

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW

10158

333

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

334

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

Field Worker's name Elizabeth L. Duncan.

This report made on (date) February 10, 1938. 1938

1. Name Chris Larson.

2. Post Office Address Renfrow, Oklahoma.

3. Residence address (or location) Main Street.

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month April Day 23 Year 1871

5. Place of birth Denmark.

6. Name of Father Lars Larson Place of birth Denmark.

Other information about father Farmer.

7. Name of Mother Rennina Ensign Place of birth Copenhagen.

Other information about mother Housekeeper.

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 _____.

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

Elizabeth Duncan,
Journalist,
Feb. 10, 1938.

Interview With Chris Larson,
Renfrow, Oklahoma.

When I was a young man of twenty-one, my home was near Lincoln, Nebraska. It was then I heard of a new country that was to be opened for settlement, so I thought that would be a very fine trip for me to make, and more so, to see what the country would be like, as it was then called the "Indian Territory" and "Cherokee Strip". In later years after it was settled up by the people, they gave it the name of Oklahoma.

At first there was a little dispute about whether they should call it "Southern Kansas" or "Oklahoma". So, the people made the decision and gave it the name of old "Oklahoma".

In the year of 1893 on September 5th, I came from Lincoln, Nebraska; my friend and I drove a team of mules to a spring wagon and brought two saddle horses with us, one of which I rode into the Cherokee Strip which was to be opened for settlement on September 16th, 1893. I made

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

-2-

the run from the South boundary line of Kansas, about ten miles west of Caldwell, Kansas, and I located only two miles from the border line. The "Old Chisholm Trail" is just ten miles east of my homestead.

The way they made the run, the people were lined up along the border-line, east and west as far as the Cherokee Strip ran, and about a quarter of a mile back on the Kansas line. Then at high noon they gave the signal by the shooting of guns every so far apart. When the guns were fired, the people were supposed to start the race. Of course not many knew where the best land lay, so no one knew what kind of land they were getting. The claim I located on is just two miles south from the Kansas line, the southwest quarter of Section 19, Township 29, Range 5. I rode my horse very rapidly until I thought I was far enough from the line to stake a claim and there I stopped and stuck a small stick in the ground and tied my red handkerchief to the stake so the other people could see that claim had been taken. The people rode on by and did not seem to try to bother any. Some rode on horseback, some in covered wagons, and some on mules. A few of the

-3-

people that were acquainted with the country before the race staked a claim just over the line, then they tried to trade it off to the next person that came along who offered them anything at all for it, such as an overcoat, a pair of shoes, a horse blanket, or just a little sum of money, but I decided to try and hold down my claim as I had nothing else in view to do those days.

The first two nights I turned my saddle horse loose on the prairie, putting a chain around one foot to keep him from going very far away. Then I used my saddle blanket for a bed and my saddle for a pillow. Lots of coyotes were chasing around, but they were rather shy about coming very close. My friend, who came with me to make the race had the adjoining claim on the north. He drove the team and wagon in which we hauled a little bedding and a few cooking utensils, a frying pan, a coffee pot, and an old coffee grinder that my father brought from Denmark years ago. In the early days, people never thought of buying their coffee already ground, like now. They would buy a sack of green whole grain coffee, then put it in a

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW

10158

-4-

bread pan and brown it in the oven before grinding. Some people even had no mill to grind with, so they would sew up a little cloth sack and put the coffee in it and pound it with a hammer or mallet.

Blackstone, Kansas, was our nearest trading post - that was seven miles from our claim, but we would go there on horseback, to get our mail and what few groceries we would have to have. We would put the groceries in a flour sack and tie them on behind the saddle. Our groceries usually consisted of a sack of corn meal, twenty-five cents worth of dry-weather beans and a couple of pounds of coffee.

About the first thing we had to think about was where we would get our water to use as there were no running creeks or rivers close by. So we made a sled out of two-by-fours and set a barrel on the sled, hitched one horse to the sled and drove to the nearest well in Kansas and hauled our water from there. In a short time, however, I started to dig a well a short distance from where I thought I would build my house. I struck water at a depth of about twelve feet. In the winter-time that would freeze over, then we

✓

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

-5-

would have to break the ice before we could get a bucket of water. We would tie a rope on a bucket and draw the water hand over hand. Sometimes we would draw the well dry just watering four head of horses and what we would use, but in a few hours there would be about the same amount of water in the well again. We managed to get along that way for a while. Then in a few months I dug a deeper well which furnished plenty of water for my own use and some of the neighbors. After I had stayed around my claim for a short time, I decided I would build some kind of a house to live in. So I drove into Caldwell, with my team of mules, bought a little lumber and build a little shanty, 10 x 12 feet with one door and two windows in it; it was made out of just common plain boards. I put strips of boards and laths over the cracks to keep the wind out, and the rain. I built a small table against the side of the wall and used a couple of boxes for chairs. Then I felt very well pleased with my shanty, for it was the only frame house in the country as most all of the people lived in dugouts and sod houses and some in covered wagons.

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

-6-

The way they built their sod houses was to break out the prairie, with two horses to a breaking plow, then cut the sod in squares, or long pieces, two or three feet long with a spade, and lay them up together in the form that you would lay a brick house now. Then they put a roof on them with some kind of lumber or old boards and then lay sod on top of that, but generally most of the sod houses would leak some for it was hard to make a good roof on them.

After I got my shanty built, I stayed around the claim for a week or so. Then went to the town of Enid to get my homestead filing papers arranged so no one could jump my claim. Then I decided to strike out to hunt work for the winter. I went to Weir City, Kansas, and got a job in a coal mine. This was something new for me, but I worked as a helper with an old miner during the winter months. In the spring, I came back to my claim.

I had saved up a few dollars during the time I had worked in the mine, so decided to put a few more improvements on my homestead. I built a small corn crib about 8 x 16 feet and broke out ten acres of prairie. In April I

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

-7-

planted that to sod corn, but raised just a very little corn. That summer, I decided to go south to look for work. All I had to leave on the homestead were six old hens and one rooster which my mother had given me when I left to come to the Cherokee Strip, but my neighbors were kind enough to take care of them for me while I was away. In July, 1894, I started south and got as far as Hennessey, Oklahoma. There I found a job. I worked around Hennessey that summer, using my team of mules and hauling water for a steam threshing machine outfit. I got two dollars a day for myself and team, through the threshing season and worked until along in the fall. I came back to my homestead again that fall and the next spring in 1895, I broke out another 50 acres which made 60 acres for me to farm.

I bought seed wheat, gave 35¢ a bushel for it, and sowed the 60 acres to wheat. But the drouth struck us again that year and we raised but very little wheat. Since I had no binder to cut the wheat with, I gave my neighbor half the wheat for cutting it. I thought that would be cheaper than buying a binder. I got about fifteen bushels for my share. But I did not let that discourage me all together.

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

-8-

I thought I would try it another year. Then by the fourth year, things began to look brighter and more encouraging for me--we began to get a little more rain and the weather was more favorable for crops. As things began to look more favorable, I began to feel more encouraged about improving my homestead. I owned 30 head of hogs in Nebraska that I had left in my brother's care. I wrote him a letter and had him sell the hogs and send me the money. Hogs were only 2½¢ and 3¢ a pound, I did not receive a very large sum of money for them, but that gave me a little more money to buy a little more seed wheat and help build a barn. I built a small barn, room for four head of horses. Most of the people turned their horses loose and let them eat whatever they could find. There was no fence anywhere in the early days.

We were never troubled with the Indians in the Cherokee Strip. Lots of the white people were very bad about stealing from each other. Most people would keep their harness and saddles in or near the house for fear someone would steal them. If they had a hog to butcher for their meat,

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

-9-

they would put their log pen close by their house so the neighbors would not steal it and butcher it first.

Believe it or not, the people would take gunny sacks and go around over the prairie to pick up cow chips to burn in their stoves and their camp fires to cook their meals with. If you would pile up a bunch of chips and ~~leave them~~ some one would steal them before you could go back and get them.

As time rolled by and things kept looking brighter each year and looked more favorable for crops, business picked up. In the fall when I got my wheat sowed, I would start out trading, buying and selling horses, so after I had tried that for a few years, I began to get rotten tired of chasing around and leading that kind of a life, so I thought I would look around and try to find me a helpmate and settle down in life. It seemed like the girl I wanted to go with, her parents objected to me coming to see her at first. But I dealt with that like I did with my claim-- I would not give up. How well I remember the day I took her to church on Sunday night. We drove old Fan to a two

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

-10-

wheeled cart and attended church in a little sod school house about four miles from her home. The house was crowded with people when we got there, also the father of the girl was there. It was not long until the father was a very good friend of mine and he seemed to think quite a lot of me. Finally, we decided to buy our first threshing machine together. I quit my horse-trading and went to threshing grain. The first year we threshed, we did not do so well. But the second year, we cleared up a nice little sum of money. I pressed my cause, and in the year of 1899, I was married to the young lady I had taken to church that Sunday night at the little sod school house. This young lady was Miss Orpha Mae Courtright. Her father had taken a claim just one mile west of my claim. We were married at her home and had a big wedding dance. We invited all our neighbors. Each of them brought a wedding gift which we appreciated very much. They were very useful since we were just starting out in married life. Her father and mother gave us one horse and a pig and twenty chickens. Then we moved to the little shanty that I had built.

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

-11-

My wife seemed to think it was a very snug little home. She had been living in a house that was dug partly in the bank and then built up with sod, but was made very comfortable by ceiling the walls up with boards. Most people would not think of making a three room dugout, but that is what her father did. Her mother wanted the home to look rather nice, but did not think they could afford to buy the regular wall paper, so she decided to paper the house with the daily newspaper. I had noticed she had put the papers on the wall all upside down, so one day I asked my wife why they had put the papers on the wall all upside down, and she said just merely to keep people from reading the advertisements.

That was a very common thing for people to paper their houses with newspapers and rip gunny sacks open, then sew them together for carpets and rugs.

In the year of 1902, one of the old settlers built a small store and also put in a post office which they called the Lyle store and postoffice four miles from our homestead. This made it much more convenient for us to trade.

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

-12-

My wife would often hitch up old Fan to the cart and take the eggs to Lyle. We would usually get six or seven cents a dozen for eggs. When we got 10¢ for them, we would think that was a big price. But calico and dress goods were also cheap.

One day my wife started for Lyle with a large basket of eggs. She said she believed she would get her a pretty nice dress that day. She got her ten yards of dress goods and gave 3¢ a yard for it. Now just think of putting 10 yards into one dress, but that is what she did. Now she gets a dress out of three yards but gives 50¢ a yard for it.

The same year we were married, we built a nice three room house, then took our shanty I had first built for our chicken house. We bought a milch cow, paid \$28.00 for her. I also traded for a nice big team of mares which my wife and I both became very much attached to. We kept them until they were eleven or twelve years old, then they both died but we had raised several colts from them, so we still had a few horses.

I bought my father-in-law's interest in the thresher. Then every summer I would thresh from July to about the

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

-13-

first of September. (The threshing seasons lasted longer those days than it does now.) There were but few threshers in the country. I also ran a cook-shack with my threshing outfit. My wife would go along and do the cooking for the threshing crew.

So we were saving and working ahead to buy more land. In May, 1903, we put a mortgage on our homestead of \$1000. through Mr. S. P. G. Lewis (real estate man of Caldwell, Kansas) to which we added \$100.00 of our own savings and bought our first farm which is 160 acres on Pond Creek, four miles west of our homestead. By working and threshing through the summer time, and buying and dealing in some stock, we soon accumulated enough to pay our mortgage off.

In 1904 we put out a large orchard of fruit trees of all kinds. A few years later we had an abundance of fruit, but never tried to sell any of the fruit. We gave the neighbors all they wanted to use and put up what we wanted for our own use. In later years we had a cyclone and hail storm which ruined the most of our trees for us. Then we planted more trees but not so many as the first time. We also added to our house and a few more out-buildings and

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

-14-

improvements, such as granaries, fences and chicken pens as we usually raised from seven hundred to a thousand chickens each summer. We never thought of buying our chickens from hatcheries or setting incubators like people do nowadays.

In the year 1910, I built a large basement barn with room in it for 16 head of horses, and one hundred tons of hay. Then I started dealing in cattle, stock buying and shipping. I would feed out several carloads of cattle each year. I had my corn shipped in from the south by the carload, sometimes I would pay as high as \$1.20 a bushel for my corn. I would ship my cattle to Kansas City or Chicago whichever place I thought would strike the best market. Sometime I would make a quite a little money on them and sometimes I would lose money, but often when I would lose on them I would get out and try that much harder to make back what I had lost. This is still my motto: "If at first you don't succeed, try and try again". But I won't complain for I think I have done as well as most of the people who made the race at the same time I did.

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW

10158.

-15-

In the year of 1913, I decided I would quit farming and move to town, so we bought a home in Renfrow, Oklahoma which is eleven miles east of the homestead, but kept on dealing in cattle and stock.

My family consists of my wife and three children, two daughters and one son. We now have five grandchildren. The oldest daughter Eva, married Jimmie England and they have two children, Jimmie Jr., aged 12 years, and Naomi Ann, aged 1 year. They live on a farm two miles east of Renfrow, but just recently have gone into the hardware business at Renfrow. Our second daughter, Ilene, married Lynn Schuermann. They have one son, Max, aged 1 year. They live on a farm two miles west of Renfrow. He also deals in cattle and stock. Our son, Lester, married Apoline Misak. They have two children, Donna Mae, aged 2 years, and Lars aged 4 months.

In 1935 we deeded Lester the old homestead. He is now in the horse buying business. So it begins to look like he is going to follow in his father's footsteps. We deeded to Eva and Ilene a farm. My wife and I still have six farms left for our own and have them leased for oil

LARSON, CHRIS.

INTERVIEW.

10158.

-16-

at \$1.00 per acre. We now own our home in Renfrow and have an 8 room dwelling house, a Buick car and also a restaurant which we operate ourselves. We have asked for no help since we left our shanty on the claim.