

SMITH, GEORGE WASHINGTON. INTERVIEW #12390

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

SMITH, GEORGE WASHINGTON.

INTERVIEW.

12390.

Field Worker's name James Russell Gray.This report made on (date) December 13, 1937.

1. Name George Washington Smith.
2. Post Office Address Hartshorne, Oklahoma. Route 1.
3. Residence address (or location) About 1 mile North of Lone Oak.
4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month March Day 30 Year 1861.
5. Place of birth Christian County, Missouri.

6. Name of Father Eliza B. Smith Place of birth _____

Other information about father Served Co. B. 24th Missouri Infantry during the Civil War.

7. Name of Mother Not available. Place of birth _____

Other information about mother Mr. Smith didn't remember

about his 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 6.

James Russell Gray,
Investigator,
December 13, 1937.

An Interview With Mr. George W.
Smith, Hartshorne, Oklahoma Rt. 1.

What would I say was the most thrilling thing I can remember doing back when this country was Indian Territory? Well, I'd say it was the time I danced with Belle Starr, the famous woman outlaw. Not that I was in love with her, you understand, but it was just the idea of seeing her and dancing with her. What did she look like? She was a darn good looking woman, that's what. She was a fine figure of a woman; graceful as you please, and confident. She was wearing a gun strapped around her the night I danced with her.

That was up close to where Enterprise, Oklahoma, is now. We came there in 1886, I think it was, and it was right after we came. Belle had a daughter named Pearl. She was a good-looking woman, too.

I was born in Christian County, Missouri, March 30, 1861, but we moved to Arkansas before we came to the Indian Territory.

My father's name was Elijah B. Smith; he fought in the Civil War on the Northern side. He belonged to Company B

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of the 24th Missouri Infantry. He died during the war. Not wounded, just took sick and died.

We came to the Indian Territory from the Boston Mountains of Arkansas, and settled near Enterprise.

I farmed at first; raised cotton and corn, and food for my family. People raised nearly everything they ate then. I made pretty good crops. It seems to me that land was more fertile then than it is now.

There were Indians living around that country. I don't know so very much about their customs. I can tell you one funny thing I saw once. I saw one of their ball games. You know where the Sans Bois country is; it was up there.

The Sans Bois County Choctaws and another bunch of Choctaw played a ball game. They had two goals, and they played with sticks, each player having two sticks and trying to pick the ball up with the sticks. Talk about something rough! They fought like wildcats.

I worked a while for a man named Jim Bickell, doing farm work on a place just east of Enterprise. Then we moved over close to Russellville, and I worked for Ben Foreman.

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It wasn't 'till 1900 that I brought my family to Hartshorne, and I've been here ever since. It was the coal mines drew me. There was lots of money in circulation around Hartshorne then. The payrolls ran into the thousands of dollars. A man could find a ready market for anything he raised.

I lived that first year on a little farm close to where the underpass is just east of town. The house was just a shack, and the land wasn't much. I tried to farm, but didn't do very well.

Next year I leased a place out south of Hartshorne from an Indian named Billy Bee. That farm was right there where the cement plant was put in later.

Later, when that cement plant was going full blast, it was an important industry around this town. It produced thousands of sacks of cement, and it put many a dollar in circulation. It's been shut down for years now; someone even bought the old machinery and moved it away here the last year or so. But you can see the place there when the whole side of the hills have been blasted away. That's where they took out the limestone to make cement. Yes, and I raised a crop on that place in 1901.

I sold out my lease to Taylor Spears. He had a molasses mill, and he made sorghum for people. They still have the sorghum mills but people do not depend on molasses now like they used to. We ate molasses a lot then in place of sugar. A farmer pretty nearly always planted a patch of sorghum when he was putting in his crop.

After that I started working for the mines. I was not a digger; never did any work down in the mines. I was a "company man", working on top for day wages. I used my team and wagon, and hauled supplies from one mine to the other. You know, lumber, nails, cable, and the like would have to be moved to where it was needed.

I worked at old No. 11. That was just south of Harts-horne near No. 18 Hill. No. 1 mine was working then, too. No. 1 was right by the railroad, west of the crossing where Ninth Street crosses the Rock Island tracks. You can see an old tin warehouse there now. In a way, you might say that Harts-horne was built around old No. 1.

Coal was the thing that drew so many settlers to this part of the state. Take the eastern part of the state from McAlester to Fort Smith, Arkansas, and the bulk of the population, even yet, is where the mines used to be.

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Of course a lot of the mines are closed now, but there are a few still going.

After I moved to Hartshorne lots of people kept coming here to work in the mines or to sell things to the miners. Before statehood the Choctaw government got most of its revenue, I've heard, from taxes paid by the mines.

The railroad that runs through Hartshorne didn't used to be called the Rock Island. When I came here it was the Choctaw, Oklahoma, and Gulf. It was still pushing westward then; it reached the western border of Oklahoma about 1901.

Hartshorne looked something like it does now when I came here in 1900. It was a pretty nice little town, with good business. Of course it wasn't as modern as now; the streets were all dirt, muddy and full of holes. The eastern part of Pennsylvania Avenue was so bumpy we often called it "Washboard" Avenue in fun. You know where that old rock building is where Seventh Street crosses the main highway? That was the Grady Trading Company. Old John Grady ran it; he was the man who had charge of all the strip pits here then. You can still see the excavations where they got coal out those strip pits. Of course John is dead now, and his son, Bill, too.

I bought this fifty acres here where I live now in 1917, and I've lived here since then. I'm a little over half a mile north of Lone Oak School. I've seen a lot of changes take place in this country since then, even. Since the Rock Island mines quit working in 1931 or '32 this section isn't at all like it used to be.

I guess you saw my daughter making sausage when you came in the house. I remember when I first came to the Indian Territory we made sausage with an axe. We chopped the meat up as fine as we could with an axe, and then we beat it with a hammer to soften it some more. Then we mixed in the seasoning.

We used to go places in wagons and buggies, and on horseback. We lived mostly in log houses; sometimes even in dugouts. We wore mostly rough clothing; we raised nearly all our own food. Roads then weren't much; just dirt, and liable to be impassable in wet weather.

And if you write down this stuff I've been telling you I want you to be sure to bring out what I said about the coal mines influencing this part of the state.

Oh Yea, and don't forget to say I danced with Belle Starr.