

SMITH, DONA M.

INTERVIEW

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

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Field Worker's name Zaiden B. Bland.This report made on (date) June 18, 1937. 1931. Name Mrs. Dona L. Smith.2. Post Office Address Altus, Oklahoma.3. Residence address (or location) South Baucum Street.4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month April Day 4 Year 1881.5. Place of birth Grimes County, Texas.6. Name of Father Charlie Winkiff Place of birth Other information about father 7. Name of Mother Bettie L. Winkiff. Place of birth 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 13.

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Zaidee B. Bland,  
Journalist,  
June 18, 1937.

An Interview With Dona Smith,  
Altus, Oklahoma.

THE EXPERIENCE OF A PIONEER  
OF OKLAHOMA.

I was married to Henry Lawson in the latter part of 1899 and we took the train to Quanah, Texas, to come to Henry's brother's home near McQueen for our honeymoon with the understanding that if I liked it we would take up land and make a home. Letters were very uncertain in those days and we had to stay in Quanah two days before Henry's brother came for us. He was driving a big span of black mules to a wagon and we loaded our trunks into the wagon and all got on the spring seat and started for McQueen across the prairie.

When we came to Red River it was "up" and looked dangerous to me but the mules did not hesitate but walked right into the water just as though it was their every day business to cross such places. The water came up into the wagon bed and I was scared; it got our feet and the grips and everything wet. I wanted to go back right then and the farther I got the more homesick I was for trees and houses.

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I did not like the idea of living in the ground like animals. We got to Henry's brother's house that night. I guess we must have stayed there three weeks before we got moved to our "hole" in the ground.

Henry filed four and one-half miles north of Eldorado; dug a little long cavity in the ground facing East; built walls up above the ground two or three feet; put a half window in the north and one in the south hung on hinges. There was a dirt floor and no door for a long time, not until after my first baby came, for I remember there was a sand storm and I could not tell the color of my baby, he was so covered with dirt, and then Henry made me a door.

## FURNITURE.

We went to Quanah and bought a cook stove; a cook table; four chairs; a wooden bedstead; and an iron wash pot for boiling outdoors; a washboard; a barrel to saw in two for two tubs; iron cook vessels; some tin and china dishes; crocks for the milk and a crock churn. Henry made a churn dasher for me out of some kind of white wood; I think it was ash. I had brought with me from home all my linens,

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five quilts, two feather pillows and a feather bed, a tick to stuff with wild grass to place next to the slats of the bed, and so we set up housekeeping.

#### FARM ANIMALS AND FOWLS.

Henry bought two cows and calves, two mules for our team, three mares for raising mule colts for he intended to raise mules to sell, some chickens, turkeys, guineas and tame ducks, and a shepherd dog which we named Tabo.

#### IMPROVEMENT FIRST YEAR.

We had to have water. A well was not good for the water was too bitter so the first thing was to dig a tank and plant willows on the dam to keep the dam from washing out. Henry broke out eighty acres of land on the south side of the place and forty on the north and planted to maize, kaffir, sorghum cane and some corn. It all made good if it was on sod. I have seen Henry make a hundred bushels of maize to the acre on that land. We had to have the whole hundred and sixty acres fenced for the country was full of wild cows that would eat up your crop or stampee and run right over your dugout, windmill or anything.

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It was dangerous for anyone to try to live on the prairie unless protected by a fence.

I sold over a hundred chickens that year besides what we ate. I do not remember how many turkeys I sold but I do remember that I got 10 cents per pound which was considered a good price. I had the bronze turkeys, and they grow large when they have grain, and my husband let them run in his feed all the time.

To put in that much land we had to have a hired man during the plowing and planting. One morning the hired man was listing some land with the mules and down they went into one of those sinks; over their heads. Henry and the man had to dig all the rest of the day to get those mules out, and the mules were so frightened and trembly that they could not be worked for several days. One of our neighbors was working one mule and he and the mule both disappeared in one of those holes and they never could get them out; they just disappeared. We raised a good garden; everything too; beans, potatoes, tomatoes, beets, peas, onions and I canned and dried enough vegetables to do me all the next winter.

I was young and strong and loved to work right along with Henry when he would let me.

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EATS.

That first year we had to buy our meat and lard as well as sugar, coffee and flour. We paid \$1.50 for forty-eight pounds of flour, 10 cents per pound for sugar and 15 cents per pound for coffee. To hold our meat bill down we used to eat lots of rabbits, fish and birds. I have walked nine miles across the prairie to Boggy Creek to catch a mess of fish for Henry's supper when he would go to Guanah for lumber. He had a good span of large mules and he used to haul lumber for other people, when he had time, for a little extra money.

I could twist a rabbit out of a hole as well as a man any day and I have gone down into a gyp sink many a time and twisted out a rabbit for our dinner.

There was a blue quail with a top knot that we called Mexican quail that is larger than a bob white and we trapped them a lot away back from the house. They made a good pot of dumplings or a good pie if they happened to be young ones and they are good fried.

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## FUEL.

I had to use cow chips mostly for cooking and they made a nice hot fire. I made the finest of biscuit and cooked them on the nice hot quick fire the cow chips made. Cow chips make a quicker hotter fire than coal oil does. For winter we would grub mesquite roots to go with the cow chips and make them last longer and we did not have to be putting fuel into the stove all the time. I always boiled everything I could out of doors and had to have mesquite limbs or something to go around the pot. I washed my clothes and spread them on the grass to dry. The grass was tall and clean and they dried real quick on a sunny day and the most of the days were sunny. I always made all the soap I used in the old iron pot and rendered my lard. Open kettle lard seemed better; it seems that it gets something from the clean air and smoke that is around when you are making it like a flavor.

I always made enough soap to last three or four months at one time. I would cut it out of the pot when it got cool and dry it in the smoke house so it would be in the shade and then hang it up in grass sacks and use it as I wanted it.



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## PESTS.

The earth was alive with fleas. Big, little, old and young. They were not jumping fleas but crawling fleas. They simply crawled all over you; you could not sleep. I have poured hot water all around my bed posts to try and kill them. At night when the lamp was lighted I have seen my bed sheets black with them. If you could ever get them all off of your bed and around the posts you could sleep until another bunch found you.

## SNAKES.

I never dared go to bed at night until I had shaken out every quilt and sheet and looked between the beds and under them for snakes. I have found many a one that had to be killed before we dared to go to bed. And then you know snakes always go in pairs and when we had found and killed one if the mate was not already in sight to be killed we had to hunt him and kill him or we might wake up and find him in the bed with us.

## SPIDERS.

We had a lot of spiders different sizes and colors. Some were supposed to be poisonous and some were not. I was

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afraid of them all but the one that scared me worse was the big old black prairie spider called a tarantula. They were everywhere; more numerous than snakes.

Once I opened my oven to put in the bread and there sat a tarantula as big as my hand on his old long legs. He was so hot he was made. They can jump four or five feet. I got him killed and threw him out of the window and then was afraid to cook my bread in the oven for fear he had poisoned the oven.

Centipedes and tarantulas would suck the blood out of real young chickens and cause them to die. Hawks were bad after chickens and little guineas. The guineas were the watch dogs of the farm and it seemed that their noise did keep things away that preyed on the chickens.

#### WOLVES AND CATAMOUNTS.

There were a lot of wolves, both prairie or coyotes and lofer wolves; both kinds were bad to get after chickens and any kind of fowls or birds but the lofer wolf was the worst about little calves and colts or pigs. When you would go out early in the morning it was dangerous, especially walking, for if a lofer wolf was hungry he would attack a person.

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Pole cats, possums and badgers would all catch the chickens and eat the eggs. We had to keep everything shut up at night. We had a raven; I think it is the same fowl which they call a crow now, that was bad to get the eggs. This raven would watch the turkeys and as soon as the hen would leave her nest the raven was right there to break the egg and eat it.

These ravens destroyed more eggs for us than all the other "varmints" together. There were not a great many catamounts and they were soon killed out. There was a big gyp sink away over on Boggy that the catamounts "denied" up in and once in a while they would scare some one and often get a colt or calf. One time when our nephews were out hunting they found a gyp sink where some wild animal had devoured a man. They found some of his bones, his boots and hat. The whole neighborhood was "riled" up and got together and hunted the cats down and killed them all or drove them out of the country.

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#### FISH FRIES

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Every summer all the neighbors would get together and go on fish fries. The water would be low in Boggy and the

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men would get in barefooted and seine and we women would walk along the bank and as the men would catch the fish they would throw them out on the banks. We women would put them into a sack until we thought we had enough and then we would make a fire of cow chips and fry them right on the banks and have a big time. We would bring our bread and everything else we needed already fixed to eat.

Lots of times they would catch soft shell turtles. Soft shell turtles were good just thrown into the fire and roasted in their shells. I remember one time we had a man with us who, when he found a turtle, would just bite the turtle's head off himself before he would throw it to us. We women would not pick up a live turtle for we were afraid if he bit us he wouldn't turn loose until the sun went down.

Once when we were out on one of these fish fries a regular cloud burst came up and the creek got out of its banks and we all got as wet as drowned rats before we got home. Sometimes when the weather was good we would stay two or three days. The men would stretch a wagon sheet for us women to sleep under and they would sleep out under the stars just on a quilt.

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There was always lots of fish in all the streams those days. There was a little creek that ran near us that was always very clear and Henry made a gig and would walk along the bank and gig them. We loved fish and had lots of them to eat. Once when Henry and I were going to a fish fry, and were a little late in getting started, we were driving two big mules to a buggy and we started off across the prairie headed in the direction we wanted to go. We were going along at a pretty good clip and the mules came to a ditch and jumped it. It threw us both out of the buggy but I was thrown across the mules rump and tangled in the harness some way. Henry saved me though and I was not hurt. Henry always could get his mules to do most anything by talking to them and when he told them to stand they always minded. We had a pair of big ones we called Mandy and Kate. They would mind just like children and seemed to understand. Henry could always get \$500.00 for a span of his good "broken" mules.

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We had two Percheron mares that always raised the biggest mules; one was bay and one was black. I think they each weighed more than eleven hundred pounds. We kept them for a

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long time. We taught Tabo to bring in the cows and work horses from the pasture. He knew the milk cows from the dry ones and work horses from the others.

We always kept our heifer calves but would fatten our steers every fall and after killing one we would sell the others.

We had Jersey and Red Pole cattle mixed; this breeding made a kind of brindle cow and which were very good milk cows and the calves made good beef too. We stayed on that place seven years and built a fine two story house and nice barns and granaries.

I would get gyp rock and burn it and beat it up until it was a powder, sift it and cut out pictures and lay them down in a platter or any flat vessel, mix this powdered gyp and make the prettiest pictures to hang on the wall.

Sometimes, we would mix a little colored paint in with the water when we were mixing it up and have pretty colored frames.

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My husband was a good provider. He killed wild ducks and geese and we ate them and I saved the feathers and made a feather bed. He put fish in our tank and we did not have

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to go way over to Boggy for fish for a meal but put out our lines at night and would always have fish for the next day to eat.

He caught coyotes, coons, possums and skunks; skinned them and sold their hides. We always had a batch of hides to sell every spring. Henry would make stretchers out of boards and put the hides on them to dry so they would not be so wrinkled or maybe spoiled in some places.

My husband was a good manager and provided all things for our needs and comfort as long as he lived.

We could not put out an orchard for the soil had too much alkali for fruit and we always had to go a good many miles from home to gather wild plums to can. There used to be lots of fruit raised on the sand and we would go to the orchards and get a load for little or nothing and sometimes for the gathering of it and I always put up plenty of fruit after the first year.