

WATTS, CHARLES G.

INTERVIEW

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

WATSON, CHARLES G.

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Field Worker's name Anna R. Barry.

This report made on (date) January 21, 1938. 193

1. Name Charles G. Watson.

2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma.

3. Residence address (or location) Same.

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month March Day 20 Year 1875.

5. Place of birth Northwood, Iowa.

6. Name of Father George F. Watson. Place of birth Adrian, Michigan.

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother Sarah Watson. Place of birth Illinois.

Other information about mother Died in 1895.

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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Anna R. Barry,
Journalist,
Jan 21, 1938.

Interview With Charles G. Wattson,
El Reno, Oklahoma.

I was born the 20th day of March 1875, at Northwood, Iowa. My father, George F. Wattson, was born in Adrian, Michigan, and descended from an old English family. Father removed to Iowa when a young man and at the commencement of the Civil War, he joined Company "K" of the Fifth Iowa Cavalry and served throughout the war with that regiment in the engagements at Fort Madrid, Iuka, Corinth, Vicksburg, Champion Hill, Red River Bridge and Jackson, Mississippi, receiving his honorable discharge in August, 1864. In the following month he re-enlisted in the same regiment, but was assigned to Company "M", being in action at Franklin, and Nashville and continued with this company until the close of the war.

My schooling was obtained in Iowa and as a young man engaged in the newspaper business in Texas and Oklahoma, our family having removed to the Lone Star State in 1888 and to El Reno in 1892. I continued my connection with journalism ^{until}

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1897, when my father was appointed postmaster of El Reno and served as his assistant until August, 1906, at which time Father resigned on account of ill health and then I succeeded him as postmaster.

Since settling in El Reno I have taken a hearty interest in civic affairs and was a member of the committee which purchased the Oklahoma Building from the Worlds Columbian Exposition and transformed it into a club house. I am a Mason of high standing, being a member of Chapter, Commandary Shrine.

My wife, to whom I was married in 1898, was formerly Alberta Kensley, a native of Pennsylvania. When I came to El Reno in 1892 the town consisted of row after row of little frame shacks, while the crudely constructed store buildings bore many signs such as "saloon", "dance hall", "billiards" and pool. Often in front of covered wagons or tents one saw campfires surrounded by men in broad-brimmed hats, gay colored shirts, and pants tucked into high-topped boots. Many settlers still lived in dugouts or mere hovels constructed of poles and dirt when I arrived in Canadian County; in many cases their poverty was extreme.

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The arrival of the train was always an affair of prime interest to the whole town. In addition to seeing the puffing iron horse or the dusty coaches, which always bore a deep fascination, there was the chance to see the old home crowd, the possibility of meeting someone from the old home state, the opportunity of learning the latest news from back East, or of seeing the drummers, always interesting characters and, of course the chance to get acquainted with any new settlers.

In the farming communities the saloon more often was a drowsy unoffensive little place where the majority of people drank moderately; it was a sort of drug store where people went to get whiskey or bitters. It was thought that the medicine found there was proof against snake bites, chills, and other ailments; furthermore, it was a medicine easy to take and as some were terribly afraid of any kind of real or imaginary frontier ailment, a sufficient number visited these places frequently enough to keep the dead little towns in a lively condition at least part of the time.

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The rows of plain houses were scrambled along the streets in a manner that suggested a clash between the various structures; paint, when used, was generally a dreary lead color. The board walks often ended abruptly before a mud hole, which caused people to track mud and dust over the wood surfaces. The interiors of the old business places were not designed to welcome or please. Often the floors were dirty, also three or four large cuspidors would be seen on a dirty floor that was uninviting to the women who in that day wore long dress which mopped up the dirt.

The sanitary conditions in a new town were far from satisfactory. The ground where the horses were tied to the hitching racks around the square and along the street in front of the stores, became vertiable cess pools of filth which drew flies and created a vile odor. The absence of sewage disposal also made for unpleasantness, nearly everyone owned a horse and piles of refuse from the barn increased the discomfort. Hog pens added to the medley of smells; the cows were usually herded in a town herd on the prairies, but often hogs, chickens, and horses had the

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run of the town. Women chased the pigs and chickens away, only to have them return and destroy the family garden.

El Reno at this time was peculiarly susceptible to fires. The frame houses which were erected as soon as the owners could afford such structures were very inflammable and in many cases hay-covered stables sheltered the family cow and horse. Stacks of hay placed in various parts of the town furnished food for these animals and added to the fire hazard for careless smokers or children at play were enough to start a fire which endangered the town greatly.

The city fathers of El Reno drew up rules for fire prevention and provided for a method of righting fire; the normal practice was to rally all the able-bodied men. El Reno's first fire wagons were several two-wheeled carts, drawn by hand; a local carpenter was engaged to build some sixteen-foot ladders and the city also possessed several dozen buckets, each having a capacity of about three gallons. In case of fire everyone was supposed to grab a bucket and get busy. These buckets were used in many parts of El Reno

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where city water had not been installed, this was known as the "Hook-and-Ladder" Company. They had a captain and a secretary and solicited members. Those who could not join as regular members could become honorary members on payment of twenty-five cents a month. It was a great ambition for every citizen to help put out a fire. Mostly the members of these companies served only for the honor of serving their home town and protecting people's property.

El Reno's streets became very muddy in rainy weather and broad strips of dust in summer and the only crossings on many of the streets were stepping-stones.

Horseback was the most popular way of travel; single buggies were used by the young men to escort their ladies to the various entertainments and on a holiday occasion the three-seated spring wagon was popular. It was not uncommon for the occupants of the back seat to be spilled when the wheels struck the stepping-stones which stuck up above the surface. Livery barns with a large assortment of horses and vehicles for hire, supplied the means of transportation for the townsman who had no horse and buggy. The trotting horses and the splashing mud were a constant menace to the

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finery of the ladies in rainy weather. Often time horse racing down the city streets caused concern and annoyance and older men suggested that ditches be dug across the streets to prevent fast driving and racing on the streets. Runaways were frequent occurrences and formed one of the main items of news in the local newspapers.

The frontier was a hunter's paradise: to the southwest or near the South Canadian River, big game was very plentiful and near at hand ducks, quails, turkeys, prairie chicke and other small game abounded and large groups of men sought companionship as well as sport in rabbit and wolf drives. Spearing fish was also a pleasant amusement. Torches were made of corn-cobs soaked in kerosene and then placed on long sticks, spears were often made of broken pitchforks and after dark the spearmen entered the shallows of the river and, while the torches were held high to light up the stream, were able to gig some fish. Turkey shoots were numerous, usually a group of shooters each threw a sum of money into the treasury, bought some birds, and shot at a mark, the best shot securing a turkey. Raffles of various sorts were held occasionally and were a sporting

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event. The boys in town played marbles and the traveling men waiting at the hotel for the local train, watched them "play for keeps". Guests and townspeople also played penny ante at the hotel during the winter months and in warm weather played horseshoe near the hotel, livery barn, or blacksmith shop. Wrestling matches, like dog fights, took place on the street corners and were enjoyed without gate receipts.

Men and boys went swimming in the summer. Boys went to the ponds or creek holes and conditions, especially in the ponds, were far from sanitary. Not aware of their germ-laden surroundings, the youngsters splashed about in these mucky, stagnant pools; the secluded nature of these places offered complete privacy to the nude bathers. A period in midsummer was commonly called "dog-days" and was ruled out for swimming purposes by public opinion. Sometimes groups of men from here went to the Canadian River for an evening plunge after the sweltering day in the sun-parched little town.

After holding the job as postmaster several years at El Reno, I entered the real estate business, and today am considered one of El Reno oldest real estate men.