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Effie S. Jackson, Interviewer
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A Pioneer Teacher--Oklahoma

Interview with Lula Benn Lamb,
412 N. Rosedale, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Mrs. Charles Lamb, a life member of the State Historical Society, relates the following account of her early life in Oklahoma.

My father was Henry Philips Benn, born in New Castle, Pennsylvania, 1833; my mother Matilda Jane McClintock, born in Ohio, 1836. My grandfather (paternal) served in the Home Guards, War of 1812, receiving a land grant covering part of what is now Quincy, Illinois. My parents married in Pittsfield, Illinois. The old home is still in possession of the Bennis. In 1887 my parents took their large family of seven children to Wichita, Kansas. It was the day of the western movement and word had spread of the money to be made in town-lot investment in Kansas towns. Railroad extensions and cattle industry contributed to this movement. My father invested heavily in town-lots in Wichita, so did hundreds of others who came from the east. Then the bubble burst--came the panic of 1893. I am stressing this to show you why the opening of the Strip in 1893 meant so much to these people

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from the east who had lost everything in Kansas booms and droughts.

My brothers obtained land at Billings (1893), thirty miles southwest of Enid, on the Soldier's Declaratory statement. I was only seventeen years old, just out of high school. Our big family had to fight out an existence in a new country. We had the land and our own initiative, what we made of it was up to us. That was true of all the fighters in 1893. Broken in spirit and purses from struggle elsewhere this was their last "stomping ground," their last gamble with fortune.

My sister, brother and I took the county Teachers' examinations, receiving our first certificates. I obtained a country school at Enterprise, southwest of Waukomis. Just a small frame building, wood stove, drum-fashion, regulation desks, McGuffey's Readers. It was a prosperous farm community. I wish to emphasize the type of people. Though they lived in dugouts and sod houses, they kept material things that saved their morale and were a sustaining force in raising the new generation. I remember the Le Bow family from Texas. They lived in a large sod house. The father was a violinist. They had brought the family grand piano

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with them; it was the old-fashioned square type. Music and a few good pictures produced an environment of culture. Even this had to be used in a material way. The young people of the nearby towns gathered there for dancing, paying ten cents a dance. That was their only money for staple groceries. I remember one time after the dance was over there was \$3.40. This bought the groceries^{and} allowed ten cents for Mr. Le Bow's tobacco. Their daughter later married Doctor Aylesworth, Waco, Texas, of Baylor University. He donated a valuable historical collection to the University. The Le Bow family still retains the old farm. This family was typical of the higher class of citizenship that developed in western Oklahoma.

I taught next in Enid, until 1901, then I bought a farm of one hundred and sixty acres, six miles due west of Hobart. This was after the Kiowa-Comanche drawing. I built a one-room house and became a homesteader. I kept the bit of a place like a shrine, a few choice pictures, my sterling silver and embroidered linens. A sod house often covered pearls. I passed some more examinations and became a teacher in the Hobart schools. These were good up-to-date schools

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among a fine class of people. I remember Mr. William E. Smith, the Superintendent, in particular. He was one of the finest school men with whom I have ever been associated.

I went to Oklahoma City as a teacher in 1905. Here I began my special work as a music teacher. I spent my summers studying in the New York School of Musical Art under Walter Damrosch and Thomas Tappan. I later became head of public school music at Edmond. Soon afterwards I married Charles H. Lamb, another Oklahoma pioneer, and with him entered into a life of western Oklahoma development.

Some incidents that I recall seem to stand out from the past. I remember an interesting sod house northeast of Enid. This was in 1896. This house was large and well built. You could not tell from the interior that it was sod. The living room was about fifteen by thirty feet, with adjoining bedrooms. A separate house adjoined for cooking and eating. The walls were plastered with adobe and white washed smooth as plaster. There were regular windows and doors. This home had a board floor (some sod houses had only dirt or straw floors). On this floor was spread,

Oriental rugs. The people had lost their money but had kept their cherished belongings. Some well-known writer, I can't recall her name just now, used this house as the background of a story.

Another incident that comes to mind was a picture I'll never forget. We were living near Enid. By the way, never have I seen anything as glorious as the prairie flowers. It must be the hot western sun. Though come to think of it, those great patches of brilliant colors are not to be found today. There were the wild heliotrope, the yucca, buttercups, winecups, Cherokee rose (Mimosa), and the commoner flowers. One day in the midst of this splash of color I saw an old covered wagon drawn by one horse and driven by an old man, approaching. He came to the door and asked for a drink of water. I asked him if he was alone and he said "No, I am not alone, I am going with her on her last journey." I went to the wagon, and there, banked with colorful wild flowers, lay a coffin. The old man (seventy-four years old) said, "It is my wife, I am taking her back to Nebraska for burial." I did not think of the error from the practical standpoint

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but the sentiment of their "last journey" has remained with me.

The hold of the East over the West was illustrated in our own family. A brother, sister and I faced the west and fought out our problems with fair success and a feeling of individual freedom. My two older sisters, Mary and Evalena Benn, went to New York and studied voice under a famous Italian singer. Then they established their own studios on the fourth floor of the Metropolitan Opera House. They retained them until their death in 1933. My twin sister married Mose Anderson, who became the leader of Masonic activities in Oklahoma.