

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

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Field Worker's name Harry M. DreyerThis report made on (date) May 3, 19371. Name Jacob A. Willits2. Post Office Address Oklahoma City, Oklahoma3. Residence address (or location) 2508 N.W. 154. DATE OF BIRTH: Month December Day 5 Year 18615. Place of birth Indiana, near Marion6. Name of Father John Willits Place of birth OhioOther information about father Born 1828, died in Indiana7. Name of Mother Mary Glass Place of birth OhioOther information about mother Born 1835, died in Oklahoma City

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 JACOB A. WILLITS

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

By

Harry M. Dreyer

I, Jacob A. Willits was born in Marion, Indiana, on December 5, 1861. My wife came with me to Wellington, Kansas, a few days before the Opening in 1889. She had two uncles living there. One was an ex-captain in the army, who was an early boomer in Western Kansas and founder of the town of Hougeton.

I came on down to Caldwell and I was robbed on my way down, which circumstance is such that I do not care to discuss it; any way, as I inquired about the way to get down to the line, a stranger heard me talking and walked up to me and said that he was going to make the run and planned on going to Kingfisher; that he had a good team and spring wagon; and that he would take me with him for \$10.00 and that I pay for the food. So I agreed to go with him and we left Caldwell and drove all day and camped on the prairie over night. We got up next morning, got breakfast, and shaved, and began maneuvering around to get closer to the trail and line as we were about $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles from it then. His name was Joe Stephens, a pretty good sort of a fellow. I wanted to get a business lot in Kingfisher and he was going on

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west to Cantonment. So we camped on line that night, fed the horses, a feed box arranged for them on the end of the tongue and put up our tent. I had an old style circus tent with eight poles to it that I carried on the side of the spring wagon. There were about 10,000 people there at the Opening. The soldiers had Springfield rifles on their hips, and the captain had a pistol. As he fired his pistol for the start of the run, soldiers echoed the fire down the line and fled ahead of the crowd. Some made the run horse back, some with wagons, some on foot and one fellow made the run on an old st. led bicycle with high front wheel and two small back wheels. When the shot was fired he rode about two hundred feet and hit a rough place and fell and I did not see him after that. Another fellow in a wagon had the front wheel run off of his wagon which was probably because so much backing with the wagon before the run had worked the nut loose on the axle. However, I did not see anyone that was seriously injured.

Before the run with all tents up, it appeared as though a circus was on, and gambling was going on wide open.

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It had rained a short time before Opening day and there were a lot of buffalo wallows, which were called wallow springs, all filled with water. It looked as if it were a place where many buffaloes hung out.

Our destination was Kingfisher, so those on horses went ahead of the rest, and the crowd began spreading in both directions as they started. My friend's horses were pretty fast. One was a pacer and the other a trotter. We kept crowding on the old trail toward Kingfisher. The trail consisted of about twenty roads, side by side nearly all cut so deep by the wagon wheels that the axle would drag. So wagoners for commission firms would, from time to time start new trails, parallel with others. So as the crowd started thinning out, we advanced and began crossing these trails, some of which were filled in with loose sand, making very rough riding. We finally got into a trail that had been recently traveled. But as we were crossing trails, I lost one of my tent poles, but managed to catch the rest of the tent; my friend handed me a piece of baling wire that he had on his wagon, to tie the tent. I told him to drive on, and never stopped to pick up the tent pole.

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As we started from the line, there was a wagon pulled along side of us. They fed their team from tongue end of wagon. They had hounds under the wagon, a plow on the side of the wagon, and a cow tied to the back of wagon. In getting ready for the run, the old man took a saddle from the wagon, put it on a mule, then took off his boots. He was bare headed and had an ax in his hand. His boy had a nice pony, rode bare back, and had stakes in his hand. The old lady sat in the wagon with a Winchester across her lap and the covers were back to the second bow on wagon. The two little girls were on the back end of wagon. The old lady gave such instructions as, "Pa be sure and take a claim with water on it" and "Paul, take good care of Pa and be sure and get back". So as they started, son beat on the mule as it was hard to get started, but as they started they practically passed all other riders, so that was last I saw of them.

As we arrived at Salt Fork River, we saw several people stopped on ^{the} bank. But my friend had been on this trail before, so he crossed the line and went up the river a little way and crossed, while the others hesitated to cross, as some were stuck in the quicksand.

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As I say we crossed the river and pulled a pretty steep bank on opposite side, and as there was no one ahead of us, this left the trail to ourselves, so we traveled along pretty rapidly, one horse pacing and the other trotting could hardly keep up with the pacing horse. We reached the Cimarron River, I ran on one side of the wagon and Joe Stephens, the driver, on the other side, until we reached the stream. Then we climbed on the wagon and crossed ^{the} stream easily; Joe then said "now we will travel," so the horses took us on the trail at top speed. When we arrived at Kingfisher a crowd was there from Cheyenne Country, only about a mile away. We had been informed by papers that they could not run from there or we would have driven around to that side. So we drove up to the land office, a box house, about 25x50 feet, and about 100 were lined up to file names. We were one hour and forty-seven minutes on the road.

We found that we were too late for town lots, so we stopped at Bill Grimes' claim, cooked our dinner and rubbed the horses. We then hooked up the horses again and drove up town and put up my tent on the west end of a lot, and Joe Stephens skipped out, going about twenty-five miles west near Cantonment. This left me by myself and pretty

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lonely. I was to meet my wife's uncle whom I did not know. So about dusk a team with a wagon drove up beside my tent, unhooked traces and a couple of other men came over. Each took a corner of the wagon box and they put it on the ground beside the back of my tent. I heard them talking to someone in the box. One man went away and came back with a doctor. The doctor presently left saying he would be back about ten o'clock. So I went into my tent for the night, later I heard a baby crying. There was a baby born in the wagon box, the first to be born in Oklahoma. The Mayor of Kingfisher came down to see it, and named the boy "Jake Admire Lewis". The father of the baby was a gambler but very well known. His wife, the mother of the child, later was a very good friend of my wife, and they were later customers of mine when I opened a grocery store. Gamblers were not looked down upon then as they are today.

I remained on my lot until the following Wednesday after the day of the opening and had never found my wife's uncle up to that time. People began to gather around to the north end of town as they thought the streets would run east and west. So a fellow came along and said

he had been elected Clerk of the city and told me I was in luck. And said he was charging one dollar to get names put on record. So I paid the dollar and happened to be lucky enough to get a lot.

A few minutes later a bearded man came through the crowd and said he was looking for Willit, and it happened to be Captain Meyers, my wife's uncle, with great coat and Quaker voice. The Captain's claim, which he took, cornered on the southwest corner of the town. He had gone on a surveying party before opening. As I said he was a sooner. He had slipped in there before the opening, hidden his horse down in the thickets, soaped his horse to make a lather and then had come out of the canyon and staked his claim.

Later my brother-in-law came in. He took the stage from the end of the railroad line at Pond Creek. Captain Meyers asked me to go out to the claim with him to sleep over night, so we walked out until Captain said "this is far enough to prove possession". It being dark, we put our blankets on the ground and lay down to sleep. Captain showed me how to lay one side of the blanket down as they do in the army and fold other side over you which I did and tucked other side under me, and used my coat for

Captain ... was restless
 and did not go to sleep very quickly as I was not used to
 ... out this ... quickly fell asleep. When
 I awoke in the morning, there was a rattlesnake coiled
 about the feet of the bed. I pulled on my arm and
 ... saw the snake crawling toward the Captain, and
 ... about the side of
 the bed. The snake stood up and emitted an air of
 ... that one does not
 have much use for a gun but when he does need one, he
 needs a good one. That snake probably crawled over my
 bed and ... next
 day I went back to my tent and stayed in bed all day.
 ... in the Kiowa and Comanche
 country, a ... in the
 bottom. ... and had ... and hand-
 led cattle. He stored his ... town of Cloerton.
 I haule ... from ... then Mountain Park,
 and Hobart for three years. He would go over for a load
 one day and return next day.

Captain Meyers had a friend of his to move on the

back of my lot at Kingfisher, while I was at Wellington. I settled his contest for \$400.00 including keeping contestant's tent and equipment. I learned later I was "framed" by my wife's uncle and contestant split with the Captain on the \$400.00. I built^a 720x50 foot building on the lot at the same time the bank was built, and we both built 10x12 rooms for living quarters on back with same roof. We later rented quarters out.

In the fight for the Capitol at the first legislature in September, 1890, there were three towns, Guthrie, Kingfisher, and Oklahoma City. Kingfisher citizens held a meeting, electing fifteen men to go to the legislature and the first thing we did was to raise money. First I contributed five lots. The group from Kingfisher were told to vote for Oklahoma City and Governor Steele would veto the measure. So that bill was vetoed. Then later Oklahoma City voted for Kingfisher but kept asking for \$5000.00. So I contributed five more lots. Governor Steele came up and was not satisfied with the location of the Kingfisher site. They decided on a spot a mile north of Kingfisher and the city bought that land. At the end of the session of the legislature, Governor Steele vetoed the bill after five days, which would have made

Kingfisher the capitol, and then he left for Indiana. So a bill was then passed at Washington, making Guthrie the Capitol so long as Oklahoma was a territory. I never learned until later that Kingfisher received \$5000.00 for voting with Oklahoma City, but I have an idea who got the money.

Ex-Governor Steele was a banker in Indiana, and he later came back to Oklahoma, at the time of the Sac and Fox Opening. He kept Tecumseh from opening on the day of the run. His excuse was that it had not been completely surveyed. But his friends were making the run at Orlando. Tecumseh was opened a day later. People at Kingfisher were pretty angry over the conduct of Ex-Governor Steele, he was hung in effigy at Kingfisher. He went back to Marion, Indiana, and remained in the banking business.

Oklahoma in those days was a human paradise, I used to get up early and with my dogs and saddle horse, ride out into country to hunt and come back with a half dozen prairie chickens. There were plenty of deer, wild turkey and golden plover, a species of snipe that were merely a breast, and very good to eat.

I went hunting in the Glass Mountains with Joe Irwin, in 1890. We followed the Indian trail across the Cimarron River into Beaver County. It was very cold and wind was blowing, and there was about five or six feet of ice on the north bank of the river. Joe drove his horse across to cut the ice with an ax. As he began chopping ice, a deer turned up on the bank so he fired with his revolver and crippled it. Later he caught it and shot it through the head between its back to the wagon. But while cutting ice he dropped his ax, and the handle stuck up out of the water, so he put one hand on the ice and down he went into the water with the ax handle but came on out of the water with ice all over his clothing. I drove on across, and stopped on a spot a short distance from the bank where some Indians had camped. Joe was out in the water and all ~~his~~ his clothing removed from him. He was bothered with T. B. and feared that he would take pneumonia, so I put up the tent and built a warm fire and prepared a mustard and douch poultice and put on his chest to keep the chills from settling on his lungs. Joe got along all right at that time but later died in a hospital in Kansas City, Mo. in 1894.

We continued on our hunting trip and had a great

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I met an Indian, named Short Tooth, and his wife. He helped me put up a tent when he saw that my friend was all covered with ice. His wife was an interpreter, and was interpreter in court at Kingfisher for a good many years. I traded with the Indians and was pretty well acquainted with them.

I returned to Indiana and lived there for a while after coming out here the first time. But in 1916 I came back to Oklahoma and have lived here since that time.