

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

142

BIOGRAPHY FORM
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Indian Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

143

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

Field Worker's name Elizabeth L. Duncan

This report made on (date) September 20, 1937 1937

1. Name John Runyon

2. Post Office Address Medford, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) 1 block west of Main Street

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month March Day 2 Year 1859

5. Place of birth Lancaster, Kentucky, Garrard County

6. Name of Father William Runyon Place of Birth Whitley County, Kentucky.

Other information about father March 22, 1832--November 16, 1868 was common laborer.

7. Name of Mother Susan Runyon Place of Birth Garrard County, Kentucky

Other information about mother February 1, 1838--January 7, 1867 was house wife.

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 18 sheets

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

141 /
#8829

Elizabeth L. Duncan,
Field Worker.
September 20, 1937.

John Runyon,
Medford, Oklahoma.

John Runyon was born in Lancaster, Garrard County, Kentucky, March 2, 1859. His brother Peyton, was eighteen months younger than he. The time spent of their childhood years with their parents is but vaguely remembered, but what little he can remember is to his and his brother's sorrow.

He remembers the terrifying days of the Civil War when his mother would keep the windows barred and also the doors, afraid of the soldiers coming in and taking what little they had.

His father served in the Civil War on the Union side for three years. While in the Army, his father took the measles and they left a weak stomach. He nearly lost his life by reason of the measles. When he was better, they discharged him as he was unable to serve in the army any longer.

At the age of eight years, John's mother died leaving him and his brother, on February 7, 1867. His father did not know what to do with the children, they were so young. His father then married the sister of George Brock's wife. George Brock was the uncle of John and Peyton Runyon. She really took the place of a mother quite well. She was wonderful to the children and good to their

-2-

father, but they were soon to lose their father. He died November 16, 1868, leaving John and his brother in the care of their stepmother. The children were very fond of her. She sewed to provide an education for the boys and to make the living. The brothers were growing up and as they grew older, their needs increased, so their stepmother married. After her marriage, she really had to work twice as hard as before as her husband was mean to his family. His name was George Woolwine--he was rather good looking, but mean and lazy.

The stepmother of John and Peyton Runyon soon passed away and then that left the boys without a mother again but not for long for their stepfather married a woman who proved too good for their stepfather. She was very kind, everyone loved her. She took as good care of the boys, as though they were her own.

During the winter of 1875, their stepfather had been hauling lumber for John Ferris some eight miles from their home. This particular morning, their stepfather had one of his mean spells and he told John to go out and hitch up the horses to get ready to take the lumber down to John Ferris.

Young John's shoes were out at the toes and the sleet and snow on the ground was turning to ice as a fine rain set in. He asked his stepfather to buy him a pair of shoes, and his stepfather

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-3-

grabbed him and began to beat him with his fists. The boys then and there decided to leave, their stepmother begged them with tears in her eyes to stay. She said that the neighbors would blame her for their leaving. The two boys told her that the neighbors knew what kind of a man George Woolwine was and would not blame her. The stepmother then told them to go to her folks in Lynchburg, Kentucky. Young John went to the home of one of the elder uncles, of his stepmother's, and Peyton went to his stepmother's brother.

Lynchburg acquired its name by reason of being the place where the first lynching took place.

The boys stayed at these places for two years, then decided to come to Kansas. They could not imagine any part of the country being perfectly plain without any hills and lots of trees. John was eighteen years old when he came to Kansas. He had an uncle living at Truesdale, Kansas, so the brothers headed for this point.

They stayed with their uncle and helped him farm.

In January, 1881, John married Miss Julia Murry. They rented the Halloway farm. It was four miles east of Winfield. Two children were born to this union while living on the Halloway farm. At the same time, David Payne was going through that part of the country telling the people that down in Oklahoma was good farming ground and that the cattlemen were trying to "hog" the country; and

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-4-

if the people would only follow him, they would go in and get land to live on. Many of the people in that neighborhood sold their household goods and followed him on down into the southeastern part of the State.

One time in particular, when Mr. Payne came to Mr. Runyon's house to talk to him, Mr. Payne told him how the people were forming companies of wagon trains to come down into Oklahoma. John told him he had his family to look after and they just couldn't come. Mr. Payne then talked to John's brother-in-law, who his work at John's farm and said he would go with Mr. Payne down into Oklahoma. So he took all of his worldly possessions and started out with Payne and his followers. This brother-in-law said there were a hundred and they headed for Stillwater. They figured they could go down in there and begin to build right away. They stayed for a while without being discovered and proceeded to build sod houses and dugouts. In eight days time, they were discovered. The soldiers, composed of negroes, made the people put their belongings in their wagons and marched them out of the territory. Samuel Murry said before they were all ready to be taken out, David Payne called all of his followers together and told the people not to try and resist the soldiers as he did not want any of them hurt, then he asked the people to have faith. He asked all to kneel as he prayed for their safety and prayed that God yet would open up a

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-5-

way for them to come back in here and take homes.

The soldiers then took Payne's Boomers out of Oklahoma. Samuel Murry said he was going to follow Payne back down here when he came, but the only thing he did not like about it was those large burley black negroes. If they had been white people, he would not have cared so much but since they had been negroes he was coming back.

Payne formed quite a number of colonies but each time was brought out.

In the early part of 1884, Payne was indicted for conspiracy against the United States, but Judge Foster of the United States District Court at Topeka decided that if the cattlemen could come in here, it was no crime on the part of Payne to come in here to take this land for farming purposes, so Payne was set free.

After Payne was set free, he proceeded to organize colonies, but while in Wellington discussing his plans with some of his followers, he died suddenly while in a restaurant. A lot of his followers thought there had been foul play and they were ready to shoot the town up.

In the spring of 1885, John Runyon moved to Ashland, Kansas, and bought sixty acres in the Rose Valley district some four miles

from Ashland.

That winter was very severe. The snow drifted to a depth of six or eight feet in places. For three days the storm was so bad the people were unable to tend to their chores and take care of their stock, but Mr. Runyon shoveled a path to the barn so he could get to his stock and look after the cattle and horses. Thousands of cattle froze to death. The cattle in the Territory that were on open range tried to get to shelter and huddled together, then the snow drifted over them and smothered them to death, or froze them to death. Many a cattleman went broke by reason of the loss of his cattle. The two hogs that John had, he thought had smothered, but after they had been in the little house that John built for shelter for four days, they rooted their way out.

The Runyons lived there on the farm for a couple of years, then one of John's neighbors got him to sell his farm and go to Colorado. They made a good living there by selling butter. They sold all they could make at 50 cents a pound.

In 1889, Mrs. Runyon was killed by lightning. One evening she went to get the cows--John was away from home that day and when he came home, he found the children waiting at the gate and they told him that mother had not come home yet. He told the children she surely would come pretty soon. He waited for an hour and she did not come. He asked the children when she had left home,

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-7-

they told him their mother had left during flashes of lightning and they had heard her singing the song they always heard her sing. John rounded up some of the neighbors and started out to hunt her. They hunted all night but did not find her until the next morning. She had been struck by lightning. She was still holding the reins in her hands. The horse just went down on his front knees and she was lying across the horse's neck. The stroke of lightning had torn off her bonnet away. There was a hole in the saddle where the lightning had hit. At the time of her death, a man that lived close came in when John was so depressed and told him he would give him \$250.00 for the fifty head of cattle. Some of the cattle, John had given \$50.00 a head for, but at that time he needed all the money he could get, so he sold them.

He had three children at this time and did not know what to do, so he sold what he had and came back to Winfield, Kansas, where his Uncle George lived, and Mr. Runyon and daughter Myrtle lived with his Uncle George, while Pearl stayed with her grandmother and his son Clarence stayed with Mr. Runyon's brother-in-law.

In the fall of 1889, Mr. Runyon and four other men came down into Oklahoma to hunt. They went to the Cantonment Agency to get permission to hunt. They refused them permission as the Indians were opposed. The officials told them they could kill anything to

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-8-

eat just so it was small. They started back, but on their way back one of the men said he wished he could shoot one deer, and Mr. Runyon told him if they got down into the blackjacks, they would look for one. So they ran across a deer lying down. Mr. Runyon told this man that he had a deer spotted. He shot it. Then they strung the deer up and gutted it and started back to the wagon where it stood in the road.

When they got to the wagon, there stood a United States Marshal and a big buck Indian. When John saw them he began to pull off his gloves as they were covered with blood so the Marshal and the Indian could not see them. When John came up to these men he asked them what was wrong and the United States Marshal told him that the Indian said they had been killing game. John told the marshal they had been given permission to kill small things to eat on their way back but that explanation did no good. The Marshal took the five men back to the Cantonment Agency, then on to Guthrie. The officers took everything out of the wagon to see if the boys had killed any game but they didn't find anything, so they took their guns away from them, then turned the five men loose, and they started back to the place where they left the deer hanging. When they reached there, they took the deer down and had the best meal of deer meat they ever had.

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-9-

About sundown they began to hear drums and they figured the drums were calls to call some of the Indians together. The sound grew louder and they decided to see where it was coming from. Suddenly they came upon a band of Indians, they were Cheyennes and Araphahoes, some Sacs and some Fox. They had gathered to watch for the Messiah for it had been prophesied by the lesser civilized tribes that it was time for the Messiah. They had at least ten tom-toms, and were pounding them. The Indians had formed a circle around a huge bonfire and were dancing with the greatest fury that an Indian can muster. They had a most mournful wail and would dance until one Indian fell. Then some of the Indians who were standing by singing and wailing would go and drag that Indian out of the circle. If he got to where he could go back into the circle of mad dancing Indians, he would go but some of the Indians never did get up again. They danced until exhausted beyond consciousness. Then there were some Indians who would go out and drag in logs to keep the fire going. This continued the whole night through. It was maddening to hear the constant beating of the tom-toms and the terrible blood-curdling yells and it was a sight never to be forgotten.

The next morning, as soon as it became light enough they hitched their horses and went on their way but the beating of the tom-toms could be heard long after they left the scene.

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-10-

After the boys returned to Winfield, they were telling about the Government taking their guns away so one of the men that they were talking to, said he had a brother who was a doctor in Guthrie. He sent word to him and the Doctor got the guns for the boys.

The youngsters kept after their father, John Runyon, to start a home so they could be together. At that time a sister of Clarence's wife was visiting at the home; Clarence was a brother of Mrs. John Runyon who had been killed by lightning. John met the young lady and on May 4, 1892, John married for the second time. The family then moved to Freeport, Kansas, to live with Archie Davis who had a large house and the Runyon family used half of it. Mr. Runyon and Mr. Davis planted wheat and did other work.

The following spring, the wheat was fair. Then the opening of the Cherokee Strip was announced.

Mr. Davis and Mr. Runyon decided to make the Run and came down to Cameron to register. They were there two days, then went back to Freeport to get ready to make the Run. The wagons came to the line. To identify the wagon in which the women were riding, they put up a long pole, fastened to the side, with a black flag at the top of the pole.

The day of the opening, the people were tense, strained,

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-11-

standing four and five deep in line. At twelve noon, the guns were fired, giving the signal to start the mad race for homesteads. Thousands of people were pushing, shoving, and yelling, but generally it was a good natured mob.

Mr. Runyon and a Mr. Murphy rode side by side in the race. John had a good, high spirited horse and John stood up practically all the time in his stirrups, not letting his horse have the full reins. No sooner had they started than the man on his right side fell from his horse which had stepped into a prairie dog hole, throwing his rider pretty hard. He lay there for a while before he got up. When he did get up, he jumped up and stuck the American Flag in the ground where he fell. He waved at John and Murphy to go on. They had gone but a short distance when a man named Dugan who was riding a mule, hollered at the boys as they went by for he had been trying very hard to keep up with them. Suddenly the old mule went down. John and Murphy waited for him. He got up and started out again, but they had gone only ten miles when the mule again went down, and the rider told the boys to go on as he was going to stake there.

Mr. Runyon and Mr. Murphy proceeded on their way. They came upon a wonderful piece of grassland, got off their horses, and went in opposite direction. John came upon a man with his horse tied to a stake in a gully, and a man lying on his stomach

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-12-

in the tall grass. When he saw John, he asked him what he wanted. John said "I am looking over the land, but I am going on." The man said, "You bet you are going to move on. If you don't want to look like a sieve, you had better get along." John walked back to the place where they left his horse. When he reached his horse, there stood Murphy. John asked Murphy how he liked his land, and he said "I like the land just fine but I sure don't like the way that fellow handles that Winchester. He invited me to move on so I thought perhaps I had better." This man was a Sooner and meant business.

The boys got on their horses and rode on down to the Salt Fork.

When they struck the red soil and hill Mr. Runyon thought surely that was the jumping off place. There was a man whom they passed making the Run in a buckboard, when he came to the Hills, he would jump out and lead the horse up the hill then he would get in and ride along, then jump out and that was the procedure he was going through when they last saw him.

They couldn't find what they thought they would like, so they started back to find the women folks. They found them that evening ready to camp. It was not difficult to single out their wagon on account of the black flag. They camped all night on the cattle trail the women had followed.

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-13-

The next day, they hunted up Archie Davis and the young man who had worked for Mr. Runyon. When they came up, the young fellow said, "See Uncle Johnny, this is where I stayed all night." John said he had \$120.00 in his pocket and if he could find anyone willing to sell his rights, he would buy. The following day he started out but practically everyone had gone to Enid to file. He came back to where they had camped.

The young man who had staked opposite Archie Davis said to John, "What will you give me for my claim?"

John said, "What do you want for it?"

The young man said, "\$10.00"

John said, "All right, son, here is your money."

John gave him \$15.00. The claim was the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ 27-17-6.

The following day they went to Enid to file and were there four days before they could file. It was just a lucky break for them.

John returned to camp and the following day, they started for Freeport, Kansas. The family was more than willing to stay in Kansas until John had built some kind of a house.

Mr. Runyon, while living at Ashland, had done a lot of threshing for different men up there who had not paid him. A man living up there at Ashland was a carpenter and he came down

with John to build a stable. It was a lean-to roof shed but he had forgotten to put windows into it.

John went back and brought down his family. Along with them he brought one bob-tailed cow, one team of horses, wagon and household goods. He went back again and got a breaking plow or rod plow, as it was called, and discs as payment on a threshing bill.

In the latter part of October he broke our twelve acres of land. After breaking sod, he went to Bluff City and brought down lumber to build a house. The carpenter who built the shed, came down with three others and built the house, 20 x 21. It was plastered and papered. That was the first real house built in Valley Township.

The first church service that was held in Valley Township was at John's house. The minister came from Guthrie. They had services at the Runyon house until a church was built.

The first well that was dug was in the bed of a creek. Mr. Runyon then sunk a box in the ground. They had good water. Later they dug a well twenty-six feet deep. That well has never been pumped dry.

The first election held was held at the Runyon house. John Runyon was the first Inspector of the Election Board.

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-15-

The neighbors got together and said, "Let's vote bonds to build a school house."

John said, "No, we will all get together and build a sod schoolhouse." So they all got together and built a sod schoolhouse. The seats were planks and the desks were planks, all in rows, with the books on top of the planks.

In the spring of 1894, he broke out seventy-five more acres of ground. Later in the spring of 1894, he went back up into Kansas and got wheat, kaffir corn, corn, and oats. The farmers who owed John Runyon told him that he could have grain for their pay to him. He also got fifty chickens and brought them back with him.

Before long, the chickens began to die. They thought it was because of the weather. They really never examined the chickens, but one day one of the children had been in the chicken house, and they were literally covered with bugs. They were scratching their heads frantically, and upon examining them, they found them just covered with fleas and bedbugs. Then they looked some of the chickens over and the fleas were thick on the chickens head and body. They began to fight the fleas and the bedbugs. They got into the house, and the parasites were so bad that the people had to move out. They lived in a tent but they had to fight the pests all the time.

One day, John Runyon was on the adjoining farm hunting. The

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-16-

place was thickly infested with prairie dogs and rattlers and hoot owls. He decided he would kill a prairie dog to see how large it was. He killed one, picked it up and it was just as full as it could be of fleas and bedbugs. He then told his neighbors what he had found, and one of them said he was nearly eaten up with fleas and bedbugs. He was afraid to say very much as he had figured he had brought them with him from Kansas. Mr. Runyon told him his place was the same way.

The war then began to rid the neighborhood of prairie dogs and fleas.

The more they tried to kill out the prairie dogs and fleas the thicker they got. It was a war to the end but it wasn't long before the whole neighborhood had joined in killing prairie dogs.

In the spring of 1894, John planted kaffir corn and it yielded pretty well. They used some of their kaffir corn for seed and the rest they ground and made up into flour for eating purposes. It was very poor flour; and the bread made with it was blue color. It would not raise, but that was all they had to eat.

In 1896, they built a school house of lumber. It was 16 x 14. John Runyon helped to build it. Then in 1897, they wanted a larger school, so John got the neighbors together and they added twelve feet to it.

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-17-

In the year of 1894, a man named Thomas Kerr who had come here from Kentucky, wrote back to the folks in Kentucky and told them of the condition of the people here, so the people from Kentucky made up a car of provisions and sent it out here, the railroad company hauling it free of charge. Mr. Kerr and another man went to each family to see how many there were in each family and distributed the provisions according to the size of the family. The things that were sent were flour, bacon, beans, also clothing.

John Runyon was pretty active in the neighborhood. He started to organize a telephone company to build a line to meet the one connecting up to Medford. The president of the company was Dr. McClennon and Joe Wilson was Treasurer.

John came in to Medford to see what it would cost to connect with their telephone system and what the fees would be. Dr. McClennon told him they could not get any surplus money. John asked him why and what was the cause. Dr. McClennon said Joe Wilson was the Treasurer, and it took all the money for expense.

A stockholders meetings was called to determine who held the most stock and Joe Wilson and W. S. Long held the controlling stock, Long holding forty-four shares, Joe Wilson holding fifteen shares. So, when anything was suggested, Long would object. The meeting broke up and things were in such state of affairs that finally John played politics with Long and got his backing and

RUNYON, JOHN

INTERVIEW

#8829

-18-

bought the telephone company. He made it pay and Mr. Runyon had control of it until 1929, but when he took over the Company, he moved to town.

Mr. Runyon resides in Medford yet.

-----0-----