

SHIELDS, DELBERT.

INTERVIEW.

4972.

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

4972.

Field Worker's name Robert W. Small.

Report made on (date) July 13, 1937. 1937.

Name Delbert Shields

Post Office Address Fortawa, Oklahoma.

Residence address (or location) \_\_\_\_\_

DATE OF BIRTH: Month January Day 17 Year 1874.

Place of birth Newton, Iowa.

Name of Father Graville S. Shields Place of birth \_\_\_\_\_

Other information about father \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Mother Martha Beelle Shields Place of birth \_\_\_\_\_

Other information about mother \_\_\_\_\_

... 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 10.

Robert W. Small,  
Interviewer.

On January 17, 1874, Delbert Shields, the subject of this sketch, was born in Benton County, Iowa. His father, Granville H. Shields, was born in Ohio, and his mother, Martha Goodle Shields in Indiana.

In 1882, Delbert's parents left Iowa and moved to Spink County, South Dakota, where they settled on a homestead six miles west of Athol, living there until the Spring of 1890, when they moved to Jackson County, Kansas. After remaining there two years, they again moved and located in El Reno, Oklahoma Territory, in 1892. Delbert was then a young man eighteen years of age and having pioneered with his parents in the West since early boyhood, during which period he had shared their trying hardships and often bitter experiences, he was filled with a determination to ameliorate the condition of his parents.

Soon after their arrival in El Reno, Delbert and his father began the construction of a "dugout" to live in, which they soon built, with a floor space of 14 by 20 feet and in this they took up their abode. Delbert worked to help his father in supporting the family. In the summer of 1893 he went to Sumner County, Kansas, to obtain work and stayed there until in the fall, when he returned to

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El Reno, and secured a job working in a rock quarry to get rock for a lime kiln located eight miles west of El Reno.

In November 1893, Delbert married Emma Pitts, and immediately set out for Washita County, where he filed upon the southeast quarter of Section 32, Twp. 9 North, Range 15 West, being five miles northeast of Cloud Chief, which at that time was the county seat of Washita County and the place where J. R. Shields went to file on his homestead.

Immediately after filing on this land Mr. Shields began to build a "dugout" to live in, which he made 14 by 16 feet in floor space dimension and 6 feet deep, placing large cottonwood logs around the edge of the excavation on top of the ground over which he placed other logs and covered all with dirt. A single door was the only means of entrance or exit, ventilation or light, but it was a comfortable though rude place of abode.

Mr. Shields next dug a well 23 feet deep which afforded plenty of water and was almost free of the "gyp" taste that is so prevalent in wells of that section of the country. He then built sheds for sheltering his two horses and a cow. The sheds were constructed with poles

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cut from a timbered canyon on his homestead, which were made about twelve feet in length, placed on end in a trench dug about 18 inches deep around the space to be enclosed; after one row of these poles had been placed thus, he built another row in the same manner, leaving a space between the two rows of about four inches, which space he filled and packed with prairie grass to keep out the rain, sleet, snow and cold winds of winter. The roof was made by using poles over which grass was placed and weighted down with barbed wire strung over the grass, having stones tied to either end of the wire. These rude structures were familiar to that section of country. Only occasionally a frame building could be found in that part of the country. Most of the early settlers were too poor to afford such a "luxury" as a frame house.

Mr. Shields had saved every penny he could spare to enable him to get a wagon and team and a cow and to build these make-shift structures on his homestead, and even before they were all built he often worked at anything he could get to do to obtain a dollar or two to help him along, but there was little work to be obtained outside of freighting. In the Spring of 1894, Mr. Shields broke

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out ten acres of sod on his place which he planted to cane, harvesting the same for feed for his stock the following Fall. After planting this cane in early Spring, Mr. Shields went to Canadian County to work and after working through harvest in the wheat fields and helping thresh the grain, by use of a horsepower thresher, he returned to his homestead and began hauling freight from El Reno to various points including Cloud Chief, Arapaho, Hammond, Weatherford, Red Moon Indian Agency, and other places.

The freight which Mr. Shields hauled consisted of groceries, clothing, boots, shoes, hardware, lumber, beer and whiskey; everything used had to be hauled in wagons to these various towns and trading points in the newly settled country.

Cloud Chief was seventy-five miles from El Reno, and it required from five to seven days and often longer to make the trip. Roads often followed the meanderings of some old trail that had been made by cattle going to some watering place; in other places, long stretches across the grassy prairies would afford some relief after a tired team had pulled a heavy load over rough, hilly

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sections or through some deep sandy desert waste.

Mr. Shields received forty cents per one hundred pounds for hauling freight from El Reno to Cloud Chief; and 2,000 pounds made his team a heavy load, for which he would receive eight dollars. Times were hard in this section of the country during those years. Mr. Shields kept breaking a little more of the sod on his homestead each year and planting a little more crop each season; the second year on his place he planted a few acres to corn which made a fair yield, and in later years he began to plant cotton, but he always planted affir corn as that was the most sure crop he could grow for feed for his stock.

When Mr. Shields was away on his freighting trips, which was much of his time, Mrs. Shields stayed at home all alone until after the arrival of their first child, in 1894, and then the baby was her sole company. Mr. Shields states that not more than fifteen houses were on the road between El Reno, and the crossing on the South Canadian River, a distance of about twenty miles, and after crossing the river there were no houses for a distance of thirty-five miles.

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When night overtook him while on these freighting trips he would camp beside the road; prepare his meagre meal, and stake his horses out on the grass which was often all they had to eat, and would retire on a blanket or quilt spread upon the bare earth. If the weather was not stormy and often, lying there in solemn meditation, he would think of his wife and baby, miles away in a lonely "dugout", perhaps ill, with no one to care for or comfort them. An iron courage was needed every day of his life, and this he possessed.

On one occasion Mr. Shields went to E' Reno, loaded his wagon for the return trip and when he arrived at the bank of the South Canadian River it was flowing over the bottoms from heavy rains on the headwaters and Mr. Shields had to remain on the river bank for five days before he could cross.

On another trip which Mr. Shields was making with a team of mules he had traded his horses for, he camped one evening at a cross road camping place, and turned his mules loose, with long ropes around their necks, to graze on the grass till time for him to retire; when he went to get his mules to tie them up for the night they were gone; he traced



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them by the imprints the ropes had made in the sand here and there until they approached the river a mile or two away. Here at the water's edge he lost the trail but was sure the mules had crossed the river; he returned to camp, spent the remainder of a sleepless night and next morning early he secured a horse to ride and set out again in pursuit of the mules; after two days he found them and returned to his wagon which was loaded with watermelons which he was hauling to El Reno and went on his way. He sold his melons in El Reno, at ten and fifteen cents each. They were large melons which he and some of his neighbors had raised.

In making the trip to El Reno, he usually went by a road that was called the ~~North State~~ Road, if he was not loaded, and he would cross the South Canadian River at "Lump Mouth" crossing; on his return trip he came by another road called the Standpipe road which was not so rough, and cross<sup>ed</sup> the river at "Powder Face" Crossing.

"Lump Mouth" and "Powder Face" Crossings were so called, because of Indians bearing those names.

Mr. Shields hauled lumber to be used in the first school building built by the Government at the Red Moon Indian Agency, in Roger Mills County.

The South Canadian River was noted for its quicksand beds, and Mr. Shields has experienced some difficulty in crossing this river on different occasions.

At one time, he had to secure another team which, together with his own team, was hitched to his wagon and pulled on it for some time before getting it loose from the quicksand.

The neighborhood where Mr. Shields' homestead was situated was a free range country, and the first three crops Mr. Shields grew on his place were mostly destroyed by stock breaking into them and eating them. He also lost his barn and feed by fire on two different occasions during the year 1898 and 1899.

In the early and trying years, provisions of all kinds were cheap; salt bacon could often be bought for five cents per pound, coffee, twelve to fifteen cents per pound, flour one dollar per sack of forty-eight pounds, and corn meal was usually made from corn raised on the farm, shelled by hand, placed in a heavy cotton "meal sack" and taken to the neighborhood mill and ground into meal. A part of the corn, usually one-sixth, was taken as toll by the millers.

Many Indians of the Cheyenne tribe lived on the

Washita River near Mr. Shields' homestead and often some of them came to his place to get him to teach them "white man talk" as they called it. They were very friendly and many seemed inclined to want to learn the language and the ways of the white man. They were especially delighted when invited to eat. He traded them lots of pigs, which they seemed particularly fond of. In the early days of that section, when first settled by white people, there were plenty of prairie chickens, turkeys, some deer and a few bear in remote places.

In 1897, Mr. Shields raised a bumper corn crop which he sold to men feeding cattle for market. He received 18 cents per bushel for it delivered to the feed lot where the cattle were.

Mr. Shields states that during his first year on the homestead he was unable to buy many articles commonly used for food; the barest necessities often seemed beyond his reach.

At different times during those trying periods he would roast peas and grind them in a coffee grinder and then use them to make a substitute drink for coffee.

He also made a planter to plant his corn, kaffir, cotton and cane seed; he took the front wheels of his

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wagon, leaving the tongue fastened to it, and constructed a home-made contraption which he fastened behind the two wheels and upon which he could sit and drop the corn or other seed down through a tin funnel which extended down between two plows that made a furrow and loosened the top soil, and a drag attachment was fastened behind the plows which covered the seed that fell through the funnel to the soil below. It was necessary to have a boy or his wife drive the team while he dropped these seeds through this improvised planter.

The only food his team had during the spring and summer months the first two or three years was grass, but that was plentiful and he gave his team frequent rest and plenty of time to eat their meals of grass.

The year 1901 was very dry and but little corn was raised in the country; cotton had become one of the principal farm resources for money in that section and it was also very poor that year.

The following year, 1902, Mr. Shields sold his place and after a few moves here and there, he located in Tonkawa, his present place of abode.