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INDEX CARDS

Greer County  
Home - Dugout  
Altus

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

4730

Field Worker's name Virgil Coursey

This report made on (date) May 24, 1937

1. Name Mrs. D. S. Austin

2. Post Office Address Altus, Oklahoma

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

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month February Day 21 Year 1868

5. Place of birth ---

6. Name of Father M. D. Hensley Place of birth North Carolina

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

7. Name of Mother Myra A. Byrd Place of birth North Carolina

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 5.

My father's name was M. D. Hensley and my mother's maiden name was Myra A. Byrd. Both were born in North Carolina. We lived in Wise County, Texas, when we decided to move to Oklahoma.

We were all very poor, and I think that was the deciding factor in our coming to Oklahoma. It was a land of opportunity. There were some four families of us: my father's family; two brothers and their families; and my husband and I. Of the thirteen in my father's family, twelve are still living. I have eight children, all living. G. C. Hensley, one of my brothers, became the first sheriff of Jackson County.

We came through in thirteen covered wagons and a hack. I suppose we had the usual experiences of the pioneer on this trip. There were no bridges and it was necessary to ford all rivers and creeks.

My husband and I settled five miles west and one mile north of Altus. We filed on a quarter section, and as soon as we were able, bought another quarter. A few years ago one quarter of this land brought \$15,500.00. The other brought over \$17,000.00.

The first few years were very hard indeed, principally because we had no start. We did not even have sufficient

clothing. If some of the neighbors had not helped us, I don't know what we would have done. They helped us in many ways, even to loaning us cows to milk.

We got our supplies from Vernon, Texas. It took some three days to make the trip. My husband sometimes hauled merchandise for the Hightower Grocery at Altus. On one of these trips his wagon was overturned by a head rise in the river, and all his merchandise got wet. He had several hundred pounds of flour on the load.

I suppose our lives were similar in all respects to those of other pioneers. We lived in a dugout, as did many others. We made every effort to get ahead, and we succeeded.

The town of Altus was very small when we first came to this country. There were only about twelve houses here, and the first court was held in a dugout. At one time lots were offered free to those who would fence them with wire, but most people were too poor to do this. From where we lived we could see only nine lights shining from dugout doors.

Although the Indians never did us any harm, we were in constant fear of them. I believe, however, we dreaded

3

prairie fires more than any other one thing. One could so easily become trapped in a prairie fire. The grass grew unusually tall, and of course was very dry in the winter. A strong wind would carry a fire on with great rapidity and fury. On one Christmas morning a prairie fire did break out. A small boy threw a match into the grass and was unable to quench the fire. Soon huge flames were leaping into the air and great volumes of smoke drifted with the breeze and the fire traveled in an ever widening area. Men from all over the country saw this and knew its significance. They quickly hooked up their teams, placed barrels of water and gunney sacks in the wagon and rushed to the scene. They fought all Christmas day before the fire was finally subdued.

Then there was an unusual burial that I remember. Old grandma Chisum died at a time when Bitter Creek was on a rampage. It continued to rise until the water almost surrounded the house. It remained that way for days. Finally the men made a raft out of an old wagon bed. They placed the corpse on this raft and swam across to higher ground, where burial was made.

We killed seventeen rattle snakes on our farm the first year we were here. I held my baby in my arms and killed one of these snakes with buffalo horns.

4

Our first cotton crop yielded us fourteen bales. We received four cents a pound for it at Vernon, Texas.

After eleven years of successful farming, we moved to Altus and have lived here every since. Mr. Austin died about three years ago.

Well, our pioneer days were fraught with danger and hardships, but we won out and got our start in life.