

SCHWAB, MARY.

INTERVIEW 9598

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

SCHWAB, MARY.

INTERVIEW:

599.

Field Worker's name Anna R. Barry.

This report made on (date) December 17, 1937. 1937

1. Name Mrs. Mary Schwab.

2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma.

3. Residence address (or location) 413 South Bickford Street.

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month October Day 28 Year 1857.

5. Place of birth Hittensberg, Germany.

6. Name of Father Andrew Greisiner. Place of birth Germany.

7. Name of Mother Christina Greisiner. Place of birth Germany.

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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Anna R. Barry,  
Journalist,  
Dec. 17, 1937.

An Interview With Mary Schwab,  
El Reno, Oklahoma.

Mrs. Mary Schwab was born at Wittenberg, Germany, on October 23, 1857, the daughter of Andrew Greisinger and Christina Greisinger. When she was eight years of age her parents came to the United States, locating near Pittsfield, Missouri. Here her father engaged in farming and it was near Pittsfield that she attended school and spent her childhood days. On July 18, 1877, she married Jacob Schwab, a young man reared in this same neighborhood.

In 1880, they moved to Kansas, locating about fifteen miles south of Anthony on a claim. On this claim they built a sod house ten by twelve feet. They took a spade to cut the sod into bricks about three feet long, these bricks were then carried to the building site by wagon. In building the house on the homestead, the line for the wall was drawn after dark so that it could be located by the north star. For the first layer of

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the wall three foot bricks were placed side by side around the foundation except where the door was to be made. The cracks were then filled with dirt and two more layers were placed on these bricks. Every third layer was laid crosswise of the others to bind them together. This process was continued until the wall was high enough to put the roof on the structure. The settlers who could afford it put frame roofs on their sod houses. The poorer settlers built roofs in the crudest manner; the rafters were made of poles and the sheeting was of brass, a layer of prairie grass covered this, and over all sod was placed. From time to time this dirt filling had to be renewed as the rains carried it away. In a short time, great growths of sunflowers and grass appeared on the roofs. If the house were to be plastered, a mixture of clay and ashes were used.

All that was needed to make a home was a pair of willing hands.

Mrs. Schwab's house like many others was crudely furnished. A nail keg and a soap box did duty as chairs. A dry goods box made a table and a rude bed of boards

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was fashioned in the corner. The sod house had many faults; its few windows permitted little light and air for ventilation and these little houses were hard to keep clean, as dirt and straw kept dropping on everything in the house. The most disagreeable feature of these houses were the leaky roofs. As fear of the sod-covered houses really turned water. When a heavy rain came it soaked into the dirt roof and soon little rivers of muddy water were running across the floor. When great clouds rolled up in the summer Mrs. Schwab began gathering up all the old dishes in the house and placing them here and there on the floor, on the stove, and on the bed, and when the rain came down in torrents a few minutes later every drop that came through the many holes in the roof of the shack went straight into these vessels.

After a heavy rain it was sometimes necessary to hang all the bed clothing and wearing apparel on the line to dry; however, there were some inventions in the sod houses which were cool in the summer and warm in winter. There was no fear of the wind blowing a sod house over and no danger of fire from a faulty fireplace. A fireplace was

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safe which was built of sod. The average life of a sod house was six or seven years.

It was in May, 1889, that the Schwab family along with nine other families left their homes in Kansas to seek homes in the Indian Territory. Great preparations were made weeks and months before the start for the new home by this group. In addition to bacon, beans, flour, salt and other groceries the necessary tools and utensils for housekeeping and farming, were brought. A cookstove was usually set in the corner of the wagon, the pipe running through the top. This wagon was a travelling home where the family lived until they found the desired location and had a house built. Cows were generally brought along; often they plowed wagons drawn by cows and oxen, but were often the cows were driven.

Frequently these animals became footsore and both oxen and cows needed to be shod at a blacksmith's shop. The long line of white covered wagons wound across the open prairie like a huge white snake on a vast carpet of green; their lumbering wagons were decked with spades, hoes, plows, axes, and other equipment. Now and then a coop of

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chickens was tied at the back of a wagon while numbers of buckets and pails dangled under the wagon and the faithful family dog trotted along behind. Boys of all ages, barefoot and with shaggy hair, trudged along and now and then a sunbonneted girl drove the family cows. There were shouting men and boys on horseback and very often women in a buggy or light rig. Soon after entering the Indian Territory these people began to scatter out and seek homes.

The Schwab family located on relinquished claim ten miles southeast of El Reno, near the little town of Cereal, later called Banner, in Canadian County. Soon after their arrival this family started a house known as slab house or many times called "s. e" house. Slabs were made by sawing a log into blocks and splitting off rude boards. The slabs or slabs were nailed directly onto the studding. These great cottonwood boards shrunk and "crawled" in the sun, leaving plenty of places for ventilation.

El Reno's 1889 Christmas was celebrated somewhat in the manner in which Mrs. Schwab imagined the Pilgrims

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of old New England celebrated their early holiday season with simple religious faith and hope for the future and with provender provided largely with their muskets. The railroad was building toward El Reno from the north, but train service did not reach here until January, 1890, so Christmas shopping had to be done in the meagre local stores, or the families had to bundle up and make a two or three day wagon trip to Oklahoma City or to Kingfisher. Very few were able to stand the expense of such a journey, along with the attendant hardships and practically everyone resorted to his or her own method of carrying out the spirit of the occasion.

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Tame turkeys were very scarce, but there was an abundance of wild game in the canyons along the South Canadian River and in the "Caddo Country" across the river including wild turkeys, prairie chickens, quail and deer. A few days before Christmas some of the citizens made up a hunting party and returned from the "wild west" with a wagon-load of various kind of game, including one deer and dozens of wild turkeys. This supply was really

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sufficient for most of the population and when distribution was made near the site of the present Irving school there was plenty of "Christmas Cheer" for all concerned.

Most of the folks gathered about their woodstoves in their houses, tents, shacks, dugouts or whatever shelter their condition then afforded and enjoyed their feasts.

The Tusten family, proprietors of the Del Norte (Anstine) Hotel served a large throng of boarders and transients and a few restaurants did a thriving business with wild game as the leading delicacy. No one went hungry and the people were as contented as though they were in mansions with every convenience.

The Schwab family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Schwab and five children ranging in age from one to ten years, and this family managed the gift situation with a very few inexpensive trinkets and the swapping of pop-corn balls and stick candy. The expense was certainly at a minimum, but the joy as great as wealth could buy, and Mrs. Schwab does not recall that any auto wrecks were reported in the next week's papers.

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One of the greatest trials of the pioneer women was remaining alone in their isolated cabins or shacks sometimes for a few days or often longer when men worked at places away from home to secure food for their families, and the mother and children would be left alone sometimes for weeks at a time. During this time there were many Indian scares, which proved to be false, but nevertheless, many times frightened a woman who left her cabin and went to the home of a neighbor to stay until her husband returned.

The wind blew from day to day and made Mrs. Schwab nervous and women noticed the wind and dirt, and wind and dirt were reasons why good housekeepers who had been used to a good house in the old state never felt at home in holes in the ground or in a home made of dirt above the surface of the earth.

Even those who had the good fortune to live in frame houses in the prairie towns had their trials. The gritty dust filtered into the houses filling men's beards and women's hair. A newly-washed window was almost as dirty within a day's time as before it had been

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washed. The hard water yielded to no devices for softening. This water hardened and roughened the skin and left the clothes in bad condition. A woman would set about to supply herself with wash water by putting tubs, dishpans, and other available vessels under the eaves of the house and many times the wind scattered these vessels in every direction. A little later rain barrels appeared at the corners of the houses to catch the raindrops which dripped from the eaves and were then carried to the barrel by means of troughs. Later on most homesteads had cisterns dug.

It was on their claim that Mr. and Mrs. Schwab reared their family of eleven children. In 1935, Mr. Schwab passed away, just two months before their sixtieth wedding anniversary. Today, Mrs. Schwab makes her home with her son, who lives at 413 South Bickford Street, El Reno, Oklahoma.