

JOHNSON, C. L.)
WRIGHT, FRANK)

INTERVIEW

9853

199

LEGEND & STORY FORM
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

200

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Field worker's name Linnaeus B. Ranck

This report made on (date) January 25 1938

1. This legend was
sourced from (name) Historical Sketch from recollections of the
writers, C. L. Johnson, Arnett, Oklahoma,
Address Frank Wright, Shattuck, Oklahoma.

This person is (male or female) White, Negro, Indian,

If Indian, give tribe _____

2. Origin and history of legend or story _____

3. Write out the legend or story as completely as possible. Use blank
sheets and attach firmly to this form. Number of sheets
attached 5

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Linnaeus B. Ranck,
Investigator,
January 25, 1938.

Interviews with Mr. C. L. Johnson, Arnett,
and Mr. Frank Wright, Shattuck, Oklahoma.

Prairie Fires of Early-Day Northwestern Oklahoma

A prairie fire was one of the most dreaded of impending horrors to the early settlers of this part of Oklahoma. The greater part of the native grass in this section of the old Cherokee Strip country used to grow from one to four feet high. Either the late winter or the early spring of 1903 a settler in what is now the southwestern part of Ellis County set fire to the big grass growing on a piece of land he was turning with a breaking plow in order to do a smoother and better job of sod breaking. The fire got away from him, jumping over the few furrows he had plowed around the outer edge of the field of sod. This was in the morning. Other homesteaders turned out in the locality where the fire started to aid in an effort to stop the fire and protect their own property and lives which a prairie fire of great enough proportions those days seriously threatened in the case of

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many homesteaders; especially was this true if a high wind happened to be blowing at the time a fire started and until it ran its course, or was fortunately stopped. Usually it was a driving wind that took a fire beyond control when it started, accidentally or otherwise. By midday a brisk wind from the south and slightly west had come up and had fanned this fire into a raging inferno in its course northward over the open prairies along the Texas Oklahoma boundary.

A throng of settlers were out fighting it with no hope of stopping the fire, instead striving only to keep it from spreading east or west and trying to protect stock, claim shacks and other property threatened with destruction. Even Wolf Creek did not stop this fire. It reached this stream late in the evening of the first day, but the wind was so forceful that burning embers and sparks were blown over the creek and the fire raged on northward. We on our homestead ten miles northwest of Gage observed this fire during the night and well do I remember what a sight it was.

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We realized it was a serious threat to us and to the settlers in our community even though at that time it was many miles west of us. The north and south tributaries of Wolf Creek served as the greatest prevention against this fire spreading over so great a scope of country, especially eastward, as might have burned out the greater part of old Woodward County. Too the wind never changed its direction till the fire was stopped.

When it had progressed as far northward as the adjoining community on the west of our neighborhood many from our locality left their homes and joined the terror-stricken settlers in the fire's path to aid in confining the fire as much as possible and rescue livestock, people, etc., from the course of the rolling flames.

At the Beaver River, or Creek, some fifty miles north from where this fire started it stopped. Many settlers were "burned out" completely by it and left in the midst of black and bleak nothingness. Others who suffered no damage took them in temporarily. Money, clothes and other necessary equipment was donated by the country at large for the

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unfortunates' succor and aid.

The late winter of 1904 another prairie fire came into the Chaney country from Beaver County. As in the first instance, a settler in Beaver County let it get away from him and a driving wind from the northwest carried it southeast over the rolling prairies many, many miles to the Chaney neighborhood some 16 miles northwest of Gage.

This fire burned over the homestead of Frank Wright who was then living about a mile east of the old Chaney Post Office. He had a small orchard started by 1904 and said he saved his horses by taking them from the shed-barn on his claim into the middle of the orchard and tying them to the small trees. To protect his small frame house from the flying sparks and embers he and his family kept it sprinkled with water until the fire passed. His other out-buildings, such as they were, the fire burned.

Much of the native sod had been plowed under when this fire rolled into the Chaney community; and just a mile south of the old Chaney Post Office ran the old Beaver County Trail, then a well beaten, wide course of wagon tracks made by the

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countless hundreds of "prairie schooners" which had passed over it to Beaver County. Here the fire stopped. Beside the trail in a low place a family enroute to Beaver County had camped for the night. The weather was quite cold so they took their old team north several hundred yards and tied them to a small hackberry tree in the bottom of a ravine for protection over the night. The fire reached the Chaney settlement during the dead of night and before the man camped by the old trail had time to rescue his team the fire had raged down through the high thick grass in the ravine where he had his horses tied and burned them to death. It left the poor people stranded so the surrounding community joined in keeping to provide another team for them to travel on to their Beaver County destination.