

HIGGINS, NEAL.

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

HIGGINS, NEAL.

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Field Worker's name Ruth E. Moon

This report made on (date) August 13 1937

1. Name Neal Higgins,

2. Post Office Address Guthrie, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) 521 E. Vilas Avenue

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month November Day 14 Year 1873

5. Place of birth Asheville, North Carolina

6. Name of Father Marion Higgins Place of birth North Carolina

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother Eliza Duval 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 _____.

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Ruth E. Moon,
Interviewer,
August 13, 1937.

An Interview with Mr. Neal Higgins,
521 E. Vilas Avenue, Guthrie, Oklahoma.

I came to Guthrie from North Carolina in 1891, and worked for W. L. Rhodes for twenty-six years, selling furniture and doing embalming. Mr. Rhodes' store was in the one hundred block on East Oklahoma Avenue where the Vencedora Cigar Store is now. For several years we were the only undertakers here. Mr. Rhodes carried a line of caskets that sold for \$20.00 and \$25.00 and the cost of embalming was \$50.00. Most of the embalming was done in the homes. When someone was killed in a fight, or something of that kind, the bodies were brought to the store, and I did the work in a back room, but we did not have any place fixed up nicely to work in as the funeral homes have now.

The furniture business was good. Settlers had not brought very much furniture with them. Beds, mattresses, chairs, and tables were in great demand. We bought mattresses by the carload. Then when people began building

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nice homes to replace the first shacks, they needed a lot of good things for them.

At first the school section just south of town was used for a cemetery for white people, and the negroes were buried on the bank of the Cimarron River ab ut where the south approach to the bridge on U.S. Highway 77 is now. When the bridge was being built, the workers found some skeletons; but that bank has overflowed so often that I imagine most of these skeletons have washed away by now.

Summit View Cemetery was started in 1890. At first it was privately owned, but the city bought it about the time I came here. I helped to move some of those bodies from the school section burial ground to Summit View. There had only been about eighteen or twenty graves there. The reason for that is that almost everyone who could raise the money had the bodies of their dead shipped back to their old homes for burial. Most people were not sure how long they would stay in this country and of course, the cemeteries were unimproved so most people preferred not to bury the bodies of their dead here. I did a good deal of embalming

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in those days, but I conducted few funerals.

It was the custom for friends to "sit up" for a night or two with the dead. Mrs. Rhodes did not like that, and often said that if she died she wanted everyone to go to bed and rest. I was living at the house when she passed away. We laid her out in the front room, and went to bed. It caused quite a scandal among the neighbors. A funeral sermon was at least two hours long in those days.

One rainy night I went out four miles west of Downs, and embalmed a woman's body. Coming back to Guthrie with the body, the hearse turned over as I was going down a slippery hill. The husband was following me in a buggy with a negro boy driving. I didn't know what to do, and they both refused to get out and help. It was up to me. So I struck out on foot towards a light that I could see in the distance. I thought the house was only a quarter of a mile away, but it must have been all of three miles that I groped and slid around in the mud before I reached the house, and explained my trouble. An old cowboy and his two sons lived there, and they went back with me, on their horses, threw

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their lariats around the top of the hearse, and rode away from it, pulling it back onto its wheels in no time.

One day we got word that Major Crozier, Vice-President of the Bank of Indian Territory here in Guthrie, had dropped dead in Cushing. The body was to be shipped to his old home in Canada. There were no railroads to Cushing, and not even roads. I left here just after noon, and by driving all night, I got to Cushing the next morning. Mr. Rhodes had ordered a fine casket shipped from St. Louis, so after embalming the body, I drove to Ripley, the nearest railway station, and hauled the casket back to Cushing. Then I made the trip again, taking the body back to Ripley, and shipped it from there to Canada. U. C. Guss, a business associate of the Major, went with the body and he told me that when Major Crozier's mother saw the body, she called a doctor because it looked so lifelike that she did not believe her son was dead.

The truth is, we did better embalming then than we do now. Then we used Mills' and Lacey's Embalming Fluid. I doubt if there are a half dozen undertakers now who ever

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used it, but it had better results than the formaldehyde fluid which we use now. It was very expensive, and I guess that is why the undertakers quit using it.

Undertaking has improved in one way. We can patch people up better now than we could then. If a man had a bullet hole, we filled it with wax, but it was almost white and showed up plainly.

We kept the body of one man six months, trying to find his relatives. We knew he was from New York, so advertised in the New York papers and waited. This man had been killed in a fight in a saloon. But the store was crowded, and the body took up so much room that I finally stood it up in one corner. There was a law that people had to be buried within six months after death. When the time was up we buried this man's body, and in less than a month a letter came from his sister. She had just noticed one of those advertisements in an old paper.

One day when I was alone at the store some deputy marshals came in and said that they had the body of a

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man out there in a wagon. It was Bill Doolin, with twenty-one buckshot wounds in his breast. The officers had killed him twelve miles east of Stillwater, after he had escaped the second time from the Federal jail at Guthrie. Harry Thompson was U. S. Marshal at that time. You never saw such a mob of people as rushed in to see this dead desperado. We saw that the furniture store was going to be ruined. People climbed on top of tables or anything in order to look over other folks' heads. So we moved Bill Doolin's body to a vacant building on Division Street- where the telephone office is now, and I was kept busy looking after things there. I could have made plenty of money if I had charged 25 cents admission to view the body of Bill Doolin.

Not everyone who came to see his body did so out of curiosity. His wife was there (she lived at Stillwater) and there were many friends and neighbors from near Oilton where his father owned a ranch. Mrs. Doolin wanted a picture of him, so we stood the body up and took a picture of it for her.

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Then one night the Marshal sent me word that he was through with Bill Doolin's body and for us to bury it right away. They had the grave dug that night, and about eight o'clock the next morning the negro sexton and I buried it in Summit View Cemetery. Two deputy marshals watched us to see that the job was done right.

I have taken a lot of bodies out of the Cimarron River. There used to be a deep hole under the railroad bridge across the river north of town, and I have taken several out of that place; and at least four from a deep place in the river near Wild Cat Curve.

The weirdest experience I ever had was with a negro professor from Langston University. Somebody had telephoned the negro porter at a clothing store that this professor was calling on his wife. The porter turned from the phone and asked, "Mr. Gardner, can I get off work long enough to go home and kill a nigger"? About a half an hour later the body of the professor was brought to us. It was cold weather and I used warm water mixed with the embalming fluid. I don't know whether this caused it or

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not, but when I began injecting the fluid in his veins, every muscle in his body began to jerk and shake. It was pretty spooky. Harry Matchett was supposed to be helping me, but he left, calling back as he went, "when that nigger quits jumping around I'll come back". I wrote to one of our journals about it, and they sent a long explanation but I never did understand it.

In 1924 I was working at Hobart, and was the only undertaker within fifty miles of Babbs Switch schoolhouse when the Christmas Eve fire there took thirty-two lives. I took care of all the bodies. I brought twenty-four of the bodies into Hobart in the hearse at one load, and on a truck following me were the other eight. That was the most tragic experience I ever went through.

Just about two months ago, I helped remove three bodies from a cemetery near Crescent, and bury them in Summit View. They had been buried there about forty years ago, and had all been quite old people. They all had false teeth, and we noticed that the plate of one set

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was made of lead. I mentioned this later to Dr. Furrow, a dentist, and he had never heard of lead being used in this way. He said that he wished he could have examined this plate as it must have been very primitive.

Enquiry was made concerning the name of the Bank of which Major Crozier was Vice-President, and the Field Worker, Mrs. Ruth Moon, replied:

Believe it or not, there was a Bank of Indian Territory at Guthrie. There was even a Bank of Nebraska at Seward, which is only a wide place in the road southwest of Guthrie. In an old book called the Art Edition of the Oklahoma State Capitol, published May 26, 1900, there is a picture of the Bank of Indian Territory, and of its President, U. C. Guss. This bank later merged with the Guthrie National and the Guthrie National later became the First National, which is still doing business.

The building occupied by the old Bank of Indian Territory is now used by the Jelama Abstract Company at the southwest corner of Division and Oklahoma.