

WILLIAMS, ALVA JESSIE

INTERVIEW

#4945

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WILLIAMS, ALVA JESSIE. INTERVIEW BIOGRAPHY FORM

Form A-(S-149)

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WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

Field Worker's name Anna R. Barry

Report made on (date) July 12 1937

Name Alva Jessie Williams

Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma

Residence address (or location) 710 South MaComb

DATE OF BIRTH: Month July Day 23 Year 1869

Place of birth Rutherford County, Tennessee

Name of Father Henry R. Williams Place of birth _____

Other information about father _____

Name of Mother Julia Pillow Williams Place of birth Murray County, Tenn.

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 _____

INTERVIEW WITH ALVA JESSIE WILLIAMS
El Reno, Oklahoma
Anna R. Barry, Field Worker

I was born in Rutherford County, Tennessee, July 23, 1869, and my early life was spent on a farm. My father was a physician. We later moved to Nashville, where he established himself with a small hospital.

In my youth, and at the age of eighteen years I started out in life on my own account. In the Spring of 1891, I went to Springfield, Missouri, then came to El Reno in Canadian County.

Canadian County is located in the central part of Oklahoma, adjoining Oklahoma County on the west. Its topography is typical of the prairie plains country. The Canadian River traverses the southwest corner of the county and forms most of the southern boundary, the North Canadian River traverses the county from the northwestern part through the central part to a point about midway on its eastern boundary.

When I first landed in El Reno there appeared one brick building, the Citizens National Bank. But there were rows and rows of wooden frame shacks, some just hurriedly put up. A saloon at every other door, but everything seem-

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ed to be on the boom, so I established a grocery store and dry goods combined, and stayed in this business until 1925, my largest sales being to Indians when they received their money issues. In 1891, through their chiefs and head men, the people of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indian tribes agreed to accept individual allotments of land and permit the sales of the surplus lands of their reservations for opening to settlement under the homestead laws. Those people had occasionally handled some paper money but they were more or less suspicious as to its value; consequently, there were many of them who demanded that they should be paid in coin. Accordingly, when the first installment was to be paid a few weeks before the reservation was to be opened to settlers, a shipment of fifty thousand dollars in silver was received. This had been packed into a heavy oak chest, when it was received from the railway company, it was unloaded into one of the heaviest freight wagons in the army quarter-master's department and a six mule team hauled it to the agency at Darlington. Six soldiers were constantly on guard over the chest and its contents. When the Indians came for their payments, they were admitted at the front door of the commissary building, they then passed back to the rear of the building where the

chest of silver, the guards, the paymaster and his clerks were awaiting them and as the head of each Indian family came up to the counter he handed over the certified list of the members of his family, brought in some kind of bag or sack in which to carry away the bulky and heavy sum of money in silver coin. At the time of those payments many white people went to Darlington to see those issues, while others went for the purpose of getting hold of as much as possible of the large sums of money which the Indians received.

When the Indians came to El Reno they would sit around on the board sidewalks, talk over what each one wanted to buy, then count their money, stacking it in piles of five dollars each. When they came into the store to purchase the things they wanted, they would just buy one article at a time, paying for each article as they bought it. I sold many blankets to the Indians usually from ten to twenty-five dollars each.

El Reno, for a year or two, was the nearest railroad point to the west. People would come for a hundred miles after provisions, forming wagon trains heavily laden with

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and supplies/ wheels and hoofs left behind well marked trails and routes over which traveled mail and passenger stage coaches. Most of the hauling to the west of El Reno of lumber, nails, lime and brick was done by homesteaders who needed the money to live on; work at this period was scarce and labor was very cheap.

After the run of 1889 up until 1895 there was a feverish rush to construct new homes around El Reno and the surrounding country, among the thousands of folks who joined in the great land rush and set stakes in this new land of promise. Many built dugouts as temporary living quarters. Others managed to get logs, and sod houses were a very common sight in the early days. By cutting strips of this sod citizens built homes which were comfortable and lasting. Then sawed lumber began to make its appearance, in some cases it was just cotton wood slabs. But nevertheless those slabs made a shelter.

A number of families, lost out through failure in finding a location to stake a claim, while others lost to Sooners or claim-jumpers/ ^{and} numbers of those people piled their belongings in wagons and headed off to Kansas. Others were

determined to endure the hardships, and a few of them today own their claims, which have been turned into good farms, with beautiful homes. The little homes they built were not as comfortable as they had left in their home states.

The business of the village was confined to Choctaw Avenue. Dr. Adams built the first two story frame house on that avenue, and opened a drug store in it. It was on Choctaw Avenue that I first established a grocery store. Frank Thomas established a meat market, Whiteside opened a saloon, Dave Sharpe dealt a big monte game, all on that thoroughfare, and away north on the street a hurdy-gurdy made night hideous. In fact, all the luxuries of frontier civilization could be obtained without leaving Choctaw Avenue.

But newcomers finally built better houses on Bickford and Rock Island Avenues and the glory of Choctaw Avenue departed, but today Old Choctaw stands proud of the rows of nice brick buildings, as the oldest business street in El Reno.

Today El Reno people take great pride in the four grade and splendid high school buildings. There are two thousand students and nearly a hundred teachers.

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Back in the early days, people were no less proud but it was a different picture in the "gay '90s". You might have found a group of overalled, barefooted boys and calicoed girls at the combined highschool and grade school which stood at the old Irving school. This was El Reno's first brick school. Among the ambitious students were Frank Burford, Ben Hegler, Myron Humphrey, Bill Brown, Lloyd Kelly, Ina Gainer, Blanche Fryberger, Ruth Warren and Mabel Jensen. The highschool occupied two rooms in the building and the faculty consisted of two members, but those two were real men and the students were many of them boys past twenty-one years. The faculty were Superintendent S. N. Hopkins and principal L. W. Cole. Grade school teachers included Alice Sitton, Maggie Barrett, Miss Woods, Mary Lawson, Nellie Allen, Iona DeBaun, and Fannie Cooksey.

The old farm wagons of those days loaded with those teachers and the young men and women from the eighth grade and the highschool often brought delight and entertainment to the many litereries in the driving radius of El Reno, when the merry crowds came trooping into the country school houses.

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In the late "ninety's" the charming Miss Fryberger, daughter of El Reno's premier merchant, traipsed to the exercises in skirts which boasted enough yardage to dress the entire group of twenty-five girls in the class of '26. In those days the story went the rounds that when Miss Blanche told her father (who was preparing to sell out) that the girls of her class were going to buy their dresses at "Frybergers", the father exultingly exclaimed, "Now Mother, we shall have a new home, and fresh stock upon our shelves!"

Today, the dress and people's clothing are quite different from those in the early day when I first started in business. In those days in the fall when the children needed shoes, the whole family would come to town, usually in the farm wagon. People very seldom brought their children to town; usually the only ^{time} ~~was~~ when they needed shoes. I have seen children ^{who were} eight and ten years old before they were allowed to come to town. It was always quite amusing to watch those children, the girls with their long braided hair and the boys in their knee length pants. When a family came to town, they usually bought shoes for the whole family, sometimes as many as ten children. The parents in those

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days never asked a child what kind of shoe he or she wanted; if the ^{shoes} were heavy and coarse that is what the father usually decided on.

In later years we bought a nice little home in El Reno. I have been in business of various kinds in El Reno since 1892.