

FLEMING, JACK

INTERVIEW

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DIOGRAPHY FORM
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma.

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Field Worker's name Anna R. Barry

This report made on (date) May 24 1937

1. Name Jack Fleming

2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) Route 3

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month January Day 23 Year 1867

5. Place of birth Hemmiford, Canada

6. Name of Father John Fleming Place of birth Ireland

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother Annie Yourrow-Fleming Place of birth England

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 _____.

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Anna R. Barry
Field Worker
May 24, 1937

Interview with Jack Fleming
9 miles northeast of
El Reno, Oklahoma.

I was born and reared on a farm near Hemmiford, Canada; my father died when I was quite small. Years later my mother married a man who was terribly mean to us children and my brother, Jim, left home soon after my mother re-married and years passed and we never heard from him. At the age of fourteen I left home, going to Grafton, North Dakota.

During the winter months I worked in the lumber camps in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and made harvest in the Dakota in the summer.

Late one evening in 1886 I arrived in Grafton, North Dakota, to work in the harvest fields and a man came up to me and asked if I wanted to work. I told him "Yes"; he told me that he needed a man on his threshing crew. It was after dark when we arrived at this man's home and all the boys who belonged to this crew were seated around a straw stack in the yard, each man telling where he was from, when they asked me from where I

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halled I told them Hemmiford, Canada. One fellow spoke up and said, "I've been there", he asked me if I knew Uncle George Manland and I told him that I did and that he was my uncle, and this man said, "He is my uncle too," then he asked my name and what a surprise and shock to us both to find out that he was my brother Jim whom I hadn't seen or heard of for seven years.

My brother and I continued to stay together working in the northern states then we heard of the land rush in the south and at once my brother started for the south to seek a homestead, and made the run for a claim in the Cheyenne and Arapaho country, April 19, 1892, filing on a claim in Custer County, which is near the town of Weatherford. All during this time my brother kept writing for me to come to this new country and file on a claim.

In the fall of 1892, I left North Dakota by rail, coming down to Caldwell, Kansas, then to Hennessey, then to Kingfisher on to El Reno. The nearest railroad point at that time was El Reno; Weatherford was sixty-five miles west.

By chance I met up with a freighter going to Custer County, who said I was welcome to go along. This man had

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a large load of freight with three little burros to pull the load. Everytime we came to a mud hole this team would get stuck and it would take us a half a day to get out.

When we reached the South Canadian River, the river was "up" and scores of people were waiting on each side for the river to go down so that they might cross. Later they decided to hitch five good mules to a wagon, pull it across and bring back one person each time who was coming to El Reno. The water was so swift and deep that it got everything wet in the wagons and sometimes the water went over the side boards.

After crossing the river which took us a day, we continued on our journey to Colony, to unload this freight. It took us nine days and nights to make this trip with those little burros.

When we reached Colony, my brother had failed to meet me and I certainly felt like turning back after all this slow travel. But this man told me to go home with him and he would help me to locate my brother.

When we arrived at this man's dugout, a large squaw came out and started unhitching the team (there I saw my first Indian); this man was what was known as a "Squaw Man."

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Next morning we started out to find my brother's claim and it was two days before we found him. His nearest neighbor at that time was ten miles away. After seeing this new country, I grew discouraged and decided to go back to the north but my brother persuaded me to stay and file on a claim joining his, I went to the land office in Oklahoma City, finding this claim had a soldier's declaratory and four rejected filings on it. After getting these four men to sign a paper before a Notary Public, stating that they no longer wanted this claim, I advertised in a newspaper for thirty days for the soldier to show up and luckily for me he didn't, therefore I made a straight filing.

While both Mother and Father had been citizens of Canada, soon after I became twenty-one years of age I took out my naturalization papers and became a citizen of the United States.

The year 1892 found eight of us bachelors from North Dakota and Canada and we each filed on land joining. We would live on our claims for six months alone, during the other six months we all lived together in a large half dug-out which was centrally located in the eight claims.

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These first settlers in this part of the country were (with a few exceptions) very poor and for some years conditions remained more or less primitive and the scale of living comparatively low. We knew nothing of what was going on in the world around us, and we never got more than twenty miles from home, only when we went after provisions two or three times a year.

I built a sod house twelve by fourteen feet, bought a team of Indian ponies; dug a well which was two hundred and one feet deep, started to break sod, planting corn and kaffir corn and fenced as much of my land as I was able to.

We had many hardships and difficulties in those days; we didn't have any doctors, no laws to protect us.

As I was acquainted with this squaw man, he helped me to be assigned as one of the witnesses to go to Colony (some twenty miles from my claim) when the Government issued beeves to the Indians. John Seger was in charge of the Indians at this time, I think it was in the year 1895. The Government issued them eleven beeves every two weeks; this meant a great day for the Indians, as they made sport of it. When they would turn a steer loose these Indians would get on their horses, running the steer as fast as it could go,

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whooping and hollowing as loud as they could and they would run it until it became hot and exhausted then they would start shooting, and sometimes they would let one get away.

Bessie Seger would get on her horse and taking her Winchester would kill it. This band of Indians seemed very uncivilized at this time; they would all cluster around this beef with large knives and start cutting it up, each one taking a piece here and there. The squaws would do most of the work. Around their tepees or camps they had poles set up and wires stretched from these poles and this was where they hung their meat to dry.

On one of these trips, I bought a lister from a man at Colony and as I was on horseback I tied a rope to the lister, then tied the other end to the horn of the saddle and pulled it about three miles to a man's house and left it.

It was then after dark and I was sixteen miles from home, I had traveled some three miles when I noticed a reflection ahead of me. I looked back and a prairie fire was closing in on me. My first thought was to outrun it with my horse but I soon discovered that the fire would

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soon overtake me and feeling in my pocket I had one match, and wondered what would I do if this match should fail to strike.

I jumped from my horse and bending low in the tall grass, I struck the match on my shoe and set the grass ahead of me afire. As the grass burned I followed it. I will always say "One match saved my life."

After this prairie had burned around me it became so dark, the night was cloudy not even a star shining. I was lost, I didn't know which direction to go to get home. I then laid down in the warm ashes, held my horse with a long rope and finally went to sleep. Next morning when the sun rose I knew my directions and started home.

During this time the Indians were wild and almost unmanageable and the white people were very much afraid of them, always going armed and sometimes they would get up Indian scares and people would go for miles and camp at one place or house.

Maybe one or two boys would "make it up" to ride through the country, telling the people that the Indians were coming and to meet at a certain place and people would come for miles in covered wagons, horseback and on foot each

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taking his own provisions. The young folks would usually dance at night (if we had enough room) while the older ones sat up and watched for the Indians. This was one of our schemes for the boys to get to see their girls. But we didn't let the older ones know it until years later. I have danced many a set with girls who wore dresses made from flour sacks, the brand of the mills being plainly seen on each dress.

The bones on the prairie were a Godsend to the early settler, for they were his main stock in trade for a long long time. We would gather these bones of dead cattle and buffalo, often spending as long as two days gathering up a double bed of bones and haul them to El Reno. They would bring \$1.00 to \$1.50 for the entire load. If it had not been for the bone industry, many poor families would have suffered for the very necessities of life.

We took this money to buy flour at 90 cents per hundred pounds, three pounds of coffee at 25 cents. When taking a load of corn this sixty-five miles to El Reno we usually got 10 cents a bushel for it and we would generally bring back a load of freight for some store if we didn't have a load for our own families.

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A few years later each family had quite a number of hogs to sell, we herded our hogs together, some two hundred of them, and started to the market at El Reno with them, taking five wagons with us loaded with corn to feed them and if one hog gave out and couldn't walk we would put it in a wagon until it got rested and could walk again. It took ten days and nights to get these hogs to El Reno; there a man from Oklahoma City met us and paid us \$2.50 per hundred pounds for the hogs.

As the years passed I improved my farm or homestead with a three room house, a barn, cribs, a nice orchard and put most of the land under cultivation, it being a good wheat farm.

In 1905 I rented my farm, bought a livery stable in Weatherford, known as the "Red Barn"; this was before the automobile days. At one time I had thirty driving teams and buggies. All the traveling men traveled in buggies during this period and sometimes a team and driver would be gone thirty days. I also ran a bus drawn by four matched horses, which met every train day and night, "making" every hotel in town. Those were the good old horse and buggy days.

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After the automobile began to take the place of the horse and buggy, I sold my claim and established a service car business in Weatherford. As you well know Weatherford has many inland towns around her; Colony at that time was the location of the Seger Indian school, also the Southwestern State Teachers College, which was located almost a mile from the heart of the town and these enterprises made my business very thriving. During these years the Indians had money and held large pow-wows.

One time they had a large pow-wow on Deer Creek, some seven miles north of Weatherford. My cars had hauled Indians all morning to this camp, (these Indians all knew me and thought I belonged to their tribe) so at noon nothing would do but I had to eat with them; they had large pots of soup made and they handed me a cup of soup and some bread. I ate it and thought I would get some more soup, as there seemed to be plenty and as I took up the dipper to dip some out of the pot, an old squaw who was sitting on the ground near the pot said to me, "Oh! Mr. Fleming, dig down deep, puppy in the bottom," then I realized that I had eaten "Dog Soup."

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The eight bachelors proved up their claims, built comfortable homes and improvements, all married girls in this neighborhood and reared their families here. Our families always seemed a little closer to one another than the other "homesteaders". Just three of us are still living.

During these "Pioneer Days" our houses were small, our families consisted of from five to ten children to work for, our crops sometimes were complete failures, our wives had work-hardened hands and threadbare clothes, but these are mere incidents of life and not life itself.

While walking in the woods I would ask my children, "How many varieties of wild flowers are in bloom? Can you name them? How many trees can you identify? What kind of a bird is that singing in the orchard now?" I trained my children to see these things, to have ears that hear and hearts that understand. Even our smallest youngster is enraptured with each beautiful sunrise and sunset. The children vie with each other in naming the beautiful colors displayed. They watch for the stars and know many of them by name. Morning bird songs are far more beautiful than the music of the radio to the ears of each one of our family.

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In 1925 we sold our business in Weatherford, bought a farm in Canadian County but regardless of where we live we consider ourselves pioneers of this great state of Oklahoma.