

WELLS, EDWARD

INTERVIEW

#8784

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BIOGRAPHY FORM
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

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Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

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Field Worker's name Robert W. Small

This report made on (date) September 27th 1937

1. Name Edward Wells

2. Post Office Address Tonkawa, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) 202 N. 12th Street

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month September Day 25 Year 1869

5. Place of birth Yates City, Illinois

6. Name of Father Harvey L. Wells Place of birth Illinois

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother Catherine Root Wells Place of birth Pennsylvania

Other information about mother _____

Notes or copy to 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 Ten

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Robert W. Small, Interviewer
September 27th, 1937.

Interview with Edward Wells,
202 N. 12th Street, Tonkawa.

Born in Illinois September 25th, 1869, Edward Wells went West in early life to work and make his own way.

In the late '80's he drove stage lines in Arizona Territory and frequently carried passengers known as the "bad men" of the west.

On September 16th, 1893, he landed in Arkansas City, Kansas, and joined in the race of that day when most of the adult population of Kansas seemed to be entered in the race for homesteads in the Cherokee Outlet.

Mr. Wells did not secure a claim on the opening day but a few days later he found a man who was dissatisfied with the claim he had staked and he traded this man out of his interest in the land and filed upon it himself. The consideration was about fifty

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dollars although it was not wholly a cash transaction but was paid out in various ways and at different times.

Mr. Wells had landed in this country with very little money and he paid what little he had on the trade for the claim and after he did that he had no money left. It seemed impossible to start in to make a home out of a quarter section of raw prairie land without a horse, plow, wagon or anything of the kind to work with and no money to buy any. He had not even a place to lay his head at night except upon the barren prairie but Mr. Wells being a bachelor at the time, and a neighbor claimant who owned an adjoining claim being a bachelor also, they decided to build a dugout that would be half on one claim and half on the other so that when it was completed each man could sleep in his part of the dugout and thus be

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on his own land. This was a requirement of the law relating to homesteads that a man should make the claim his home.

Mr. Wells was compelled to work anywhere in the country that he could find any little job to do in order to make a few cents or to work for something which he could eat and he also worked to help some neighbor claimant improve his place to get the use of a team and wagon or plow or something that he needed to help him improve his place at every opportunity. He worked and planned and schemed in every conceivable way to get along. After he and his part-

ner had completed the dugout so that they could live

in it they felt much relieved although neither had much to put in it in the way of furnishings but Mr. Wells had been in the Western country for several years and was accustomed to the hardships incident to pioneer life and he just kept staying and working

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at every opportunity and finally he bought an old blind horse for a very reasonable sum, as good horses were cheap at that time and he would splice teams with some neighbor and cut prairie grass where it had not been burned off to make hay to feed his horse and also to sell or trade to some neighbor who needed hay.

It was a custom among the pioneer settlers from the beginning to lend and borrow any and everything they possessed in the way of farm implements and to help each other in any way they could to get along. They all planned at frequent meetings

how to accomplish some manner of improvement they

wished to make and each man would carry out some particular part of the work and thus they helped each other just like one big family of brothers and when one claimant had been helped in this way he would help someone else and so on around through the entire group or neighborhood and thus all the

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settlers were benefitted by each other's help and suggestions.

Mr. Wells and his partner cut a considerable amount of grass here and there where they could find grass that had not been burned off. This grass made hay that was sold here and there over the country wherever they could find a market for it. They hauled several loads of hay to Perry and traded it for lumber which they used in making some little furnishings for their dugout or put some small outside improvement that was badly needed. On one occasion Mr. Wells took a load of hay to Perry, traveling the trails and dim new-made roads for the distance of twenty-five miles; he had started from home early in the morning but did not reach Perry until late in the afternoon and a hard rain began to fall while he was there. He loaded some lumber on his wagon and started back toward home; he had to cross a creek that the rain

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had swollen that afternoon; the banks of the creek were slick where the road went up and he plunged into the water and crossed the creek safely but when he started up the opposite bank it was so slick that his horses could not stand on their feet to pull the load; after repeated efforts and as many failures to get out Mr. Wells took the lumber off the wagon and carried it to the top of the hill, a few pieces at a time until he had carried it all and at this particular time it was after night and getting bitter cold and he had no light of any kind to guide his steps. The darkness of the night made

this difficult and the bitter cold wind that was

fast getting colder added to his discomfort but

through it all he struggled for hours, finally getting the load of lumber all carried up the hill and then his team pulled the wagon up and he again loaded the lumber on and climbed on top of it while the cold north wind almost froze him as he sat up there in the

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darkness of night scantily clad and slowly moved over the uncertain trails in the direction of home which he reached at daylight the next morning, almost senseless from cold and exposure. Such incidents were not uncommon in the lives of the pioneers of the Cherokee Outlet Country.

Mr. Wells managed and worked and by the use of strict economy and self-denial managed to improve his place and stay on it through the trying years. He relates an incident as follows: In the spring of '94, his widowed mother who lived in New York came to visit him. When she was driven up to his dugout by a man who had brought her from the railroad in a buggy, she looked about for some house to walk into but none was in sight. Mr. Wells, after greeting her, said, "Well, let's go into the house". She hesitated as she looked at that dugout which her son called a house and as she slowly and cautiously stepped down into the dugout she told

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her son that she guessed she would have to spend the night there but that she would leave the next morning for her home in New York. Mr. Wells said that his mother lived there with him for over three months. The enchantment of the prairie that was green with tender grass and the sudden change from the old settled country to the new country of the pioneers, was wonderful, new and exciting. A few days after his mother arrived Mr. Wells remarked to her that they would have rabbit that day for dinner.

He went to a certain corner of the dugout, where for

~~several days a rabbit had been hiding during the day-~~
~~time, and caught it. He returned to his mother. She~~

looked at him with puzzled amazement and wondered how and where he got that rabbit. So many incidents that she was not accustomed to became so fascinating that her stay in the West was extended beyond the time she had originally planned to return, and when

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she did go it was with some feeling of regret.

Mr. Wells said that the old pioneer settlers as a rule were the "salt of the earth", the best people that ever lived in any country. Although they all had more or less hardships and privations they were not given to murmuring nor to complaint. Each one in the country knew the conditions and needs of the others and when one neighbor saw that he could help another he did so without being called upon. Voluntary acts of kindness made it possible for the pioneer settlers to stay on their claims and enjoy life, even though they possessed only rags to wear and scraps of food to eat.

Mr. Wells said that it is most gratifying to know that all who weathered the trying periods of the first few years on their claims, were later rewarded with bountiful crops in one of the most fertile sections of the entire country and that they built homes and improved roads, schools, churches

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and built bridges.

Mr. Wells sold his old homestead several years ago and now resides in a comfortable home at 202

North Twelfth Street, Tonkawa.