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

Field Worker's name Virgil Coursey

This report made on (date) June 1 1937

Name J. H. Fitzgerald

Post Office Address Altus, Oklahoma.

Residence address (or location) 223 East Liveoak.

DATE OF BIRTH: Month October Day 11 Year 1859.

Place of birth Washington County, Arkansas.

Name of Father Andrew Fitzgerald Place of birth Alabama.

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

Name of Mother Kathrine Shurrard Place of birth Tennessee.

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 1.

Virgil Coursey,  
Field worker.

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An Interview with J.H. Fitzgerald,  
223 East Liveoak,  
Altus, Oklahoma.

My wife and I lived in Wise County, Texas, and rented land. We realized that we were barely making a living and saw no possibility of accumulating anything. We heard that we could homestead in Oklahoma and decided to try it.

I left Mrs. Fitzgerald in Texas and struck out for Oklahoma. Of course, as you know, it was not then known as Oklahoma but was a part of Greer County, Texas. This was in August, 1890.

I crossed over at Doan's Crossing used then so extensively by those finding it necessary to cross the river. I think there was another crossing further west at Yeldel, a small place with one store, named after Ed Yeldel.

I settled near the present town of Hess, and began immediately trying to make it a liveable place. I first built what was known as a half dugout. This dugout was walled with lumber hauled from Vernon. The walls extended some three or four feet above the ground, and had sliding windows. It had a shingle roof and was much safer and more comfortable than those having flat roofs covered with dirt. I then

turned my attention to building or rather digging a cistern. Mrs. Fitzgerald came after I had everything in readiness.

When we came here there were some antelope and were wolves. There/also many prairie dogs and large snakes.

Our first school was at Yeldel. This building was blown away in about 1891, and we built a school at Hess. There is a consolidated school there now.

I remember on New Year's Day, 1892, we had another storm. It blew our grainery and some straw away.

In the early days there was Star Mail Route from Mangum to Vernon. Mr. Jarboe was one of the early carriers. The drivers used a team and hack, and teams were changed about every twenty-five miles. They also carried passengers.

In the year 1891 the town of old Frazier was moved to Altus. This was done because of the flood. Torrential rains caused Salt Fork of Red River and Bitter Creek to swell until they met. Old Frazier was built near Bitter Creek.

The first year I farmed I raised wheat, oats, corn, and seven acres of cotton. We made a good crop. Wheat and oats yielded thirty to thirty-five bushels an acre.

An old man visiting us from Texas said that this country reminded him of the incident in the Bible of the children

coming out of Egypt into the land of promise.

However, the tables changed on me from 1894 to 1899. We had some real droughty years, and I then learned that the mixed land I had settled on would not produce like the sand.

Although we suffered many hardships during our pioneer days, and long days of work were necessary to wrestle a living from the soil, we did not altogether neglect our social and religious life. We often drove over to Dunbar or Locke at night for church. And, of course, at a later date churches were organized nearer to us.

One Spring we decided to make a visit to Seymour, Texas. We packed some provisions in the wagon, and struck out. When we got to where one crossed the Wichita Falls River, we found the river was up. There were seventeen families on this side of the river waiting to cross. There must have been an equal number on the other side. The heavy rains continued, and the river steadily rose higher. Soon our provisions ran out and we had very little to eat. We had just about decided to return home when a man who had a new wagon bed suggested a plan. He suggested that since his wagon was new, it would do as a boat. Some of the men decided to swim across the

the river and back, towing the wagon bed along, to see if it was safe. It didn't leak, so they began carrying women and children across. Finally they carried wagons across on this raft. In this manner we reached the Texas side, and the people on the Texas side reached the Oklahoma side.

Well, we were at least in a position to buy food, for there were stores near by. And we were certainly hungry. The men went to the stores and bought meat and bread, and we built up fires and cooked. All seventeen families cooked and ate together as one big family.

We even had preaching and singing on the banks of the river. That is the spirit that prevailed in those days.

On the following day an awful cloud came up. It looked as if we would have a storm. The men grouped all the wagons in a circle for more protection, and we all got into our wagons to await the storm. There was not much wind, but I believe I have never seen such a rain. We remained in this place for several days.

We lived at Hess for thirty years. We have a son living on the place now.