

SKALNIK, JOHN.

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BIOGRAPHY FORM  
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION  
Indian Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

SKALNIK, JOHN

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Field Worker's name Elizabeth L. Duncan

This report made on (date) September 9 - 1937

- 1. Name John Skalnik
- 2. Post Office Address Medford
- 3. Residence address (or location) Five miles W. on Highway 11
- 4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month April Day 26 Year 1868
- 5. Place of birth Kardasova Recice Czechoslovakia

6. Name of Father John Skalnik Place of birth Kardasova Recice Czechoslovakia

Other information about father Weaver

7. Name of Mother Eva Krenek Place of birth Kardasova Recice Czechoslovakia

Other information about mother Housewife

**Father was thirty-two and mother twenty-eight when Mr. Skalnik was born.**

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 17.

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Elizabeth L. Duncan  
Journalist  
September 9, 1937.

Interview with John Skalnik  
Medford, Oklahoma.

Mr. John Skalnik was born in Kardasova Recice Czechoslovakia, April 26, 1868. Mr. Skalnik's father was a weaver and when John Jr., became of the age to work, the father went to the Government and told them that he was going to teach his son the weaving trade not as a son, but as a student. John Jr. served two years as an apprentice and two more years in travelling to sell the goods. So, it was four years before he was a full-fledged weaver.

At the age of twenty-one, Mr. Skalnik was subject to recruit for five years. John had heard how wonderful America was, so told his father he was going to America. He did not know just how he was going to get out of the country but started out going from town to town pretending he was selling goods. On his last lap of his journey, he was almost afraid he would be unable to get across the German lines. While on the train he met a salesman selling whiskey extract. The salesman asked John where he was going. He told him to Dresden, Germany, that his father had some interest there and he

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had to look after it. When he passed, the soldiers asked him what his business was and John told them he was a salesman. When the salesman whom John had met saw that he was having some difficulty, he came back and told the guard that John was a salesman like himself but had different products so the guard let John pass. John had to be very careful in Germany until he reached Hamburg, where he purchased a ticket for the United States. The ship he sailed on was the Columbus. The cruiser was eight days and a half coming over. Upon his arrival in New York, as soon as he was released, John went to Fairbury, Nebraska, to his cousin, but was very much disappointed to find that he could not secure work as a weaver.

Later, John secured a job in a nursery of Carpenter & Gates in Fairbury, but that was not what he wanted, so he farmed a while. His farm was located fourteen miles southwest of Fairbury, and the postoffice was Reynolds, on the B & M Railroad.

John was married May 24, 1890, while living on this place. Later, the years were so that he could not raise enough grain and he lost everything. So, he took what little money he had and his wife and went to Mohaska, Kansas, and worked for a Mr.

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Bunn on his ranch for a month. His wages were \$20.00 a month. After his month's work, he got a job on the railroad. He bought a house and two lots. He worked at this for three years. Sometimes when Mr. Newton was sick, or he was unable to get to his work, John would be appointed Special Foreman.

When the opening of the Cherokee Strip was announced John Skalnik, Dr. Roberts and Mr. Clark, an implement dealer, came down to Caldwell to seek information concerning the lay of the land. When they arrived in Caldwell, they heard that there were about eighteen thousand people in Caldwell. On the Oklahoma line there were all kinds of gambling devices and there was fighting, gambling and drinking--they were a hard lot of people. The people came there in every kind of makeshift conveyances. The cowboys who had been down in here working on <sup>the</sup> ranches, had fast horses and most of the boys did not make the run just for homestead, but for commercial purposes. While John was waiting in line to register, the people were very unruly. One would try to push into the line and then fights would follow. The soldiers tried to keep the people in line but it was futile.

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One day when the soldiers were trying to keep the people in line, a man from St. Louis, a well-educated person, observed that the mob was hard to handle, so he braved the mob and got a box to stand on so that he could be seen by the others and in order to draw their attention. He then suggested to the people to let him try to help solve their problem. After quite a bit of talking among themselves, they agreed to let him have his way. He got down off his box and grabbed the first fellow in front of him and said for him to sit down <sup>on</sup> the ground for he was No. 1, and proceeded the same way on down the line giving each person a number up to a hundred, grouped them in a circle, and from then on, after they began to group up in hundreds, each group appointed a captain. John's number was 102.

Mr. Frank Corn, Mr. Joseph Burech, Mr. Melka and Mr. Skalnik got together. The others hired Mr. Melka to bring them down in here. He had a spring wagon. They then went to a place twelve miles west of Caldwell to make the run from there. At twelve o'clock noon, on the day of the Run, the guns were fired and the mad race began, each one trying to outrun the other. When Mr. Burech jumped from the back of the spring wagon, he

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found he had jumped off among a bunch of people whom he did not like, so he yelled for them to wait on him, so they lost fifteen minutes there. Then, they had not gone very far until they saw a young lady who had her foot caught in the stirrup and she was hanging on to the reins. That was the only thing that kept her body from dragging on the ground. The last they saw of her she was still holding onto the reins to keep from being dragged to death. John jumped from the spring wagon, not even taking water or a blanket with him. He staked his claim five miles due west on Highway 11 on the SE $\frac{1}{4}$  15-27N-6W, Grant County.

After Mr. Skalnik had put up a flag that was made out of his shirt tail, as the time went by, he became thirsty. He tried to stop several different ones to get water to drink but no one was willing to give him any. His mouth felt like it had cotten in it and he did not know whether he was going to be able to stay on his claim. Then he saw a fellow on a bicycle with a small keg of water strapped between the handle bars. John went over to him and asked him what his name was. He told John his name was Mr. Billings, so John asked Mr.

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Billings for a cup of water and Mr. Billings told him he could not give it to him as he would need all the water he had. John had a \$20.00 bill for filing on his homestead. He told Mr. Billings he would give him the \$20.00 bill but Mr. Billings refused to sell him even a drop of water and John thought that he would die of thirst. There was not even a tree for shade, so he sat down on the ground thinking the others would surely come back soon. Finally he heard hoofbeats on the ground and thought it was his friends, but to his disappointment, it was not. He decided to stop this fellow who was coming and ask him for water. The fellow told him he had hardly enough for himself, but he had two barrels of water he got from Salt Fork River for the horses. John threw back the tarpaulin to look in the barrel, the water was green and red, but he shut his eyes and put his head in the barrel and drank his fill and when he finished, his face was caked with red, muddy water, but he felt that that was the best drinking water he had ever tasted. That night he almost froze to death as he had no blanket to wrap up in.

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Monday morning, Mr. Melka and the others came back early and they cooked breakfast together. They left water and provisions to last John while they were gone. The third day, two men came who were going over the country locating people and John asked them what they would charge to locate him. They said they would locate him for \$2.50. John asked them to show him a map and the original numbers, and when they located him and gave him his number, he asked them if they had change for a \$20.00 bill. They said "yes", but John was very uncertain about their having the money and the Surveyor told John to hold on to half of the \$20.00 bill and the Surveyor's partner held the other half until the Surveyor counted out \$17.50 and as soon as John had the change, he let go of the bill.

John's neighbor on the north was Mr. McGuinness. On the south was Henry Chatman, a school teacher who had taught at Coldwater, Kansas. The fourth day, Mr. George Beggs and Mr. Chatman came over to see how John was getting along. When Mr. Beggs found out that Mr. John had no water on his place he told him to get all the water he wanted over on

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Mr. Beggs' place. They had dug a shallow well on the Beggs place and there was plenty of water. Later on, Mr. John was out looking over his farm when he found a man on his place who said he was looking for a green handkerchief. John had found the handkerchief and had put it in his pocket. The man told Mr. John that he had staked this claim and John told the man to get off the place, that he, John, had staked the claim. The fellow told him he was going straight and file on this claim, so he started out.

At Pond Creek there was a County Clerk from Denver, Colorado, where some men had a tent and told people they were acting for the Government in filing. This fellow went to Pond Creek to file. John was afraid that this man would file, but did not know what to do as he had no horse, or anything else to ride but he asked Mr. Curtis if he would look after things while he was gone, so John set out on foot, walked to Pond Creek, but when he arrived, the fellow who was on his place was in line to file. John was discouraged--he felt as though he had lost his land. It was getting late, so the Government officials closed the office for that day, telling

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the people that they would be back the following day to open the office, but by two o'clock the officers had not come back and the people began to get restless and they sent word to Government Springs to see why the men had not shown up to open the filing office. The Government sent some men to Pond Creek to see what the trouble was about. As soon as they came, it was learned that the men who had been there first were impostors, and the Government sent out to bring them back.

John then caught the train to Enid so as to file and he reached Enid late that evening, stayed all night, then early the next day, he went down to stand in line to file. The men who were filing the claims for the homesteaders began to shirk their jobs. Perhaps the people would stand for an hour and the Government men would sit eating peanuts. The men who wanted to file got tired waiting, so they got together and began to lift up one corner of the building. They intended to overturn it. Soon the Government men began to holler that they would get busy and try to get all the filing done they possibly could, so that was the last of the trouble in filing.

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John then came back home. He got Mr. Melka to go to Bluff City to bring some lumber down to build a house. It was a frame house. The boards were real wide and John also hired Mr. Melka to break out some sod and paid him \$1.00 an acre. He broke ten acres. John worked on the railroad that winter and thought he would go back up into Kansas and bring down the stock and household goods. He brought an immigrant car in. It was February 10, 1894, when the car arrived in Medford. It was storming so they could hardly keep the car on the track. Mr. Corn's son was with John. They put ties on the track at both ends of the car to keep it from rolling either way. It took them ten days to bring the car down from Kansas. Ice formed on the railroad tracks and the snow blinded the fireman so they could not see the tracks clearly. While they were waiting at Medford for the storm to quiet down, Mr. Corn and John stayed in the depot when the agent would let them. One night when John and Mr. Corn were at the depot, Mr. Follett, the agent, was going after some coal. He was swept off his feet by the strong wind, and fell between the rails, striking his head, causing him to lose consciousness. John saw this and dashed out and picked him up and

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brought him back into the depot. He had no sooner gotten Mr. Follett back inside the depot when a train from the North passed. Mr. Follett from then on let John get the coal and stay in the depot at nights and let him cook their meals also.

The third day, Mr. Corn's father<sup>who</sup> was to meet them in Medford, misunderstood the directions and stopped off at Caldwell. He could not find them, so he started out walking in the storm but he was warmly dressed. John said he thought he saw someone pass the depot window, but it was snowing so hard and it was dark outdoors so he could not be sure but went out to see who it was and found a man trudging up the railroad track which was covered with snow. John got a hold of this man and brought him inside and when they got him into the depot, they found that it was Mr. Corn's father. He was nearly frozen to death. He could hardly see. They took his wraps off, washed his hands and feet in snow, gave him some hot soup. He was so cold, he was still dazed from the cold. Toward morning, he was all right.

John told Mr. Corn and his father that he could not stay there any longer--he had to get out to the homestead.

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So, he loaded up what he could on the wagon. Upon his arrival at the homestead, Mr. Curtis came over and tried to get John to come and stay all night at his house but John would not, so Mr. Curtis helped him to put up a small heating stove. John sat up half the night melting snow to get enough water to make some coffee. The storm raged for about three more days after John came out to the homestead. He had to go to a slough just north of his place to get clean snow to melt to drink and cook with, and had to keep the stock moving from place to place to keep it from freezing.

When the storm had quit, Mr. Melka, who was in town doing some trading, happened to run across Mrs. Skalnik and the children who had come down from Kansas. She asked Mr. Melka if he would not take her out to the homestead. He told her that he would, so when they reached the Five Mile Corner, Mr. Melka got out of the wagon and walked down to the house. He told John that he had a surprise for him and he must come over to the wagon, so John walked over to the wagon, looked over the side, but could see nothing only a tarpaulin, and just about that time Mrs. Skalnik stuck her

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head out from under the tarpaulin and John got the surprise of his life for he had no idea that his wife was anywhere except in Kansas.

The weather cleared for a while but it was still cold. Mrs. Skalnik and the children had been down here almost a week when it started storming again. The snow sifted through the cracks that were in the side of the house. One night it was storming so hard that the horses tried to get loose. It was so cold for them standing outside that John got up and pushed the bed to one side of the room, brought the horses inside and tied them to the foot of the bed. They were mighty glad to be inside and they stood very still not even moving.

In the spring, John broke out forty acres of sod. That spring they lost one of their cows. Among the things that John brought here with him when he shipped the immigrant car in, were one span of mules, two cows, one brood sow, three dozen hens, one lister, one wagon, one harrow, and some household goods.

The first year, John had to haul water. The second year, things were getting so bad for them that John and his

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wife sent back to Czechoslovakia to their parents for money to help them out. John asked their relatives to send the money to the Caldwell bank. When the money came, \$80.00, the men at the bank said, "How do we know who you are", and John had to go and get Mr. Neal, the roadmaster, and Mr. Duncan, the section foreman, and he also showed them his credentials which he had when he worked on the railroad in Kansas. Mr. Duncan and Mr. Neal went with him to the bank and John got his money.

That spring John got a job on the section, at \$1.20 a day. He worked back and forth. Sometimes when the water was pretty high, he would have to stay in town. One day when he drove the buggy into town the water was "up" some, and that evening when he came to the creek, he found a lot of people gathered watching the water. John thought he would drive down the creek banks to a place where a tree stood out in the creek a ways. The people told him he was very foolish to try to cross the creek, but he had confidence in his mules believing that they would make it across, so he sat up on the back of the buggy. When the mules plunged into the water, the mules went down. Seeing that he could not make it but would

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go down, too, John grabbed a limb that was hanging down and the people began to shout and scream. That scared the mules and with what strength they had left, they got across the creek safely with the buggy. By swinging back and forth John gathered enough momentum to swing himself far enough to land in safety when he let go, but he had to walk home as the mules had gone on home.

In 1896 Mr. Skalnik had twenty acres of good wheat, ten acres of hard wheat and ten acres of soft wheat. Mr. Brooke cut the wheat. Later, John built a sod house and took the roof from the dugout and put it on the sod house and the Skalnicks lived in this sod house for four years.

In 1904, he built a house 14 x 28, later on more rooms were built to it, making it 26 x 28. The home stands today as it was built then.

In the year of 1895, Mr. Corn helped John dig a well. On Christmas Day, Mr. Corn was hauling the dirt up, when all of a sudden his hands slipped from the windlass handle and the bucket began to fall back into the well, and John was so scared that he lost consciousness. Mr. Corn put his shoulder

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so that the handle could hit his shoulder so to stop the windlass. When the handle of the windlass struck him it broke his shoulder but that was the only way he could stop it. When John regained consciousness, he was wondering whether he was dead or alive. Mrs. Skalnik called to her husband and told him to crawl into the bucket, that they were going to haul him up. Mr. Corn told John after he was out that he felt as if he had saved John's life as John had saved his life when he was out in the snowstorm.

John worked that winter of 1895 on the railroad for a while, then when he got his check, the company had no money to pay the employees off and John's check was only \$13.00. So, John went to town and traded the \$13.00 for a \$9.00 Rock Island Walking Plow which he still has. John helped to build the first school house in that community; this was a sod house and was named Valley Center School.

For twenty-seven years, John served on the School Board, helped to organize the Farmers Elevator, served on the Election Board but resigned five years ago. He is a staunch Democrat, is of the Catholic faith, also a Modern

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Woodman. He belonged to this organization for thirty -seven years. He helped to organize the Western Bohemian Fraternity Association and was its Secretary for three years.

All who know John Skalnik find that he is a man who will help his neighbors. He is a retired farmer and owns four hundred and eighty acres of land.