



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

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KARNES, EMMA MAY

INTERVIEW

13780

Nannie Lee Burns

Field Worker's name \_\_\_\_\_

This report made on (date) April 30 8 193

1. Name Mrs. Emma May Karnes

2. Post Office Address Quapaw, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (~~or~~ location) \*\*\*\* XXXXX

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month \_\_\_\_\_ Day \_\_\_\_\_ Year \_\_\_\_\_

5. Place of birth As she remembers it.

6. Name of Father \_\_\_\_\_ Place of birth \_\_\_\_\_

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

7. Name of Mother \_\_\_\_\_ Place of birth \_\_\_\_\_

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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Nannie Lee Burns,  
Investigator,  
April 30, 1938.

An Interview with Mrs. Emma May Karnes,  
Guapaw, Oklahoma.

My father was Charles L. Cowarden, born in Ohio, and my mother, Lucy Cowarden, born at Fort Smith, Arkansas. I was born at Kansas City, Missouri, in 1870. I attended school at Arcadia, Kansas, after which for awhile we lived near Fort Smith and then went back to Kansas.

After this for several years, I lived in railroad camps as my father was a railroad contractor and would take contracts to build new railroads. I did my first cooking for the men at Pittsburg, Kansas. Here we had from fifty to seventy-five men to cook for. We got \$3.50 per week for boarding the men but we did not have to bed them. They had another large tent in which they slept. We all lived in tents and they ate and we cooked in tents but the cook-tent was much smaller than the tent where we ate. We had to take all kinds of weather and regardless of the weather the men had to have their meals. I have waded in (water shoemouth deep) in getting around the place.

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A single hand received \$1.50 a day and a man with a team received \$3.50 per day. The Superintendent came to the camp each Saturday and paid the men. There was not much gold but most of it was in greenbacks. After pay day and during Sunday the men would celebrate and by the following Monday many of the less fortunate men would be "broke" or nearly so. Once when I was cooking in western Kansas a stranger approached the tent and asked me for something to eat. I was alone and was afraid and I had \$200.00 in greenbacks on my person in the front of my dress. After I refused him something to eat, he then asked me for money and I replied that I did not have any money and fortunately for me he left and about three-quarters of a mile from there after a man refused to give him money, he shot this man and killed him and then "took out" across the prairie and, being on foot, the cattle chased <sup>him</sup> and so he was glad to surrender to the men who were after him. When they searched him they found that he had considerable money on his person so he was not "broke".

In 1887 at Pittsburg, Kansas, I was married to James Karnes from Ohio and we continued to work with the railroad

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gang. In 1889 my two brothers and my husband decided to make the run for land and so they went and waited on the line near Arkansas City. The river was "up" and they had to take the people across the river in wagons and it was the wildest scene that I have ever witnessed; all were anxious to get across for fear that they would not get a good start and would not get any land. They were a half a day getting the people across. East of the river was a pasture which was full of cattle many of which were dead and to my surprise and amazement there were many Indians there skinning those cattle. My husband was fortunate enough to locate a claim of eighty acres near Stillwater.

Here on the prairie we spent our first winter in a dug-out. We were fortunate to have so warm a place as some tried to pass the winter in very poor tents and must have suffered from the winter weather. However, there were many sunny days that winter that my husband could work out of doors and so the first winter after he had tried to raise a little corn from the sod that he had broken that spring, he had more time to get ready for the second crop which of course was a larger acreage and we did not have it so hard the second year

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though there were no churches and practically no schools. Our first church building was just a little log house near Stillwater and it was built by those who had claims near. It was a Baptist church but I do not recall who was the first preacher, in fact, we did not have a regular one. The second winter we had a log house to live in and after the winter here in the spring we sold out for \$600.00 and returned to the place where my father was building a railroad in Western Kansas.

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When we were living there near Stillwater the Indians would travel through there in droves, with their packs and on ponies.

There were some Indians who lived not far from us and they grew to know us and they would come to the house and would stay and eat with me. I did not mind it when there was anyone there with me but I was young and just did not like to have them around when I was alone. The reason perhaps was that my husband's father many years before had been scalped and shot by some Indians at Carbondale, Kansas. One day I was alone and I saw some Indians coming and I

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knew that they would come to the house and I was alone and so I thought that I would hide from them. On our door, we had a latchstring that was fastened on the inside of the door and then the string that lifted the latch went through a hole in the door and when you pulled the string from the outside it would lift the latch. So I pulled the latchstring back through the door so they could not lift the latch and I hid under the bed. Chief John who was in the bunch laughed when he saw the string had been pulled inside and I heard him say, "She is in the house." I do not know just how he did it but some way he managed to pull the string back to the outside of the door and then they came in and when they found me under the bed, how they did laugh. I tried different times to hide when I would see them coming but they, especially Chief John, would always find me. Once, I hid in a haystack and he found me there.

My husband stayed with my father most of the time until thirty-eight years ago; he decided that he would quit the construction work and go to farming. So we came and leased a place where the village of Narcissa, which is six miles

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southwest of Miami, now stands. Our house stood where the cross street crosses the main street, or rather I should say highway, and here one of my boys was born. At that time, Miami was a very small town and was the end of the Frisco Railroad south from Kansas City.

Afton, a little town, also, and on the Frisco Main line was just a little farther southwest of us than Miami was to the northeast but we preferred to do our trading at Miami and so grew to know more people in that direction.

~~We just farmed and lived around there in that neighborhood for ten years.~~

One day, my husband was in the field and two boys about ten or twelve years old came to the house and asked me if my husband did not need some help. I said that perhaps he could use a couple of boys as it was springtime and a busy time on the farm and that he would soon be at home and they could wait and talk to him. They stayed until he came and after they told him what they wanted, he asked them what they could do and they replied that they had never worked on a farm but that they could learn. He told them that they could stay and that he would find something for them to



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do. That night he took them to the milk lot but they could not milk. The next day he put one of them on a cultivator but they could not do that so he gave them something easy that they could do and when he came to the house that day, I said, "What are you going to do with those boys, they can't do anything?" He laughed and said, "They live in Miami and they have just got sore at home and decided to leave. They won't stay long." Sure enough, a couple of days was enough on the farm and they told him that they had decided to go back home. Both of them grew to manhood in Miami, they are Al Commons and Bill Zilar.

After living there for ten years we bought a farm near Peoria and lived near there until 1926 when we decided to quit farming and move to Quapaw where my husband had been in the hay business with Riley Bingham. Quapaw had built quite a bit by that time, though I remember it when it was only one store, a blacksmith shop and a bunch of hay barns. Mr. Deering was the first preacher here. My husband died that year and I have continued to live here since.