

CURTIS, JOE

INTERVIEW

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CURTIS, JOE. INTERVIEW.

Ruth Lee Gamblin,
Field Worker,
April 28, 1937.

BIOGRAPHY OF TILLMAN COUNTY PIONEER

Interview with Joe Curtis,
North 14th Street,
Frederick, Oklahoma.

Officially my name is I. E. Curtis, but everyone knows me through the café as Joe Curtis to such an extent that I am surprised when some unusually informed friend calls me "Isaiah," the name my parents gave me at birth.

I was born in Tipton, Staffordshire, England, to Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Curtis and my boyhood and early youth were spent on the island of my birth. There I acquired a common school education. For five or six years I worked in a grocery store in Birmingham. Then when twenty-two years old, I had an opportunity to come to the United States on a sight-seeing trip. Some friends who were coming over to see their daughter, who had married an American, asked me to accompany them. I did so, and it came near proving my death.

The ship on which I embarked was wrecked, when it struck a rock near Belle Isle, off the Canadian coast. Crew and passengers abandoned the sinking ship and took refuge on a rock. There we stayed for about a week, when other ships picked us up. I was rescued by a cattle ship and came into Quebec port and thence with my friends to Arkansas City, Kansas.

For a time I did farm and ranch work in that vicinity and then I came over into the Kaw Reservation in Oklahoma. My name gained my prestige among the Indians, owing to the fact that Charles E. Curtis, afterwards senator and vice-president, was a Kaw. I was there for six months, farming. Later I joined a threshing crew in Kansas and was thus engaged when the boss announced they would all lay off and go to Lawton, and register for farms in the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache strip, which was first opened in the fall of 1901.

I accompanied the crowd to Lawton more to be doing something than in the hope of getting a farm, and was the only one in my group that drew a claim. I filed on the southeast quarter of 34-2South-16 West, seven miles east of Frederick, in the spring of 1902.

Those were days of hard work, and work at anything to be done in order to stock, improve and hold my farm. I worked laying brick on Frederick business houses, helped survey and grade for what is now the Frisco Railroad through this part of the country, which was the first railroad into Frederick. I would do anything I could find to do, often walked back and forth between my place and Frederick.

In February, 1908, I married Miss Maude E. Lewis. In 1913 we moved to Frederick, and I opened a barber shop. When the United States entered the World War, most of the barbers in my shop went into the army. Barbers were hard to find and to help pay the rent on the Grand Avenue location, I partitioned off part of the room and began serving lunches. Thus hamburgers, chili, sandwiches, and other lunch edibles became the start of my cafe, now known throughout the southwest.

When the cafe business grew so big it crowded out my barber shop, I bought the building in which I am located now and under the personal care of myself and my wife, our business has steadily expanded.