

CHISUM, JOHN C.

SECOND INTERVIEW 10290.

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

CHISUM, JOHN C. SECOND INTERVIEW

10290

Zaidee B. Bland

Field Worker's name

This report made on (date)

March 18, 1938

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1. Name John C. Chisum
2. Post Office Address Altus, Oklahoma
3. Residence address (or location) 218 West Cypress Street
4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month December Day 15 Year 1870
5. Place of birth Limestone County, Texas.

6. Name of Father John Clayborn Chisum Place of birth Texas

Other information about father \_\_\_\_\_

7. Name of Mother Elizabeth Buchanan Place of birth Louisiana

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 14.

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Zaidee B. Bland,  
Journalist,  
March 18, 1938.

An Interview with Mr. John C. Chisum,  
218 West Cypress Street, Altus, Okla.

My grandfather was a Texas war veteran and among the other things that the state gave him for his service was 1280 acres of land beginning just west of Altus and extending south along Bitter Creek. I should have said gave him a grant for this land, for he had to occupy it to hold it. The dispute between the United States Government and Texas over title to the land was on but that did not turn my grandfather from his purpose of occupying this land and leaving it to his children.

In 1886, out he and my grandmother came to build a little kingdom in the beautiful land of flowers, tall grasses and the fewest dangerous wild animals of most any country ever settled by man.

Naturally my father and brothers thought Granddad too old to come so far away. From all his boys into a veritable wilderness; accordingly, uncle and father began to look around to see which of the boys might be persuaded to come after him and make his home with granddad. I was Pa's

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oldest boy and scarcely seventeen years of age but was considered very dependable so I was selected by Uncle and Pa to come to granddad.

Granddad came out in covered wagons and drove a lot of his cows but not his horses. I was given one of granddad's horses, a dependable little brown mare I called Molley, which was a very dark brown almost black and was beautifully gaited for a western pony. The Chisums always raised their horses and had a strain of Hambletonian and Steel Dust crossed that made a very fine and enduring saddle mount.

I put my saddle and bridle on Molley, took an extra saddle blanket and slicker, threw my grub wallet across the flanks of my horse and was ready to start on a two hundred mile ride absolutely alone. There were only cattle trails to follow and I kept constantly in my mind the general direction I wanted to go. I did get lost a half-day once but I saw I was getting too far east so cut across streams and gullies until I was back on the old cow trails again. One half-day near Throckmorton I traveled the entire morning in a lane that ran straight

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into the north without a turn. There was barbed wire on each side of me and there was no chance of getting out to turn without cutting the fence.

At night I tried to always be near water but just staked my horse out to graze and, taking my saddle for a pillow, would lay down beside the trail and sleep until daylight. I brought bread and meat so I would make a fire and broil my meat over the coals. I never brought a vessel of any kind with me. If I had to drink out of a stream I used my hands or lay flat on my belly and drank like an animal. The very last night on Beaver Creek I came up with some woc haulers and camped with them. I sure was glad to see them for I had come the entire distance alone not seeing a half dozen people at any time for the towns were not plentiful and trails did not lead through them and I did not go out of my way to see towns. I think I was eight days making the trip and landed here September 30, 1888.

My journey north alone on horseback over streams where there was not one bridge with about \$8.00 in my pocket was the beginning of a long occupancy of this part

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of the country for me. I never left Texas, they simply changed the name on me and I would not leave. Granddad and grandmother were expecting me and were they glad to see me!

The weather was fair and open; it was a beautiful fall and I got in time to help granddad with the harvest. Granddad had come into the wilderness with money he needed and every kind of seed he could think to bring with him which he planted, including cotton, but we never attempted to gather the cotton and it was five years before we ever planted cotton again. I never saw so many watermelons in my life. They would weigh some of them seventy-five or a hundred pounds, just laying in the field with no one to eat them or even want them. Only one man lived between my granddad and Doan's Crossing; he lived in a dugout at Hess and was named Hess.

We had twice a week mail from Vernon to Frazier at that time. The mail carrier drove a pair of mules to a hack and would take passengers back and forth to Vernon for \$5.00 the round trip or \$3.00 one way. That was about

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the only way people could get in and out of the country unless they had their own teams.

There was a lot of contesting of claims going on and the country was beginning to settle up pretty fast now. Granddad was determined to hold his entire 1,280 acres and he was having a time doing it, but finally after a few years his boys began to come out and we all held down a half-section apiece and got by with it.

#### Home

Granddad lived in an immense hole in the ground. The ridge pole was a big old cottonwood log and the roof was poles laid across that and covered with grass and dirt. The walls and floors on the inside were covered with burlap sacks and on one end there was a big rock fireplace made from sandrocks just picked up around over the ground.

Fuel was no object that early for both Bitter Creek and Turkey Creek had a lot of dead willow and cottonwood trees where fire had killed them and they had tumbled down to make room for new trees. Mesquite

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roots were also handy on the upland beyond the creeks.

Food .

I never in all my life ate so much plum butter nor such good plum butter. Grand-

mother had put up hogshead of plum butter and it was so thick and stiff you had to cut it with your knife to put it on your bread. We also had plenty of home cured meat, sausage, lard, sweet potatoes and pumpkins.

Everything grew that was planted and I think everything was planted that we had ever heard of.

Wild food.

I have known one man <sup>to</sup> go out and bring in forty wild turkeys in one morning; they would drive them up away from the creek where they could not hide and shoot them as they would attempt to run. These turkeys would be dressed and salted away or hung up in a tree. I have seen as many as forty antelope, right here where Altus is now, in one bunch. We would kill an antelope, hang him in a tree and he would be good to eat from September until May. We never thought of trying to keep meat any other way except hanging in a tree, for it



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would be dried by the wind and sun and be so good to cut a hunk out of to fry or broil before the open fire or put into a pot for savory meat. Quail, prairie chickens, wild ducks and geese all contributed to our table and all the streams were full of fish .

#### Wild Animals .

Only the wolf and prairie dog gave us any trouble. You could hear the wolf every night protesting about something to the moon and the prairie dog cut a lot of our crops up until we had to poison them out. Antelope and wild cattle roamed over the hills as shy of man as though they knew him to be an enemy.

#### Supplies.

All supplies were hauled from Vernon and it took three days to make the trip, with good luck.

We always brought two or three thousand pounds back every load though. Lots of people as they began to come in freighted for a little extra money. It was a fact that in five years after one had lived here the man who came in with no cash at all was as well off as the man who came in with plenty.

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Sugar and flour were both brought in by the two and three hundred pounds for one family, usually in barrels. We had coal oil lamps in most all dugouts and bought coal oil by the barrel. I remember we had a neighbor once who was accounted shiftless but he had the nicest woman for a wife. She was what you would call "old maidish", just so clean and trim. This man had a good team and did a good deal of freighting because it was easier than farm work. He went out to Vernon once and was bringing back three barrels of coal oil which he loaded into the wagon helter skelter, put his bedding on the top of the barrels of oil sat on the barrels and came home that way. All groceries and bedding was saturated with the oil. His wife was so mad she said she had a notion to set a match to the whole load including him. We all felt sorry for her.

Grandfather got water from a spring about one hundred yards from the house but I dug a well; the water was better than common but a little gypsy.

#### Clothing.

Most people came in here with enough clothing to

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do several years; especially the women and one could get work clothes at Vernon and cowboy pants and shirts at any cross-road store. Grandmother had always wove and spun so we had all the bedding we would ever want, in fact I have one of the old wool coverlids for which grandmother spun the thread, dyed the wool and wove the coverlid. Grandmother also knit all our socks.

#### School and Church.

Little one-room frame houses were being built all over the country and being used for school and church and all young sprouts big enough to like the girls looked up the place where there was to be church and attended.

Dancing was not quite so popular through here as it was back where I came from.

We all married in our early twenties for we wanted someone in our dugout to make it cheery for us. When I was fifteen it was found that I had quite a flare for building houses so I began to be trusted with the planning and building of houses. When it was learned out here that I could build as soon as people

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began to have enough to want to live above the ground I was always being called on to build a house for someone. My wife always complained that I was never at home but always gone somewhere building for someone; \$1.00 a day and board was good wages or \$1.25 a day and one meal and \$1.75 was top wages, the most I ever got.

I built a house for a man between here and Mangum for one dollar a day and board. It took me fifteen days so he paid me \$15.00 and I got a suit of clothes and had money left. I paid \$2.00 for a pair of shoes and wore them two years.

Cyclones and hail storms were the most dreaded of any danger out here. Once when I was in town building a house for someone a very dark cloud came over so my wife took the children and went to the cellar or dugout which began to leak and one of the girls got on a cigar box and tried to catch the water to keep it from making the floor muddy.

It got very dark and the sky looked like it was a very black smoke. The hail was as large as hen eggs

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and it rained so much that the water began to rise in the dugout. My wife put the children on chairs and on the steps to keep them out of the water and began to look out toward the house every little bit to see if the wind and storm had passed over so they could go back into the house. Then the wind took the house up and twisted it right around about half way. It did not blow it off the blocks, just twisted it around and when my wife saw that she said "My children, that is a cyclone but it has passed." They watched it pass on over the country, take Lock Schoolhouse off the blocks and twist everything in its path. The first schoolhouse at Altus was blown away after one term of school was taught in it and the next one burned down the night before the school was to open. Then an old stone building was built which is a part of the east ward building to this day.

#### Law and Order

All court was held at Mangum; the judge, Judge Brown, lived in Vernon. When we went to court to serve on the Jury we usually went in a wagon prepared to camp but if we were only going over for a day we went horseback.

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Judge Brown was holding court the day the decision was handed down by the Supreme Court that this was a part of the Oklahoma Territory. The message was relayed to Judge Brown from Vernon by a pony express and when the message was handed to him he read it, pulled off his glasses and said, "Gentleman of the Jury - Members of the Bar - Fellow Citizens - visitors to this court. Court is adjourned. There will never be court held in Mangum, Greer County, Texas, again, for there is no such a place on the map. By the decision of the Supreme Court this <sup>is</sup> Mangum, Oklahoma Territory. You are dismissed."

Pandemonium reigned and for sixty days there were really lawless activities throughout this country. I can't imagine where so many bad people came from but claim jumping and other misdemeanors were so bad there was a Vigilant Committee organized until the United States Court could send some officers down to enforce good behavior.

Under the Texas law a person could homestead 160

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acres- and purchase another 160 at \$1.25 per acre. Before Judge Brown could get out of town in Magum after his announcement, money was made up to send him to Washington to ask for a special law to be put through congress allowing all the homesteaders on the land at the time to have a right to purchase a quarter-section at \$1.00 per acre, having five years in which to pay for it , the money to be paid in five equal payments. Judge Brown got this done and we old timers got our purchased quarter for \$1.00 instead of \$1.25 as the later comers had to pay.

People complained of the price of produce being so low that it did not pay to sell butter and eggs. Up near Headquarter's Mountain lived a family from the north named Brodie who had a spring house for their milk and butter and Mrs. Brodie had a standing order at Vernon for all the butter she would send to town. She sent her butter to market every three months and got 25 cents a pound for every pound she would send and had no way of keeping the butter sweet except in this spring house.

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I have seen ten thousand head of cattle being driven to market north through here at a time. A cow trail is usually two or three hundred feet wide and composed of deep little paths worn down by countless feet of cattle tramping in the same tracks.

We were originally Scotch and spell our names Chisohlum but when we Americanized the name we left out the "ohl."

My journey north alone on horseback over streams where there was not one bridge, with about \$8.00 in my pocket was the beginning of a long occupancy of this part of the country for me. I never left Texas they simply changed the name on me and I would not leave.