

WHEELER, ALMA (BILBY) / INTERVIEW

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Holland, W. T. - Investigator.
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Interview with Mrs. Alma (Bilby) Wheeler,
Tulsa, Oklahoma.
131 N. Santa Fe.

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I was born in Indiana May 25th, 1863. When I was eighteen years of age, my parents came west; in 1881. There were several children in the family and to be able to bring all of us, and our house-hold goods and provisions, my father had to use two wagons. He got new wagons and had four big horses. In fact, was well equipped for traveling. We had tents for use when we stopped for any length of time, and this was usually every week end. There were no paved roads and no bridges; on the larger streams there were ferries, but a large number of streams had to be forded.

My father liked to hunt, and the farther west we got the more plentiful was the game; so, each evening, we would strike camp, usually on a stream if possible, and Dad would go out and kill all the squirrels we needed, and turkeys too, as well as prairie chickens. We really had a good time on this trip. We had no trouble of any kind, and no sickness. We were all blessed with good health and living in the open was just what we liked best.

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One of our wagons had a compartment on the rear with shelves in it in which to carry our provisions. The door to the compartment served as a table, when let down, so when we struck camp we opened, or let down this door, and we were then ready to set the table. We had a camp stove and pots and pans. On week ends, when at suitable places, we would erect our tent, and stay as long as a week at one place. We were in no hurry, which made the trip that much more pleasant. We settled south of the Poteau River, and not very far from Fort Smith.

My father leased some land from a Choctaw Indian of the name of Henry Kaiser. We erected our tent and lived in it for a short time, then decided to build a log house. There were several white families in this section then, and they seemed to be glad to see others come in, and gave them every assistance possible. When it became known that we were to build a house, they readily offered their help. So a day was decided on to begin, and whole families came, brought tubs full of cooked food and we women arranged the dinner and made coffee, while the men went into the woods and cut the logs to build the house. They cut enough logs the first day to build the house. Then, on the second day,

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these good neighbors came in again, and this day notched the logs and put up the wall of the house.

The women again provided the food, and the third day the roof was put on and the floor, of rough lumber, was put down. The roof was of boards. These three days work and the food were given gladly and were certainly appreciated by us. It was the custom in those days to love and help your neighbors. We, in turn, assisted others and helped in all community activities. Our house, at first, had only one room. Later on, Father put up another room. He put up a chimney of stones and clay, and made a good fireplace of stone. The house had two doors but no windows. The only light we had, during the day, came through the door which was kept open most of the time, winter and summer. However, we were comfortable, had plenty to eat and wear, although we made all our clothes at home. My father and brothers made quite a bit of money cutting posts and splitting rails. On our lease was a lot of good timber, and we had access to this, and in cutting the timber we opened up land for cultivation.

The first year we had bad luck. Dad turned his horses out to graze, and they went into the Poteau River bottom

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where they got hold of some cane shoots which killed three of them, and a cow, which had gotten some of the same thing. I suppose the shoots were too old, as they are good stock food when in the right stage.

We had a good time socially. We whites hung together, although we got along nicely with the Indians who treated us cordially. I remember our first sight of Indians. We had read of them and their wigwams and were deeply interested in seeing how they would actually look and live, so, after getting into the territory north of Vinita, we came to a house, and thinking probably Indians lived there, my mother called to the wagons to stop and explained that she wanted to pay a visit. We were excited and more or less anxious, as we young ones didn't know but that Mother might be met with a tomahawk. She reached the door, rapped, and a young good looking woman came to the door, and invited Mother in. She made a short call, and upon her return to us told us of the experience. She said this woman was as white as she, and very nice, and had she seen her elsewhere, she would not have known that she was an Indian. They lived a little differently from our customs but were very nice to us, and later on were good neighbors.

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Dad and my brothers sold most of the posts and rails which they cut. This was the main source of our getting some cash. Our social life was interesting and pleasant. Dances and parties. We had to go four miles to church. I rode horseback, and then a woman never even thought of riding any way except on a side saddle. Had a woman ridden astride, she would probably have been run out of the community.

In 1887 we moved to another lease north of the Poteau River in the Cherokee Nation. Here we built another log house, and later on built a boxed house nearby, which I used as a school room. I taught two or three terms of school which both whites and Indians attended. This, like most schools of that time, were subscription schools and ran for three or four months. We sold our cotton and other surplus farm products in Fort Smith, and did our trading there.

We, fortunately, were a healthy family and about the only medicines we used were whiskey and quinine.

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