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Field worker, Bessie L. Thomas,  
March 28, 1937.  
Interview with Mrs. Harry Conner,  
Connerville, Kansas.

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I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1867, and moved with my parents to Jackson County, Kansas, when I was three years old. I can remember clearly hearing my parents tell about the great grasshopper plague altho at the time I was only six years old. The grasshoppers came in the fall of '73, and lasted all through the year 1874. They came in such clouds the light from the sun was at times obscured. The peach trees after the hoppers got through feeding on them had nothing left but the tree trunks and peach pits. They piled up in such bunches on the railroad tracks that the trains were stopped by the rails becoming so greasy from the oil from their bodies, the wheels would do nothing but spin. Sand had to be put on rails before the trains could go on. Dozens of families who had no money to buy food would have starved had it not been

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for the generosity of the merchants and civic bodies,  
sending baskets of food to the needy country folk.

I received most of my schooling at Circleville,  
Kansas, and prepared myself for a school "marm."  
Altho the terms of school were short, sometimes only  
three or four months in the early days of Kansas, I  
was always allowed to go the full term.

I read and heard talked the Opening to be in old  
Oklahoma in 1889, and begged my parents to make the  
Run. They said they did not want any more experiences  
of helping settle up a new country, so then I asked  
if I could make the Run. This they refused on account  
of the danger they thought there would be from living  
in the wild Indian country in Oklahoma.

I had two uncles who made the Run, each drawing  
claims. Both picked their land near El Reno, eighteen  
miles southeast. One uncle returned home, saying he  
was too old to settle in a new country and had decided  
to let the land go back.

Having taught school for two terms and saved some

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money from my meager salary, I asked my uncle to relinquish his claim to me. This he finally agreed to do providing my parents were willing. So we both asked them about it. They threw up their hands in horrified amazement to think that I would want to go to that wild unsettled Indian country. But, being young and persistent in my begging for anything I wanted, they finally agreed and gave their consent, saying though that I would have to go alone; that is, without them. So I bought the relinquishment from my uncle and then began wondering how I could live alone on a prairie claim. I decided I'd write and ask a maiden Aunt to go with me. In a few weeks her reply came, saying she would go, coming in time to go with me when I went to file.

I resigned from my school and began making preparations to go to a new unsettled country, to face the future not dreaming what it might bring. But I had the vim and determination to stick, no matter what might come, partly because my parents in their hearts were so opposed to my going.

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In September, 1889, in company with my Aunt, I started to El Reno to file. There were several other neighbors from my home town in Kansas went down at the same time but my Aunt and I were the only women in the bunch.

The railroad at this time went only as far as Pond Creek. From there, we took hacks, going by way of Kingfisher, crossed the Cimarron River south of Pond Creek, the horses swimming part of the way. We had been warned of the quicksand but fortunately never got into it. The weather was hot and dry and as we neared Kingfisher the red dust in the air looked like a fire. We stayed in Kingfisher, a new town of boarded up shanties, that night. The hotel rooms where we spent the night were just little boxed-up rooms. We could see daylight and the stars through the ceiling. That night there came a hard rain and wind storm. The water came down in torrents, it just poured and poured. We were up most of the night trying to keep our bed dry. We had to sit perched up on foot of the bed the latter part of night holding our suit cases. The floor was a regular river. The building set

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on the ground flat without any kind of foundation. Steps leading into and out of the hotel room was a dry goods box turned upside down. Had to go outside of room to get into dining room. The next morning as we were starting to breakfast, I stepped on the box and it turned over with me. I landed in a pool of water and red mud, which turned my white shirt-waist red. As our party drove out of Kingfisher that morning, we made slow progress. The livery stables could not supply the demand of the hundreds of filers, who came each day to look over and locate their claims, for a fresh team. Therefore, we started out with a jaded old team. We had to get out and walk and let the team rest. Grasshoppers were numerous and as long as one's index finger. I had picked up one and discovered they had no wings. One rough-speaking man in the crowd said, "Hell, let's turn these nags loose, and hitch up the hoppers."

My aunt and I slept in the hack that night and the men made pallets on the ground. We heard coyotes howl

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most of the night but our camp fire kept them at a distance without bothering us. We could hear Indian tom-toms inter-mingled with the howls of coyotes.

By the time we moved to Oklahoma, February 20, 1890, the railroad had built as far as El Reno, the end of the line. There was a home colony of about twenty-five people came from Jackson County, Kansas, the same time my aunt and I did, which made the future look brighter. Each family had shipped their stock, household goods, farming implements and wagons, which were all new and knocked down for shipping.

Our party on the way down was gay and cheerful. We sang songs, got acquainted with each other and all seemed light-hearted, with high hopes of bettering ourselves with the possession of land in this new country.

After reaching El Reno late in the evening, we stayed there for the night. One man was left at the stockyards to guard the stock. All the horses shipped were big fine ones, no small ponies in the bunch. Most of the next day was spent in assembling the wagons,

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and then loading them with the household goods and chickens. Cows were to be driven on foot. When ready to start out, they lacked one driver and I stepped up and said I would drive. The team I had never seen before and I had had very little experience in driving, but as I was to start life on the plains, I thought now was a good time to begin learning how to do things in this new country. It was nearly dusk when we left El Reno. The night was warm and not very dark and we could see lots of stars. There were no roads and no fences. We just struck out and out across the country. The wagon I was driving was third from the lead.

We drove to the home of a friend of one of our party who cooked supper for the whole bunch. We ate in relays and from a home-made table just long enough to seat eight. Our supper was biscuits, ham, red gravy and black coffee. After reaching my uncle's place my aunt and I were put off there and the others went on to their respective claims.

I stayed with my uncle who lived two miles from my claim about two weeks, when my own home, a well built, one



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roomed house, 12 x 18, was ready for me to move into. I had a bed, a tiny cook stove, a dry goods box for a table and two kegs turned upside down for chairs. When I left my Kansas home my father gave me three cows, a dozen chickens, and his blessing to take with me to my new home, so I felt very rich with these worldly possessions and his blessing.

My uncle did a lot to help me get started. I soon had ten acres of sod broke, part in wheat, kaffir and a garden spot. My garden did fine as did every thing else that we planted. There was a little swag on the farm not far from the house, where the ground was always damp. My uncle sunk a barrel in the ground at this place and that was my well. Water was good and cold.

There lived not far from my claim, a young man by the name of Harry Connor, whom I soon met. He, too, had come to this new country to make his home. He began calling on me and in a few weeks he began calling regularly and it was not long till we were engaged. There were not many young people in the country so we would go miles to

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get acquainted with a young girl, or boy, as soon as we heard that someone new had moved into our part of the country. The next spring, I started a subscription school, charging \$1.50 per month for each pupil, taking pay for tuition from farmers in work. I had eleven pupils and no two books in school were alike, as children had come from different states. I taught two months the first spring, then snakes got so bad the parents were afraid to send their children as they all had to walk, some coming two miles. This school was conducted in my home. I sewed muslin together to partition off the school room, tacking it lengthwise along the ceiling rafter and tacking the bottom edge to the floor. School equipment were long cottonwood benches with no front. Children had to write on their knees and all had slates. Mr. Connor planed off the benches so the kiddies would not get splinters in them.

After the first year on the claim my aunt became so homesick she went back to her northern home, and I lived alone then until Mr. Connor and I were married. I slept with a loaded revolver under my pillow as there was a drunkard living in the community, but he never came near

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my place at night.

Mr. Conner with a lumber wagon full of young married folk, took us to our first Fourth of July celebration, ten miles away, he and I sitting up in the spring seat. This was a happy day for us two, as we were also celebrating our engagement but no one knew about it then but just two people. He owned a team of fine young horses, and we passed every vehicle on the road that day. It was a scorching hot day and all the ladies carried parasols.

After our marriage we set out a good sized orchard which was soon growing nicely, but one day there came an awful storm of rain, hail wind and lightning, which killed most of the trees. I had just made a batch of home-made soap, had it sitting on a board near a window to dry out. In looking after and gathering up my baby chicks, I had forgotten about the soap. The wind was so strong it blew in the window and I spent the rest of the afternoon picking broken glass out of my soap. Mr. Conner put half of the farm in alfalfa, which made a splendid crop. We raised and fattened a lot of

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hogs on it, and had plans drawn up for our new home which we intended to build after taking our hogs to market. However, we never got to build the home, as cholera broke out among our hogs and killed a carload. The next thing to strike was chinch bugs, which destroyed most of the corn and kaffir. Professor Snow, of the State University at Lawrence Kansas, sent out materials to fight the bugs, and each farmer who used it was to report back to him how effective it was. It did the work and killed millions of the insects.

Mr. Conner was beginning to get discouraged over the bad luck it seemed like we were in for, and wanted to make a change. He had been reading of the Kiowa, Comanche and Apache lands, which were to be opened for settlement in southwestern Oklahoma. We did not get there for the drawing. He finally sold our place near El Reno and came to Comanche County in 1902, buying a farm near Cache, where we built the home we had planned to build on my claim in Canadian County. I never liked southwest Oklahoma and longed for the claim upon which I filed as a girl. I lived thirteen years on it, and always regretted leaving it.