

WHITE, GERTRUDE.

INTERVIEW

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

WHITE, MRS. GERTRUDE INTERVIEW #4149

Field Worker's name Anna R. Barry

This report made on (date) May 18, 1937

1. Name Mrs. Gertrude White

2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) 211 West Hayes

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month April Day 7 Year 1879

5. Place of birth Brown County, Kansas.

6. Name of Father Steven B. Jones Place of birth Illinois.

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother Alina (Scott) Jones Place of birth Ohio.

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 10

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Anna R. Barry
Field Worker
May 18, 1937

Interview with Mrs. Gertrude White,
El Reno, Oklahoma.

When the President signed the proclamation opening "Old Oklahoma" to settlement, it was the signal that called the land hungry people of the entire nation to this "Land of the Fair God."

My family was living in the State of Nebraska when the news spread over the nation about the new country that was to be opened for settlement. Our family, which consisted of father, mother, and seven children, started for the "Promised Land" in two covered wagons loaded with a few farm implements, most of which were tied on the sides, and a few household goods and chickens.

In the days of 1889 travel was very slow, and as we traveled along, other wagons joined us. By the time we reached Caldwell, Kansas, eight wagons made up our little colony. We came to Kingfisher, arriving there about the middle of May, 1889, and camped for two weeks. My father took up a claim nine miles north and six miles east of

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El Reno. This claim in later years was near a little inland town of Racine, and all that is left of it today is a schoolhouse.

My father had worked as a surveyor in Nebraska for years, and the first year, he made our living by establishing cornerstones for people who filed on claims, charging them \$5.00 for the cornerstone on each farm.

Father started cutting logs to build a house for us but all he had to work with was an axe. Yet there were plenty of large cottonwood trees. At last he got enough wood ready to build the house, so by putting a chain around the logs he pulled them one at a time to the spot where he was going to build. All the time we were building our house we lived out of doors. We would take poles, lay them on the ground, and would set the wagon boxes on them; so we wouldn't have to climb so high in and out of the wagons.

We had these two wagons about twelve feet apart and we set forked poles at each corner between the wagons.

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Then we put a lot of poles and willows on top for a roof; this served as a house until we could get logs ready to build one. It was just fine for a shade, but when it rained we had to stay in the wagons.

We cooked on a little fire built outside of this shelter and we baked biscuit in a Dutch oven, which looked like a skillet; only it stood on legs about three inches high. We put fire coals under it and there was a ring in the lid to lift it. Later on we bought a little cookstove.

At last they had the logs ready and on the day we got ready to build, people came for miles to help build our house, bringing baskets of food with them. It is known that this was the first community gathering to be held in the Racine region. Our log house was 16 X 24 ft., and had a dirt floor. When the sides were finished, we built what is called a dirt roof by placing poles slant-wise. We then placed bark over the cracks between the poles, putting a layer of sod on this. Next we mixed red clay, making a plaster of it, and coated the sod. We lived in this house for three years with

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just a dirt floor; the place stood for eighteen years.

In 1892 a sawmill came into the neighborhood. Most of the lumber was cottonwood and people came for miles to have their wood sawed. This sawmill marked the beginning of frame houses and improvements in this community. The country people loved their "claims" best, but very closely allied to this devotion was their blind allegiance to the towns of their choice, and one who has never witnessed the feud of a "county seat fight" with division of the people, which sometimes resulted in destruction, bloodshed, and even death, can with difficulty appreciate the tales told of the times.

Travel in those days was very slow, and as a result, many small trading stations existed all over Oklahoma. I suspect that in the hearts of many of these old time traders were dreams of future cities clustered around their prairie stores.

Our first school was held in a half-dugout by a young girl of the neighborhood. She taught the first term with-

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out pay and had an enrollment of about thirty pupils, all bringing their old books they had at home and studying them, regardless of what they had studied before.

One negro boy attended this school, and sat on a box in the center of the room, while the white children sat on cottonwood slabs nailed on the wall around the room. This negro boy sat close enough to us so that we could put pins in the toes of our shoes and stick him while the teacher was not looking. The teacher usually went home (which was close) during the noon hour and every day we would run this negro boy off the school ground.

That Fall, in October, we decided to go back to Caldwell, Kansas, as we had not made much of a crop, and we couldn't see how we were to live during the winter on our claim. So we nailed up our house, and started in one wagon. We took our chickens (a very few), a cat, and our dog.

We children went to school that winter in Kansas and father got quite a lot of work. When we came back to our claim in March, we brought a cow and pig and had collected

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several things, garden seed, flower seed, a few small fruit trees---to help make a home.

On our trip back, when we reached the Cimarron the river was up and we had to ford it, but all the women and children crossed on the railroad bridge. When the wagons forded the river the water came up in the wagon boxes and got all our bedding wet. In a few days we were back at our claim and planted a garden and corn and Kaffir corn for feed and then father went back to Kansas to work in the harvest fields.

Brother, who was ten years old, and I took care of our little crop. We planted popcorn and peanuts, set out the fruit trees, made flower beds, and planted flowers.

The Rock Island post office was six miles northwest of our claim. My brother and I would have to walk there to get our mail, always taking a few eggs to sell to buy a little sugar, coffee, and salt. It was a long hard journey, and we would always start early in the morning. It would be around three o'clock in the afternoon when

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we returned, but everyone was anxious to get the mail and we usually made one trip a week.

One night a man came riding to our place and told us to get up, that the Indians were coming. We lived eight miles from the Indian land at Concho where the Indians camped. This man told us everyone was going to a little sod schoolhouse south of where we lived. We could hear wagons going past. My father wasn't very frightened, for when he was a little boy, he had lived among the Indians near Omaha, Nebraska, had worn moccasins, and played with the Indian children. But he told us to dress and wrap up in blankets or quilts. If the Indians did come, he would let us know, and we would all go to a large canyon and hide! No Indians showed up and therefore we lost a good night sleep.

One day a band of Indians came to our house. Father made them welcome. My brother and I were trying to make a bow and arrow like the Indians; they noticed us trying to make them, and one Indian grunted, then pointed to a letter on the wagon box and handed my brother his bow and arrow.

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Ben took it and shot, but missed the mark. The Indian gave me the bow and arrow, I shot and luckily I hit the letter on the wagon. This old Indian pulled my long braids of hair and said "good." He gave me the bow and arrow to keep.

The first Christmas at our little school in the dug-out, we decided to fix a Christmas tree. The boys went down to the canyon, got an old bush, (we didn't have cedar trees in this part of the country) and we took old clean rags and the edges cut from newspapers and wrapped the limbs, making them all white. We then gathered berries, wild honeysuckle, and bittersweet to trim our tree and made a chain out of green and red paper and put these on, also. Our folks didn't raise any popcorn that year so we popped Kaffir corn in a bread pan on the heater at the schoolhouse and we had a nice little Christmas program. We were just as happy as the children are today over their elaborate Christmas presents and tree.

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As the years passed, this community like all others, became more settled with more land in cultivation, better homes, and improvements, schools and churches. Today this little neighborhood is one among the finest in Canadian County.

As so many of the first people who settled in Oklahoma are now gone to their rewards, it is quite unnecessary to speak of what they did in the earliest days, as this State stands as a monument to them and what they accomplished, but I will tell of a few things they did not do. They did not grow whiskers; they did not desecrate the Sabbath day by putting on shows or having picnics, dances, or celebrations of any kind, birthdays excepted. Even when the greatest event that ever came to this United States of America, Independence Day, fell on Sunday, it was always celebrated on Saturday or Monday, as most of the settlers were God-fearing men and women, who in their early lives were taught to revere God and the Sabbath day, as obeying the commands of Gods' word means doing right by everyone.

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I married a boy, who filed on a claim in this same neighborhood, and we reared our family there. My six children are going to the school which now stands over the half-dugout where I attended school. In 1929 we moved to El Reno and established "The White Transfer Company." We have our home here, and expect to spend the rest of our lives in Canadian County.