

GARDNER, MATILA ANNIE

INTERVIEW

#9224

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BIOGRAPHY 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) November 11, 1937. 19371. Name Mrs. Matile Annie Gardner.2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma.3. Residence address (or location) 108 North Macomb Street.4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month July. Day 9 Year 1867.5. Place of birth Polk County, Missouri.6. Name of Father Adam Gill Place of birth Pennsylvania.

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

7. Name of Mother Louisa Light Gill Place of birth Kentucky.

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 13.

Anna R. Barry,  
Journalist,  
Nov., 11, 1937.

An Interview With Matila Annie  
Gardner, El RENO, Oklahoma.

Mrs. Matila Annie Gardner was born in Polk County, Missouri on July 9, 1867, the daughter of Adam Gill and Louisa (Light) Gill. Her first home she remembers was a little log hut located on their farm three miles east of Buffalo, Missouri. Her father died when she was a child nine years of age; after this it was very little schooling she received, as her mother's health was bad and she was required to stay at home and help on the farm. Mrs. Gardner said during this time people who lived in the Ozarks thought very little of schools or of the need for an education for their children. It was on this farm she lived fifteen years always working hard, to help keep their family together.

It was in March, 1888, that she married George Gardner. The following Fall all talk was on the opening of the Indian Territory for settlement in 1889. In their wagon covered with white canvas Mr. and Mrs. Gardner, along with a family named Lucas, started on the journey to Oklahoma to seek a new home. With a cookstove set in the center of the wagon, a breaking plow, axes, tools, bedding, a few cooking

utensils loaded in the wagon, along with provisions such as flour, bacon, salt and syrup, these two families moved slowly on in search of a new home.

Other wagons joined them. These wagons were loaded with plows, furniture, hoes, axes and other equipment; on a number of the wagons could be seen a cove of chickens tied securely at the back; buckets and pails dangled under it, with several tired limpy dogs trotting along behind.

There were boys of all ages, driving the family cows, all trying to reach the Indian Territory before the Opening, April 22, 1889.

It was after this colony had left Winfield, Kansas, that one of Mr. Gardner's horses became very lame, and it seemed very difficult for it to travel. It so happened, that their wagon was the last in the line and the others not knowing anything had gone wrong, traveled on. At noon Mr. Gardner told her husband they had better camp and he could get on the other horse and overtake the other wagons as all their provisions were in the Lucas family grub box. She said the only thing they had in their wagon to eat was flour and syrup, while she was waiting for her husband to return, she became so hungry that she decided to build a fire, make some bread, out of flour and water and eat it

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with syrup. After she had searched almost every box in the wagon, she found a few matches and lighted the fire. Soon after she had started the fire, a cowboy rode up horseback. She said he had probably noticed the fire and wanted to see what it was. She felt terribly afraid so alone and not knowing how long her husband would be gone. This cowboy asked to borrow some matches and was soon on his way.

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These families were delayed and several times were forced to stop a day or two; there<sup>fore</sup>, they arrived too late for the Opening on April 22nd. It was April 27, 1889, when they landed in Kingfisher; from where they branched out in search of claims that were still open for settlement. The Gardner family along with a family named Ross, pitched tents on some vacant lots and continued to live in Kingfisher. These two men bought a plat of the land opened for settlement and in this way found out claims were still open to home-seekers. Mr. Gardner filed on a claim three miles east of Union City, while his friend Mr. Ross filed on a claim joining his on the east. They had six months time to appear on these claims.

It was while camped here at Kingfisher, the Gardners' first child was born on August 3, 1889. These men were

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without work and their provisions were running low, so on August 13, they loaded their two wagons and started for Council Grove to seek employment cutting and sawing wood. They felt lucky when they received orders to cut cord wood for the Government and haul it to Fort Reno. Mrs. Gardner doesn't remember what wages they received for their labor, but added it was just enough to make a scant living.

It was on January 27, 1890, that the Gardner family moved to their claim east of Union City; they erected their tent near a little creek, thinking it would be warmer here than on the open prairie, and too, wood could be obtained more easily. All went well with his family, until April, when the Spring rains began. One night they awoke from their sleep to find the water from this creek two feet high in their tent. They then moved their tent upon the open prairie some distance from this creek. One night in May a terrible storm blew down their tent; this storm damaged it until it could not be used any longer. Her husband took pieces of this canvas and spread it over the wagon bows and this served as their house until they finished their half dugout. This dugout was a room eight by ten feet dug in the side of a hill. A few poles were used to make the door frame, which

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opened out into the ravine, the front wall was made of logs, a roof sloping back onto the hill was made of poles and logs covered over with brush then a layer of prairie grass thick enough to hold dirt, and finally a layer of dirt over the grass. Mrs. Gardner said all during that summer they lived in this house with a blanket hung up as a door. This house was without windows and had a dirt floor. When it rained the roof leaked so badly that a small trench was dug through the center of the room to let the water run out the door. The Gardner family lived in this half dugout three years before they were able to build a frame house.

Her husband would break a small patch of sod on their claim, then when food began to run low he was forced to get out and hunt work, many times going a long distance before he found it. Mrs. Gardner said her closest neighbor was a mile away. She felt so alone in this little cabin with just her baby and her house without a door. Often times she said after she had done a hard days work as night drew near, she felt as if she never could spend the night here. Her neighbor Mrs. Ross, had so many small children that it was impossible for her to come to Mrs. Gardner. Her husband was away also at work. Many times Mrs. Gardner said she would gather her

baby in her arms and almost too tired to walk she would go to the Ross home to spend the night.

The first year on their claim one of their best horses died. This was a hard blow to this family as it left them with only one horse to break sod and plant a crop. But Mr. Gardner found a man living not far away who had plenty of horses and when he needed a horse, he borrowed it from his kind neighbor. He helped this man break sod on his claim and worked until he also received two cows as pay for his work. Mrs. Gardner recalls at this time they didn't have money to buy wire to build a fence or pen for these cows, and it was one of her many duties to care for them.

The first Spring her husband planted some cotton and small patches of cane, but that summer a drouth struck this part of the country but they raised enough cane for hay to feed their cows and horse during the winter. Her few chickens were fed the cane seed.

Mrs. Gardner recalls that her husband took sick with the chills the first Fall and during this time their well went dry and she was forced to carry water a mile. Many times she walked, carrying a bucket of water on one arm and her baby on the other. One day while her baby and sick husband were asleep she built a ladder and decided she would



clean out the well. She could see water from the top of the well, and could get about a gallon at a time when drawing it. She found her two buckets and set about the task of cleaning out the well, each time she went down into it, she filled these buckets with water. When she reached the top she drew them up and continued this until the well was cleaned out. But to their disappointment the water failed to come back, so after all this hard work she was forced again to carry water. In their neighborhood a man claimed he could locate water. Everyone for miles around called him the water witch. He secured a willow forked stick, and holding its ends firmly, he held his hands against his knees, bending low. He continued to walk back and forth over the location where her husband desired the well to be dug. If water was to be found this rod was supposed to show activity at a spot over water the main stem of the rod inclining toward the ground. This man told her husband it would be impossible to dig a well on the west side of their farm. From all indications of this willow stick, a well here would mean just another dry hole. Mrs. Gardner said they went upon the east side of the place and located a spot where they thought water could be obtained. This family went to work digging this well, as her husband dug the well, she

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pulled the dirt in buckets to the top of the ground, while their baby played under a canvas stretched over four poles nearby. After digging a depth of twelve feet they found an abundance of water. She said they rejoiced over this well, more so than people would today over a nice bathroom and fixtures in their home. In after years this family had to dig several other wells, but never failed to find water on this location.

In the Spring of 1890, Mrs. Gardner said they were without food, her husband couldn't find work close around. All during the Winter they had lived on bread and milk and wild game. Her husband along with his neighbor, Mr. Ross decided they would go into the Caddo country (this was before it was open for settlement) and see if they could get any work. This part of the country was mostly settled with ranchmen at this time. Here they got work building a cattle tank for two men, Campbell and Williams; for this work they received twenty-five dollars. As soon as they collected this money, they came home for both their families were practically without food.

While they were building this tank one day their bird dog got in the tent and ate up all their meat. It was four days before they got this tank finished and during this time

they had nothing but bread to eat and a little black coffee. These two families felt very proud over this twenty-five dollars. It meant that both families could have something to eat. She said her husband kept working for this ranch until he had saved enough money to buy several head of cattle for himself.

That Fall while her husband was away at work Mrs. Gardner decided she would pick cotton not far from the house. This cotton was about six inches high, and from early morning until late at night she could only pick about fifty pounds, but in the Fall this family sold their cotton and received enough money to buy their Winter's flour.

When Sitting Bull was killed in the North, Mrs. Gardner says all the Comanche Indians located in the Caddo Country on the South Canadian River were in an ugly mood. They had on their war paint and every day they rode into Union City whooping and yelling. This alarmed the white settlers all over this part of the country. At this time Mrs. Gardner's husband was away from home at work. Their house at this time was without a door and many times during the night dogs barked and they would awaken her. She would take her baby, slip out doors to see if she could hear the Indians coming; often times she even went to a brush pile and hid, in this

brush pile. She had a hole there large enough for herself and baby to hide, but she added this was just another Indian scare.

Mrs. Gardner told of Thanksgiving day. She said during these early days it was celebrated in a more religious fashion than today. A church service was held in the forenoon at a church or school house and in the afternoon a great feast was enjoyed. Settlers went into the unsettled region to the West and returned with plenty of game for the feast. This hunt was usually held a few days before Thanksgiving so that the wild turkeys and other game could be cooked for the Thanksgiving dinner.

Christmas was celebrated with very little preparation in advance. There were few presents for children at this time, but a nice program was arranged. There was little opportunity in most neighborhood to secure an evergreen Christmas tree on the prairie. Often times another tree was decorated with strings of pop-corn, little red berries, cotton and other home-made decorations. She said children felt proud if each received a little sack of candy, an orange and apple.

She said children always looked forward to the Fourth of July, celebrations were usually held at small towns and

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people came walking, horseback, riding in wagons, anyway they could get there. The ladies were dressed <sup>in</sup> sunbonnets and plain calico dresses. Probably one silk dress could be seen in the whole crowd. An American flag could be seen on top of the highest building or on a tall pole, speech-making, music and ball games took up most of the day with a large basket dinner at noon. Sometimes such events as catching a greased pig or climbing a greased pole were features and to add delight for the children there was a home-made merry-go-round pulled by a horse, usually that night the fiddlers were tuned up and the dance began. Late that night wagons could be heard going in every direction, all tired but happy over the day.

Revival or protracted meetings sometimes lasting three or four weeks were held, usually in the summer under a brush arbor, while those held in Winter were generally held in the school house or at a neighbor's home. The neighbors would take turns in keeping the preacher in their homes. He worked all week cutting wood for the fires in this home, and preached on Sunday.

A wedding in the early days, Mrs. Gardner relates, was always followed by a charivari. Generally the charivari occurred on the evening after the wedding and consisted of

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beating on tin pans and ringing cowbells. After a time the newly-weds appeared before this group of noisemakers and invited them into their new home, which many times was just a little one room frame house. If it was in summer watermelons were usually served as refreshments; in winter coffee and cake or pumpkin pies were served.

During these early days if a circus was advertised to appear in a town on a certain day, children and young folk counted the days until it arrived. Everyone for miles around laid their work aside and attended this circus. A street parade was usually held at ten o'clock in the morning, while the two performances were given at two and seven o'clock. There were wild animals, tight rope walking stunts on horseback, clowns, trapeze performers, and other attractions.

After two or three years of hard work on their claim things began to look brighter for the Gardner family. They cut and stacked large stacks of prairie hay which they sold to Cowmen and by this time they had several head of horses, cattle and a nice flock of chickens, and they raised fairly good crops.

It was in 1894 that they built a frame house fourteen by sixteen feet, with two doors and three windows.. Mrs.

Gardner said she felt more proud of this little house than anything she had ever owned.

In 1932, Mr. Gardner died and today Mrs. Gardner still owns their homestead. It is on this place, her married and only son makes his home.