

ONAN, WILLIAM J.

INTERVIEW

#8497

208

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

Field Worker's name Anna R. Barry

This report made on (date) September 10, 193 7

1. Name William J. Onan

2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) 119 South Grand Avenue

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month February Day 19 Year 1856

5. Place of birth Marion County, Missouri

6. Name of Father Dennis Onan Place of birth Kentucky

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother Elizabeth (Mattox) Onan Place of birth Virginia.

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 _____.

A Biographic Sketch from a Personal Interview with
Mr. William J. Onan, 119 South Grand Ave, El Reno.
By - Anna R. Barry, Field Worker.
September 10, 1937.

I was born in Marion County, Missouri, on February
19, 1856.

My father died when I was four years of age. I was
so young at the time of his death that I don't remember
him, but my father was a cousin to Abraham Lincoln. My
father's brother looked a lot like Lincoln, and when a
very small child, I remember my relatives talking about
Lincoln. I made up my mind when I became a man I was going
to see him. He was killed when I was nine years of age.

Another story I have heard my mother tell was about
her brother, Henry Mattox. When he was fourteen years old,
in 1849, during the gold rush to California, he drove a
team of oxen from Marion County, Missouri, to California.
I made up my mind when yet a very small lad that I, too,
was going to travel like my relatives when I grew to be a
man.

When I was twenty-four years old, I started to work
as a cowboy on the Tom Brigham ranch in Howard County, Kansas.

It is a very odd story of how I happened to get a job on this ranch. Another young man and I started out on horseback, drifting over the silent smooth prairie. As we neared a small ravine, my horse "Silver" lifted his head and snorted angrily. I turned to my companion, lifted a warning hand, "Stampede coming this way now"; he yelled, "We better get away". At this I leaped to the ground, drew a thin-bladed knife which I stuck lightly into the ground, clamping the handle in between my teeth I heard those deep rolling vibrations. "Right Frank", I said, and swung into my saddle. "That's what made Silver act up, it will be some bunch of Longhorns, come on, see if we can head them off". As I rode at break-neck speed, I thought, "Some poor rancher will lose a lot of cattle if we let them scatter. Hi - there they come!" Plenty of things can make stampedes, maybe a tent blew down in high wind, sometimes if lightning strikes in a storm, or if cattle are bedded down at night and one happens to jump in its sleep this often causes stampedes at night. Now slashing and striking with our long whips, we drove again and again at the Longhorn cattle, crowding them inward ever inward. At last the forward sweep of the herd slowed down

and about this time a bunch of cursing cowboys galloped up in a dense cloud of dust. They at once took control of the herd, the dust settled and a cowboy song arose over the prairie. One rider, bearded and broad-shouldered, approached me with his big hand extended. "I reckon I owe you a heap of thanks, stranger", he said. After a few minutes talk, my partner and I started to leave. "Hey there, hold on a minute," said the rancher. "How about you guys taking a job on the ranch?" So this is how I happened to get my job on the Brigham ranch.

I continued to live in Kansas for several years. I worked at various jobs. I married and brought my family to Newkirk, Oklahoma, in 1898. I worked in this part of the country until 1901, most of the time working in the rock quarries. In 1901, I had saved enough money to buy a team and wagon, so we packed our few belongings in it and set out to parts unknown.

We had the idea of staking a claim or homesteading on land. We took a claim two miles south of Niles.

(Niles is a little post office and store combined, located in the southwest corner of Canadian County in Wal-

nut township).

Our first home on our claim was a half dugout .
The frame of this house was made of logs chinked with mud, and the rafters formed the ceiling. It must not be supposed that all homesteaders lived in dugouts or slept six or seven in a room. Such experiences did happen the first few years, but it must be remembered many nice comfortable sod houses were built. The walls of these sod houses were usually one foot in thickness, the roof shingled, doors and windows set into the walls, and the house plastered inside and sometimes outside, altogether making a very neat and desirable residence.

In our little half dugout we had quite a time keeping out all kind of insects, especially in the fall of the year when cold weather set in. Occasionally a snake would burrow through the earthen side and coil himself snugly in the bed clothes where you would find him on a cold morning.

We raised wheat, corn, kaffir corn, sweet potatoes and turnips. We didn't have the droughts in those days nearly so much as we do today. When the prairie sod had

once been ploughed the soil absorbed water like a sponge. After a days heavy rain there was no mud visible in the ploughed field. The moisture soaks downward to great depths and the soil retained it through weeks of dry weather. The crops would grow without additional rainfall for a great length of time.

The ordinary diet of the settlers, year in, year out, was usually cornbread, mush, wild game, eggs, milk and butter.

I helped to build the church at Niles. I had been in lots of churches, but I had never noticed the pulpit enough to build one. Before I built the pulpit in this church, I went to Hinton and looked over a church there, then came back to Niles and finished this church. One mile west of Niles, I built the Pleasant Grove Schoolhouse. The lumber for these buildings was hauled from Hinton. My salary for this work was one dollar and twenty-five cents per day.

I lived on my claim seven years and it was very seldom we ever came to El Reno. I remember one time my family had planned for months to come to El Reno, but

when we reached the South Canadian River at the Caddo Jake Crossing, the river was up so that we were afraid to ford the river. The only thing we could do was to go to Bridgeport and cross on the bridge or turn back home and wait for the river to go down. After much talk and debating we went home, but the children were very disappointed.

In 1908, I sold my farm, moved to El Reno, bought two pieces of property, and expect to spend the remaining days of my life in El Reno.

COMMENT.

Although William J. Onan did not arrive in El Reno until 1908, he personifies perfectly the spirit of '89 in his every day appearance on the streets of El Reno. His striking resemblance to Buffalo Bill has often been noted.

Mr. Onan came to Oklahoma from Missouri. He was formerly a cowboy on the Tom Brigham Ranch in Howard County, Kansas. He has worked for the Rock Island Railroad here for twenty years.
