

THOMPkins, CHARLES H.

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

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THOMPKINS, CHARLES H.

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Field Worker's name Anna R. Barry

This report made on (date) June 15, 1937

1. Name Charles H. Thompkins

2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma.

3. Residence address (or location) 509 South Barker Street

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month April Day 7 Year 1872

5. Place of birth Round Rock, Texas

6. Name of Father Chris Thompkins Place of birth Boomeville
Kentucky

Other information about father _____

Name of Mother Nancy J. (Hargis) Thompkins Place of birth Tennessee

Other information about mother _____

Write 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 9 sheets.

Anna R. Barry,
Field Worker.
June 15, 1937

An interview with Charles H. Thompson,
509 South Barker Street, El Reno, Oklahoma.

I was born in Round Rock, Texas, April 7, 1872.

My parents, Chris and Nancy (Hargis) Thompson,
moved to Texas from Kentucky in 1870, my father being
a ranchman and farmer. My home town was the same one
made famous by the killing of Sam Bass. I was just
old enough to be playing at outlaw and ran er with
toy pistols when the noted outlaw passed out.

In 1879 my father went to Taylor County, Texas,
where Abilene now is located, but settled in Jones
County, Texas near the present site of Anson, going
into the ranch business. In 1882 the rest of the
family moved to the new home. At the age of twelve
I left home and went to work for my uncle on his
ranch in San Saba County, Texas. I might be termed
"Little Joe, the Wrangler", but at that time I knew
my range and my cattle and never was caught in the
way of stampeding herds.

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In 1885 I went to work for Colonel W. J. Bryan's outfit whose range was in Jones, Haskell, Stonewall and Kent Counties in Texas. He was really the first man that I ever worked for and is still living at Abilene, Texas, and he enjoys telling about when I was a boy on the T Diamond Ranch, which was the ranch brand. I started going north from Texas to Dodge City, Kansas, with the trail-herds before I was fourteen years old. My first experience was in 1887 when Colonel Bryan drove a herd from Texas to Dodge City; the herd crossed Red River at the old Red River Station and followed the old trail which had been staked by Jesse L. Chisholm. We crossed the South Canadian River below where Union City, Oklahoma, now stands. There was no Silver City at that time, but the old trail crossed the Cimarron River near Dover, then swung northwest to Dodge City. This outfit drove a second herd in 1888 and I had developed into a man sixteen years of age, this herd being the last one the T Diamond drove to Dodge City.

I worked for Colonel Bryan until 1890, or until he sold his cattle to the Buckle B. Outfit on the plains of Texas. I helped deliver the last of them, then went to the great X.I.T. Cattle Company with headquarters at Channing, Texas, as a trail-driver. I was somewhat lucky with the X.I.T. outfits as my father and mother and Mr. and Mrs. A. G. Boyce came to Texas

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together from Kentucky. Mr. Boyce gave me all the breaks as you would say nowadays; Mr. Boyce was manager of the X.I.T.

There were no fences either in Western Texas or Oklahoma in those days and the country was somewhat wild, lots of water and grass which was a cowman's paradise. Each ranch and range had its own brand or brands. The brand was a device chosen by the owner of the ranch for the marking of the cattle and horses belonging to him. The form of this device might take any style or shape suggested by the fancy of the owner, so long as it conformed to one requirement, that it should be distinctive and not subject to confusion with the brand of some other ranch or range. Most of the cowboys could speak Spanish words and phrases.

The X.I.T. Cattle Company in addition to the Texas ranch which covered over three hundred thousand acres of land, had a steer-ranch in Montana where they carried some twenty-five thousand head of steers. All the time they drove from five to nine herds of three and four year old steers each year from the Texas ranch to the Montana Ranch. These steers were held on the Montana Ranch for two years before shipping to the Chicago market. These trail-trips would take from three and one-half to four months.

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The trail-herds usually consisted of cattle with five hundred to three thousand head of cattle, with from ten to fifteen men in charge and an allowance of from five to seven saddle horses to each cowboy. There was always a foreman in charge, a man that took care of the horses, and a cook that took care of the chuck-wagon. Even though several successive herds might belong to the same owner, great care was taken in keeping them a certain distance apart, not only because of the fact that the cattle had been carefully graded and separated before starting from the range, but also because it was difficult if not impossible to manage stock in large numbers at the watering places and in bedding them down at night.

These trail-trips were never dull, for you met a different situation most every day or every hour for that matter; there were folks who did not want you going through; there were Indians who always wanted beef; there were stampedes; there were rainy days and nights without rest; and always such rivers as the Cimarron, Arkansas, South Platte, North Platte, Tongue and Yellowstone to swim and the cowboy that couldn't swim a raging river was in hard luck, as they were always running bank full, most of them from snow melting in

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were when they shot. We always believed it was those Mexicans.

As a rule, the cowboys were peaceable, yet living in a land where there were no laws, where men went armed and prepared for any emergency, they had their failings and faults and weaknesses, as indeed most of the rest of humanity has. Yet taken on the average, they measure up well according to the standard of Pioneer American manhood.

The last herds for the K.I.T. Ranch were driven in 1895; the country had been pretty well fenced by that time and it was hard to get grass and water, so cattle were shipped as far north as Lusk, Wyoming, and driven from there to the Montana ranch for a year or so. Then that was discontinued and they were shipped from Texas direct to Chicago.

During these years of growing up on the wide open range and practically in constant company with the beef-herds, I was winning fame on the range as a steer-roper, winning many contests and matched ropings with the range-hands. In 1895 I entered a three-steer roping contest at a spot known as Tattersalls in Chicago. Five fast ropers each put up a side purse of five hundred dollars which finished by my roping and tying three heavy Montana steers in one minute and forty-seven seconds. I tucked the twenty-five hundred dollars down in my

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jeans and left the other contestants with nothing to console them but the fact that they had tied and lost.

In the year following the Chicago contest, I joined the old John Robinson Circus, making horse-catches and doing trick-fiding, the first act of this kind to be introduced in the circus. I decided to settle down, so I started a general store at Kyle, Texas, not far from my birth-place. I ran this mercantile establishment three years, but I could not shake off the wild west fever, so in 1900 I roped at the International Exposition at San Antonio, Texas, against some sixty cowboys and three Mexicans brought from Old Mexico to rope against the Texas boys. A representative of the West Indian Exposition at Charleston, South Carolina, was there and immediately hired me to bring twenty-five cowboys and fifty head of steers and horses to the Isle of Palms, Charleston, to give exhibitions during the winter. I went from there into the Wild-West Show business, was known all over the show world as King of Cowboys, was arena manager for the Forepaugh Shows for several years.

Thirty-seven years ago I visited the old Buffalo Show. I had many friends with the show, but early in the performance

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there dashed into the arena Mabel Hackney, a chic and charming jumping-horse rider. A year later Mabel Hackney became Mrs. Charles Thompkins.

~~In 1905 Mrs. Thompkins and I received an offer to go to~~
Europe to ride and rope; my contract called for me to furnish twelve Sioux Indians. The show came to grief and it cost me all the horses and money we had to get ourselves and the Indians back home. I had told the Indian Agent the Indians would be returned home safe regardless of what happened to the show and that is just what I did.

Upon our return to America we hooked up with the great old stage show, "The Roundup", and were with this organization during its three-year run. After leaving "The Roundup" we put out our own Wild-West show and were on the road with in until November, 1917.

In 1917, I took up an automobile agency at El Reno and settled down to become a quiet business man, but in 1935 the old longing to mingle with the western sports cropped out again and helped produce the "Pioneer Days" Rodeo at El Reno. During the past few years I have been dragged back into the Rodeo game by admiring friends. One of my staunch supporters being

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Ralph T. Hemphill of the Oklahoma State Fair Association, whom I helped put on a big rodeo at the State Fair in 1936 and hope to put on one this year.

One of our dearest friends is Major Gordon W. Lillie, "Pawnee Bill", and we spend a lot of our time visiting each other talking over old times.

Books could be written on our experiences. We have piles of scrap books, but it is very seldom any one gets to see them for we do not want any of our friends to think we are bragging.

I don't think I will dwell on these experiences and hardships any longer. I thank Heaven now that I can see things more clearly and accept them more quietly. That's a lesson Time teaches us. As Father Time rolls on, many of the young cowboys who rode the ranges and attended the "Round-up" are numbered among its substantial citizenship today, though most of them are now past the meridian of life.