

GOWER, GOMER. INDIAN TERRITORY COAL MINERS. #5889

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

GOWER, GOWER. INDIAN TERRITORY COAL MINERS 5889

Field Worker's name Gomer Gower

This report made on (date) May 21, 1937

1. Name Gomer Gower

2. Post Office Address 608 East Dewey Ave., Poteau, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) \_\_\_\_\_

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

5. Place of birth Maesteg, South Wales

6. Name of Father Thomas Gower Place of birth Wales

Other information about father Pioneer resident of Indian Territory

7. Name of Mother Eliza Gower Place of birth Wales

Other information about mother Pioneer resident of Indian Territory

~~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 13.~~

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INDIAN TERRITORY COAL MINERS

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Gomer Gower,  
Field Worker,  
May 21, 1937.

Experiences of Coal Miners in the Indian  
Territory, 1882 to 1891.

I was born in Maesteg, South Wales, on November 25, 1869, and came to America with my parents, Thomas and Eliza Gower, in January, 1880, and settled at Gentschler Station, Illinois, where we resided until May, 1882. We then moved to the mining town of Savanna, Indian Territory, a point about ten miles south of old McAlester, where, as a boy, I began to work in the mine with my father.

At that time, the one mine at Savanna and some two or three at Krebs were the only coal mines, and the M.K.&F. railway the only railroad in the Indian Territory. Due to the isolation from other coal mining areas, the operators of the mines at these places found it difficult to find experienced miners, such as were required at that pre-machine period. They were, therefore, forced to secure and transport miners from other mining centers. It was in this manner that my father and nineteen other miners were induced to leave Illinois and come to the Indian Territory

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with its prospect of more steady work than might be obtained at that time in Illinois. This prospect for steady employment was due to the demand for locomotive fuel by the M.K.&T. Railway, which at that time extended south to Fort Worth and a short branch line from Whitesboro to Gainesville, Texas, and north to Sedalia, Missouri, and these mines in the Indian Territory were the logical source of supply.

Houses in which to live were scarce. For a short time our family shared a four-room house with the family of a Scotchman, Tom Carr. We then succeeded in renting a small log cabin with a box lean-to, where we lived until we departed for Gordon, Texas, in June 1883.

When we moved to this cabin I realized the dream of most normal boys in the form of a beautiful Indian pony together with a saddle and bridle presented to me by my father, and was I proud!

We had not been there very long before I was stricken with Malaria, then called Choctaw fever, from the effects of which had it not been for skillful treatment by Dr. Peter

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Harris, I no doubt would have died.

Doctor Harris, an elegant gentleman, who was quite tall and wore a long flowing beard, presented a striking appearance when making his professional round of calls, mounted on a very pretty though small brown stallion.

Doctor Harris was employed by the mine owners to care for the medical needs of the miners. For this service the mine owners collected one dollar per month from each employee. The medicine was provided by the doctor who carried his pillbags in the form of saddlebags laid across the rear part of the saddle.

After my recovery from the attack of Choctaw fever, everything moved along nicely until the following Spring when Father was stricken with an intestinal trouble and in June upon the recommendation of Doctor Harris and of Doctor Hailey, who had been called into consultation, we left the Indian Territory for Gordon, Texas, where a married sister had preceded us.

The employees at the mine at Savanna at that time were of various nationalities; Scotch, Irish, English and Welsh who, like our family, were recruited from mining

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centers in other states. Of the Scotch people I remember best the Carrs and David Crozier, the McLaughlins and William Cameron, who was superintendent of the mine. Of the Irish people, Tom Courtney who succeeded Charley Hokey as mine foreman; of the English people there was John Beck and his son Bob, good old Lancashire people, who kept a popular boarding house, then there were the Lawlesses who I think came direct from England to the Nation. And nearly all became victims of that dread malaria. Who living today remembers Jimmie Lawless singing that good old song "Oh, my bonnie dujean." This song dwelt on the pleasures enjoyed while smoking his "dujean" and after Jimmie had a drink or two of "Choc" the "dujean" would be converted into an idol. The Welsh miners were quite numerous with John O. Williams from Pennsylvania and his sons, Tom and Jim, and a foster son, Ted Richards. This family, with the aid of one or two of the girls, formed a brass band and whiled away many an evening entertaining the neighbors with the rendition of popular airs. John Parry, our

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fire-boss, who came from Litchfield, Illinois. Billy James and Jack Daniels from Pennsylvania and our own family.

In the Winter of 1882-1883 Slope 2 was opened and a double row of company houses erected midway between Slope 1 and Slope 2. These houses were of the four-room variety; two front rooms with a lean-to at the rear, and accommodated two families. When these houses were ready for occupancy the mining company brought in families from the Shotwell-mines in Kentucky. Among these families was that of James Elliot, who later became a prominent coal operator at Haileyville. Jim was one of the best miners in that aggregation.

With this aggregation of people of foreign origin who had ever had their beer when wanted, and the Kentuckians who came from the proverbial home of "mountain dew", now residing in surroundings where it was unlawful to introduce intoxicants for either use or sale, added to this the fact that the drinking water which the wells afforded was guppy in character and taste, it may well be wondered and conjectured what the result was. A way was found

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to circumvent the law and at the same time render the gypsy water more palatable. This was done by boiling malt or oats, or corn and hops in the desired quantity of water and extracting the substance of the ingredients, and then adding the proper amount of yeast and sugar. This concoction was then placed in a keg or barrel to ferment. When properly aged it afforded a drink that had a wallop comparable to the kick of a mule. This potent drink, no doubt, had the effect of counteracting the effects of the deadly malarial mosquito from which we had no other protection as window and door screens were unknown to us. Besides it rendered the water more palatable.

Then, again, an enterprising merchant, George Buntie of Saint Louis, did a mail order business. He sent out a monthly price list, quoting prices on groceries and other household necessities, including liquors in gallon lots.

It was the custom of these ~~people~~ people to include an order for a gallon of whisky in their grocery order which was limited to a minimum amount of twenty-five dollars. When this was done the order of groceries would usually



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be packed in a wooden cask for shipment with the gallon cask of whisky or other liquor carefully wrapped to resemble as nearly as possible a package of groceries and placed near the center of the cask used for shipment. Such was the discreet use of this method of law evasion that I do not recall a single instance in which the suspicions of the United States Marshals were aroused to the extent that they felt called upon to break into and examine the contents of these grocery packages.

Perhaps it was a privilege tolerated and enjoyed on account of the assurance manifested that its use was not abused.

Occasionally, whisky peddlers would appear, always at night, and they would make their presence known by firing two pistol shots in rapid succession, but aside from small sales made to the employees who resided in the boarding houses, of which there were four, their sales of whisky were meager. Their wares were sold at two dollars per pint. The alertness of the Marshals prevented any extended practice of law violation of that nature.

Soon after moving to Savanna we made the acquaintance

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of two Choctaw Indians, one of whom was Aaron Appellar, the other Hiyokitubbe- the spelling of which is phonetic and possibly incorrect. It was from Appellar that my father bought the pony for me and it was from Hiyokitubbe he bought two cows. These Indians provided us and other families with venison, wild turkeys and eggs. For a ham of venison we paid fifty cents and the same for a turkey. Hiyokitubbe could not speak English but could make himself understood by means of grunts and motions. He lived at a point about three miles east of what was then Ferryville at which there was a cotton gin and a small store. He was prominent in the Choctaw Tribal affairs and had made several trips to Washington, D. C., in the interest of his people. It was his custom to wear a red bandana tied around his head instead of a hat. On the occasion of his visits to Washington, he had been presented with quite a collection of silk top hats, which then as now were the vogue with official Washington. These hats he kept as souvenirs only, and he took keen delight in showing them to us when we visited his home. He would place one of these hats upon his head and would affect the air of a Beau Brummell and

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strut around in imitation of the dandies he had seen in Washington. On all other occasions he was dignity personified. His dignified silence was in itself eloquent.

He visited us often when Father was sick and though that was fifty years ago, I shall never forget nor cease to admire him. Appellar, too, was a kindly man and was fairly well-educated in the English language.

On May 1st, 1883, the coal company reduced the wages of the miners which resulted in the first strike of miners in the Indian Territory. The miners were not organized at that time as no labor organization as we know them today was in existence. A joint meeting of the Savanna and McAlester miners was held on the prairie near Savanna and a committee selected to appeal to Chief

Jack McCurtain for moral assistance to resist the reduction in wages imposed by the coal company. However, to the consternation of the committee, the Chief directed that the miners return to work or get ready to take an Arkansas bed, which meant to return to work or get out of the Territory. Thus ended the first strike of miners after a period of idleness of one month, idleness which afforded a grand opportunity for hunting and fishing.

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In January, 1886, the mines at Gordon, Texas, were closed down and in August of that year the writer returned to the Indian Territory to work in the mines at Lehigh which had been opened after we left Savanna. At Lehigh it was the custom of the miners to close the week's work at noon on Saturday. This custom gave the miners an opportunity to indulge in the various sports, pony-racing, foot-racing, pigeon shooting and baseball. A quarter mile race track was located on a ridge west of Mine 3. Another was located about a mile south of -toka. It was here where the more important races were run. Jim Wells, Laje Hodge, Jack-Hog-Jaw Phillips and Dutch Ahnehardt, each owned fast ponies and were ready at all times to back them with their money. The Veeches, Andrew and Bob, Bob Blackbird and Tom Pope were the outstanding contenders for supremacy in the contests in pigeon shooting. Much money would be wagered on these sports and trickery of all sorts was practiced. Jim Wells owned a long-bodied saw-backed, yew-necked brown mare that on the race track would be transformed into a streak of lightning. The mare's outlandish appearance when not on

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the race track gave Jim a decided advantage when matching a race with someone to whom the fleetness of the mare was unknown. In addition to this advantage Jim's mare had been trained to use tactics calculated to wear out the opposing horse before the actual race was started. In starting—always a flying start—she would send her opponent off on numberless false starts while she remained as cool as the proverbial cucumber. Then, at a signal from Old Jim, she would be off, her rider enjoying that thrill which accompanies the pleasure of looking back to see how the opposing horse is running. And invariably these races would result in Jim's pockets being filled from the bets he had made. Then there was Maje Hodge's Blue, a blue roan compactly built, that could run a good race, and Buckskin, a rangy Texas horse owned by Dutch Rhinehardt. A great horse which later was owned by my father and used as a cowhorse. and last, there was Scarleg, so named because of his ability to affect a very painful limp when being examined by a prospective party with a view of matching a race. After the race was matched and the money put in the hands of a stakeholder, the limp would disappear as if by magic. I have especial occasion

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to recall Scarleg's limp because I myself was made the victim of his duplicity on my first introduction to this wise and good old horse. To the lover of a horse there is no thrill comparable to that felt when two fleet ponies come thundering down the track, every nerve and muscle strained to the breaking point, the riders leaning forward, and with a steady hand on the reins urging and assisting their mounts to attain and keep in the lead. Oh Boy!

I had an intimate acquaintance, extending over a period of years, with Colonel Robert D. Hunter, a pioneer stockman of the Indian Territory, and who has been frequently mentioned in the Chronicles of Oklahoma.

I was in his employ at the time of his death which

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occurred at Fort Worth, Texas, in 1900. It is impossible

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for those who did not know him intimately to fully appreciate what has been written of Colonel Hunter. He was truly an outstanding character of whom it can truthfully be said "He was a winner." Tall and portly; at once ruthless and yet kind, of Scotch parentage, possessing the determination of the spider which inspired the Scottish Chief, Robert Bruce, to carry on.

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Thus closes the narrative relating the modes of life of the pioneer miners of the Indian Territory, who were engaged in an industry which has added much to its wealth and development and has given to the State of Oklahoma many of its leading lights: William Cameron, Territorial Mine Inspector, Pete Hanratty, Constitutional Convention Delegate, and later, State Mine Inspector, Ed Boyle and Robert Brown, State Mine Inspectors, and Matt McElroy, member of Industrial Commission, and last but not least, Claud Connally, former Labor Commissioner and now Director of Labor Relations of the State Works Progress Administration.