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AUSTIN, OTIS FRANK

INTERVIEW

#4222

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

Field Worker's name Ethel B. Tackitt, Lone Wolf, Oklahoma

This report made on (date) May 20, 1937.

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1. Name Otiss Frank Austin
  2. Post Office Address Lone Wolf, Oklahoma
  3. Residence address (or location) Lone Wolf, Oklahoma
  4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month April Day 28 Year 1880
  5. Place of birth Near Wellington, Kansas

- 
6. Name of Father George Austin Place of birth Port Hope, Canada.  
 Other information about father Drilled wells supplying cities with water for 60 yrs.
  7. Name of Mother Annie Snodderly Place of birth Page County, Iowa  
 Other information about mother Very efficient woman

Took contract from Government to supply wood to Fort Reno, 1887.

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 \_\_\_\_\_.

Field Worker, Ethel B. Tackitt,  
May 20, 1937.

Interview with Otis Frank Austin  
Lone Wolf, Oklahoma.

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I was born in Kansas near the line of the Indian Territory on April 23, 1880. My father, George Austin, was born at Port Hope, Canada; however, the family home was at Star Prairie, Wisconsin.

When father was quite a young man he took up the occupation of providing the water supply for the rapidly growing cities and towns of the new country west of the Mississippi River. To do this he purchased or built the best well machinery to be procured at that time and dug wells for St. Louis, Missouri, Kansas City, and in fact for most all of the growing cities and towns of the time.

Among the first of these machines was one called the Texas Star, which was run by a horse hitched to a pole which walked round and round, drilling a hole three feet across. Father progressed in this work and finally he purchased the Star Well Rig, used in drilling the big wells which were used for the water supplied to the Saint Louis Exposition in 1903-4.

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We have this well rig in our family yet, kept as a souvenir.

My mother was Annie Snodderly Austin, born in Page County, Iowa, in 1855.

Her father, Henry Thomas Snodderly, was part owner of the X I T Ranch on Eagle Chief Creek, in the Indian Territory, seventy-five miles southwest of Caldwell, Kansas.

Our home was in Kansas near the line of the Indian Territory and it was the custom of my father to come down into the Territory every Fall and hunt. He would kill deer, antelope, turkey, prairie chickens and many other kinds of game. This meat he would bring home and jerk or dry for our winter's supply.

My earliest memory is of accompanying him on these hunts, which were delightful to me.

In 1886 Father moved our family to Fort Reno and he took a contract with the Government to dig wells and supply water for the Fort; this contract ran from 1887 to 1889.

Mother established a commissary, sold food and clothing, canned goods, etc., to the Indians, settlers and soldiers.

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She also secured a contract from the government to furnish five thousand cords of wood to Fort Reno. In order to furnish this wood, Mother hired men to haul and deliver the wood at \$5.00 per cord. Some of it was hauled as far as fifty miles by wagon with teams of mules, horses, and oxen. Some of these teams were six, eight or ten mules, horses or oxen hitched together. The choppers were paid \$1.25 per cord. Mother boarded many of these workmen and others had their families along and camped near us or near their work.

The commissary was a large house built of poles seventeen feet long, set in a trench dug in the ground which was three feet deep. That left the wall ten feet high after the dirt was banked back. In the middle of the end wall a longer pole stood which was sixteen feet high to give pitch to the roof. Around the upper edge of this wall was fitted a split log to make the upper plate and hold the walls together. These logs were notched and fitted. The door was left in the end but stood to one side of the ridge pole which extended the length of the building. This had braces under it. Small logs or poles were laid close together over the top of

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the house and over them was spread a heavy layer of blue-stemmed sage grass. On top of all this was thrown a heavy layer of dirt. This was a dirt roof. Chinks or chips were wedged between the poles to fill any cracks which were left, then the wall was chinked with mortar made of blue clay mixed with prairie grass and worked into stiff mud. The mud dried in the cracks and was hard as any cement.

We lived mostly in tents although we had dugouts.

At this time there was an Indian Agency at Darlington and an Indian school. The Sac and Fox, Cheyenne, Cherokees, and many other Indians came to Fort Reno and to the Agency. I knew more about the Caddoes because there was a white man named Clerk who was interpreter and he had a Caddo Indian wife. I associated with his children and knew many Indians through them.

There was another trading post near Fort Reno which was owned by a man named Evans and his son-in-law, Biggert. This was a plank house and had forty-two rooms in it and was two stories high. Part of this house was used for bed-rooms.

Behind the storeroom was a canteen where the soldiers traded and which was used as a meeting place. In the Fall

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of 1888, or Spring of 1889, some soldiers were drinking in this canteen and about midnight a lamp was upset and the house caught fire and was completely burned up.

Father was drilling a well not far away and as is always done, a slush pit had been scraped out about four feet deep. Into this was dumped the thick red mud from the well. It was about midnight and the drilling crew was eating supper.

Captain Mackey's wife, Mrs. Mackey, was awakened by the fire and at once thought of Mrs. Biggert, wife of the trading post manager and her baby, so Mrs. Mackey slipped a big coat over her nightgown and put on a pair of Captain Mackey's shoes, and rushed down to our camp to see if she could find out if Mrs. Biggert and the baby had been saved from the fire. We could not tell her and she rushed out, going the wrong way round the well-machine and walked straight into the slush pit. Of course, we knew nothing of her plight and the mud came far up above her knees. She lost both shoes and stumbled over, driving both arms into the mud up to her shoulders. Then she scrambled around and got herself out and came back around to where we were. I



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can see her yet. She was red mud plastered down from head to foot. She had left the Captain's shoes in the slush pit and was holding up the coat so she could walk. She came into the light and of course we stared. She said, "Now you may laugh but there is nothing funny about it."

Mrs. Biggert and the baby were safe.

While Father was drilling water wells for the Fort, General Miles went to England and we ran out of material, so had to wait until he came back. Father, with Jack Elder, Tim Mumford and Mr. H. Berry took me along with them and went fishing on Turkey Creek, northwest of Kingfisher. They rode horses and had a camp outfit.

One morning I was left at the camp to take care of things when four men rode up and asked me to fix breakfast for them. I had been well trained to do as I was bidden and asked no questions, so I fixed their breakfast and they ate and went on their way. They were <sup>Al</sup>Jennings, ~~Wesley~~ and Henry Dalton, and another man. They had robbed the train between Kingfisher and Elmore and were getting away.

In a very short time a posse under Lon Poling, Deputy United States Marshal, came up and they also asked me to fix

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breakfast for them. This I did in a hurry but I never let them know that I had seen anybody. I remembered to mind my own business and not to tell things nor ask questions. In later years I told both Al Jennings and Lon Poling of these happenings for I have known both of them in private life.

In 1869 Father made the run and got a claim. He boarded a freight train at Hennessey and dropped off at Kremlin, then walked one and one-half miles west where he located on a well-watered place. It was the only place in the locality which had plenty of soft water. He knew the country and was sure where he wanted to locate.

Among the first things which he did after we moved onto the claim was to dig a dugout, or cave, as we called them. This cave was our bank.

The banks at Wellington, Kansas, and at Kingfisher were robbed so frequently that Father did not want to place our money in either one, so he dug down into the ground some six or seven feet then walled the sides up with rock. On one side he dug out a hole in the wall and lined it with rock and in this he fitted a tomato crate; that is, a crate which had held canned tomatoes. When this pine box was fitted into

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the wall Father placed \$3,000.00 in half-gallon, glass jars and screwed the lids on them and placed them in the box. Then, he fastened the box up and continued laying the rock wall right over the box and when it was finished no one could tell there was any difference in this place and any other part of the wall. We went on about our business. I, only a boy, was left alone to look after the place for a week at a time and we never thought of getting robbed.

This money remained hidden in this cave three years. Then Father took it out and started the first bank at Kremlin, twelve miles from Enid.

While we were farming here we made a planter for feed by fastening a wash-pan with holes punched around it to a board, making a wheel and fastening all behind a breaking plow. As we plowed down one row, we would plant by turning the pan on the wheel behind the bottom share and cover the grain as we came back. This was our first planter, made at home.

We also made a double row planter similar to a sled cultivator with a lever worked by hand.

When a threshing machine was brought into the country,

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I went to work with it. I rode from six to fourteen miles horseback, eating breakfast before I went and coming home for supper. I cut and bound grain and received from 25 to 50 cents per day for my work. Food was cheap; bacon cost 3 cents per pound and flour 50 cents per sack. I saved \$25.00 during this season and bought some calves, paying 50 cents each for them.

I remember that I took a notion for a pair of toothpick shoes and they cost \$3.50, but I wanted <sup>the</sup> shoes awfully bad. We had lots of chickens and got lots of eggs, and I bought the shoes and paid for them with eggs at 3 cents per dozen.

Pigs sold at 25 cents each and we raised twenty-five hundred bushels of kaffir corn and sold it at 25 cents per bushel.

In 1895 we began drilling wells and furnishing water for the Rock Island Railroad Company on the line between Herington, Kansas, and Chickasha. When the Mangum line was started west, we worked out on it from Chickasha to North Fork of Red River on the Kiowa Territory line.

I was much impressed with the country and when the opening came in 1901, I registered at El Reno and drew

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number 677 but some men dropped out and I filed on Number 645.

I proved up on my claim one-half mile south of Lone Wolf, and lived on it until 1908 when I became substitute mail carrier on a rural line out of Lone Wolf.

In 1910 I received a contract as rural mail carrier and have continued on the job ever since.

I consider myself an Oklahoma pioneer.

When the town lots were sold in Hobart, the county seat of Kiowa County, a ruling was made that nothing but cash would be accepted in payment for the town lots in the opening of 1901.

Many persons had expected to pay for their lots with check or had their money in certified checks. We did not learn of the ruling until the day before the sale and there was an awful scramble to secure cash. Father telegraphed to Chickasha to the bank to get the cash ready and I had a railroad bicycle, of the old type, which I rode to Chickasha and drew the money for ourselves and some friends who were in our group, and caught a freight train back that night, and we were all ready for the sale next morning. That was

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the most money I ever carried. I do not know exactly how much it was but I remember that one of the men had \$8,000.00 and another \$10,000.00. I was not molested for nobody thought of my having any money on my person.