the new country. He came in the spring and
made the run of 1889. As soon as my school closed I came to
visit my brother. He lived at Frisco, a small place within
four miles of where Yukon now is, and had a general merchan-
dise store in this little town. I liked it so well, I made
a firm resolution to go home and assist Mother in selling our
earthly possessions there, so that we might try the "New West".

Despite the warning of relatives and friends of the
desperate chances we were taking by going into a land filled
with wild Indians, rustlers, sooners, desperadoes and bad men

2

in general, we, Mother, two younger brothers and myself, landed in Oklahoma City late in the fall of 1890. The city was crowded. We stopped at the "International Hotel" over the old Herskowitz Store. This was considered the second best hotel. We stayed there for three weeks and it cost us \$10.00 per week for Mother, two small brothers and myself.

Finally we succeeded in getting an empty store building in which to start housekeeping. It was embarrassing to me. As a young lady I could not devise a nice way to keep the passing crowd from seeing us through those big windows. We had to stay there for three weeks before we found a small three room apartment for which we paid \$15.00 per month rental.

I immediately secured a small school at Choctaw City for one school year. My salary was \$40.00 per month. This money was appropriated by the Government for the maintenance of the school, and \$40.00 was considered a good salary at that time. I boarded with the Orcutts paying \$3.50 per week. Mr. Orcutt ran a general merchandise store in Choctaw City.

[3]

I was saving every penny over my expenses to make the Cheyenne and Arapaho run. This took place April 19, 1892. I secured one week's absence from my school and equipped myself with a light cart and a high spirited race horse, which belonged to Brother. The crowd, noise and general excitement recalled to my horse his days on the race tracks, and it was with utmost difficulty that with myself at the lines and my brother at the bit he was kept in line until the start.

At 12 o'clock, at the boom of the cannon, my brother released the bit, my horse bound forward and soon was speeding across the prairie, surrounded on all sides by a hurrying, yelling mass of humanity. After a few miles of running I tried to guide my horse and to my consternation I found that in the wild excitement, my horse had gotten beyond my control and was running wild. Realizing my helpless condition I was seized with terror. I dropped the lines across the dash board and clutching the seat with both hands, I clung on with all my strength, thinking each moment would be my last. My light cart bound

CUNES, ELIZABETH THOMAS.

INTERVIEW.

1114

4

from side to side over prairie dog hills, rocks, gullies but I hung on like grim death. It seemed to me like ages, but was really only one one-half hour.

When I had given up hopes of stopping him, I noticed a short distance ahead of me a broad expanse of water. Along the banks were numerous tents. This proved to be the North Fork of the Canadian River. The tents belonged to the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians. My horse was almost exhausted; this, and probably seeing the river, caused him to slacken his speed and I regained control of him. I drove only a short distance further when I came to a claim that was unoccupied. I stopped my horse, untied my stakes, that had been securely tied to the bottom of my cart, drove them down on my claim. I secured three neighbors as witnesses and thus established my claim. The proud feeling of establishment made me forget the wild hectic ride I had just experienced.

I then started on my return trip to the starting point, now El Reno. I had covered a distance of fourteen miles.

I had left my mother and two small brothers with a wagon loaded with a camping outfit and supplies. I found them; we spent the night there and at the break of dawn we started for my claim. In the excitement of the "wild run" I had not noticed in which direction from El Feno my claim was. After wandering round and round until night, hunting my claim, I realized we were lost. We stopped and camped until morning. The next morning another wagon drove in sight, driven by a man and his daughter, who also had made the run. They were hunting her claim. I gave him the numbers of my claim, and he volunteered to guide us to it. In doing this kind act he discovered his daughter's claim only a short distance from mine.

We pitched our tent and spent the night on what I began to feel was my own. The next day I went to Oklahoma City and paid my \$14.00 as filing fee.

The Government allowed all settlers six months to take their actual residence on their claim. I resumed my school duties. I now had a school in Oklahoma City, as I needed the money to make improvements on my claim.

In the fall of 1892 I had a small shack built and some of the prairie sod broken, getting ready for spring

CUNES, ELIZABETH THOMAS.

INTERVIEW.

1114

6

planting. This was the spring that the Government issued seed to homesteaders of the Cheyenne and Arapaho country. So with others, I went to the county seat and received my pro rata of garden seed, potatoes, oats, corn, and so forth, to plant my first garden and crops.

I had to hire a man to plant all of the crop and most of the garden, but any way I had a big feeling that I was instrumental in the improving. I continued to improve as I earned the money from teaching and at the end of five years of labor I had 40 acres in cultivation, the remaining 120 acres of pasture land fenced and cross fenced, a never-failing well of water and a good windmill. I had replaced my "shack" with a neat little three room frame house and had accumulated 20 head of young cattle, four head of horses, wagon, harness and buggy.

By now I thought my troubles were over, but it seems they had just begun. I rented my place to what I thought was a good tenant and continued my teaching, needing more money to futher improve my place. Imagine my dismay and consternation one morning when I received notice that my tenant had filed a contest on my claim.

He denied me possession of my own home. Then began a long drawn-out battle in court to hold what I had justly earned.

First was a suit for possession. While this was pending, I went to my claim and erected a tent on the land and lived in the cold and snow for several weeks, until an opportunity presented itself to purchase a small "Photograph" car very similar to the "trailer cars" that are so popular now. I had this mounted on wheels and hauled out to where I was camped. Here I lived until I was given possession of my little home by the courts.

Contests were common, and many a poor settler lost his life in his fight to maintain his rights against the claim jumper. With the exception of attempts to frighten me off my claim by "rocking" my camp house, and firing shots through my windows, I suffered no personal violence during my entire contest, but stay I did.

I had never had any experience with fire arms but being alone my friends insisted that I buy a revolver for my protection. I did. I shall never forget my first

experience in an attempt to use the revolver. One night I was awakened by a loud noise. Grasping the revolver, and shaking at the knees, I forced myself to go out and investigate. Seeing a dark object moving near the house, with shaking hands and the gun grasped by both of them, I pointed in the direction of the moving object, closed my eyes and pulled the trigger. The pistol failed to explode. The dark object was a cow and seeing me it trotted on off in the pasture. That was the last time I ever attempted to shoot a weapon.

The court gave me possession in the following March. That fall the Land Office at Oklahoma City passed on the contest and decided in my favor. The Contestant appealed and the General Office decided in my favor. Thus five years after I had made my "wild ride" across the prairie for a free home I received my patent from the Government, and was in undisputed possession of my home.

Two years later I sold this farm for \$3200.00 cash. While my trouble was brewing Mother bought property on West Sixth street. She sold this, also, and we purchased a farm near and some town property in Yukon.

I again resumed teaching school until I married.