

MILLER, DORA

INTERVIEW

#9373

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

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Field Worker's name Anna E. Barry.

This report made on (date) November 22, 1937.

1. Name Mrs. Dora Miller.

2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma.

3. Residence address (or location) 319 South Bickford Street.

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month April Day 26 Year 1866.

5. Place of birth Anson County, North Carolina.

6. Name of Father Anson Watkins. Place of birth North Carolina.

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother Jennie Bryant Watkins. Place of birth South Carolina.

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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Anna R. Barry,
Journalist,
Nov. 22, 1937.

An Interview With Dora Miller,
319 South Bickford Street,
El Reno, Oklahoma.

Mrs. Dora Miller was born in Ansen County, North Carolina, on April 26, 1866, the daughter of Ansen Walkins and Fannie (Bryant) Walkins. It was in 1872 when she was six years old that her parents along with their twelve children one bright morning in May, 1872, boarded General Bush's special immigrant train bringing people to the West to seek homes.

On this trip people were allowed excursion rates, but after all with their family of fourteen, this trip seemed rather expensive to them then, but they were lured from their home in the East by a promise of a better livelihood on the prairie.

It was at Gainesville, Texas, that this family stopped and stayed for several days; her father then purchased a yoke of oxen, a wagon, a few cooking utensils, a small amount of bedding and loaded his wife and twelve children into the wagon and set out for parts unknown.

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This country was new to her father, and he did not know the directions, but they located on Big Red River at Delaware Bend on the old Indian Territory side.

Here her father took to trapping and hunting at this time, there was no market for agricultural products, but furs and hides could be sold easily. Mr. Walkins loved the wild free life of the hunter and trapper, as this was the work he had followed in North Carolina so they just camped in one place long enough to get all the best furs before moving on into a new region. They usually camped for the winter in the protection of some little grove along the stream. Some times, they built a log shanty but more often a dugout was made by digging a hole about ten feet square back into the creek/^{bank} and building a front of logs or by covering the opening with brush and grass. Next Mr. Walkins and his sons would string out their traps for several miles along the stream to catch the fur-bearing animals of these woods. Busy days and hard work followed; in the forenoon came a long tramp through the heavy snow or rain, baiting, setting traps, sometimes returning almost empty-handed, which meant less food for this family of twelve children;

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and again he would come home heavily laden with game. Each afternoon was spent skinning animals and caring for the furs and pelts. A hunting trip on the prairie usually netted a buffalo skin and enough meat to last this family for several weeks.

Their meals were not always regular, but they ate well and enjoyed their food. They had no time piece and cooked when all felt hungry, regardless of time. The cooking was done over the camp fire and consisted mostly of game roasted and wild turkey or duck, roasted, fried or boiled venison, buffalo, or antelope meat and often a big chunk of buffalo or deer meat was cooked before the bright embers of the fire and roasted to a golden brown, juicy and sweet, ready to serve at a moment's notice when the men returned .

In the evenings after supper we spent time in molding bullets, repairing clothes, talking, and wondering what was going on in the outside world.

Each evening their trusty friend, the rifle, had to be cleaned and oiled, and while her father did this, Mrs. Miller remembers hearing her father tell of narrow escapes from wild animals and Indians.

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Their wants were few, their beds were made of prairie hay covered with buffalo skins, a few simple cooking utensils, blocks of wood and three-legged stools served for chairs, a crude home-made table, a box for a cupboard, and a bench that served as a washstand completed their simple house furnishings.

By the door stood the trusty axe used to secure their fuel supply. Mr. Watkins had to be on the alert for the prowling Indian visitors who would rob him of his cattle as well as supplies, and to guard against this he frequently dug a hole lining it and protecting it against dampness, stored his furs in it. This hole was well hidden and the surroundings ground covered with grass and leaves to prevent detection.

The sides of little huts and barns were covered with drying hides and in order to keep the meat it was "jerked" or dried. There were two ways of "jerking" the meat. If the weather was the least bit damp, a scaffold was built by driving four forked sticks into the ground and laying other sticks on these until a complete scaffold was formed large enough to dry the flesh from a buffalo and the flesh was

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cut from the bones and sliced into thin pieces then dipped into boiling specially prepared brine to cure it thoroughly to prevent spoiling. This usually took a day's time. If flies were bad the smoke kept them away from the meat. The method they used to cure meat was used when the weather was dry and warm and the meat was prepared in the same way except that no fire was placed under it and the wind and sun dried it in eight or ten hours so that it would keep all summer in a dry place. Mr. Walkins sold his furs at Dexter sometimes at Springtown. At this time very few white people lived in this part of the country, which was full of Indians.

Mr. Walkins leased some Indian land and this family in a few days had a ten by twelve log hut built and were at home.

The white people at this time felt very much afraid of the Indians especially the women and children. These Indians would walk right into any home without knocking, squat on the floor, smoke and make themselves at home. The ways and habits of white men were strange and interesting to them and they would pick up every cooking utensil and examine it.

Mrs. Walkins was frightened many times when she looked up from her work at the fireplace to see a burly warrior in her

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house. When these Indians came to their house, their first words were usually "Eat! Eat!" or if they could speak a little more English it was "We heep hungry!" and Mrs. Walkins scared to death, was glad to feed them to get rid of them.

They lost several good cows by the Indians stealing them; maybe they would have just the one milk cow staked on a lariat rope when a group of the hungry Indians would come along, cut the rope, kill this cow, and in a few minutes each one would have a chunk of raw beef eating as fast as he could.

Sometimes the Indians did some trading with the settlers; the settlers secured calico, beads, pocketbooks from the red man, while the Indians in return always traded for something to eat. Raw-hide lariats were traded for pork, watermelons and other food.

In the hunting season Indians, returning from a hunt, often stopped at the Walkins home offering to trade buffalo for "hoggie" meat, as they called it, or for corn meal. Indian scares at this time were very common, mostly caused by Indians who became wild after a few drinks of the white man's "fire water." During these Indian scares many men

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hooked up their cattle and horses, put their families and household goods into their wagons, and took flight to the nearest settlement for safety.

One of the greatest hardships of this frontier life was the great distance to town; the mill closest to the 'alkins' house was seventeen miles away as was the blacksmith shop and the railroad. All these years they had cooked on the open-fire or sometimes over a mud and stick fireplace. One time while her father was at Springtown, he saw the cookstove for the first time and bought it and brought it home and set it up. He didn't know where to build the fire. He thought surely the oven must be the fire box so he built the fire in the oven. Each night her father covered their fire so as to have some coals alive to start the fire the next morning; this was called "seed fire". He took as good care of this little fire each night as he did his money. If this family let the fire die out, they took an old Indian flint, placed a small piece of cotton down on it, sprinkled a little gun powder over the cotton, took an old file and would strike up and down on the flint until a spark would light this piece of cotton. Many times neighbors came six or seven miles with a pot or pan to "borrow" fire.

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Okra seed was parched and used as coffee by this family and they were careful to save and care for these okra seeds and many times they made coffee by taking corn-meal and molasses and frying them together until they were powdered.

Their baking powder was made by taking white clean corn cobs and burning them, this powder was used as baking powder in their molasses cakes; very few pastries were used. White flour biscuits were considered a treat for their family, but Mrs. Walkins always managed to have biscuits for breakfast on Sunday morning and cooked wheat eaten with molasses was considered a good breakfast cereal.

Mr. Walkins kept a number of sheep and all their clothing were made of homespun cloth. This homespun cloth was usually dyed brown from walnut hulls, or black-jack bark which colored purple, while they picked little leaves called dye leaf which dyed yellow.

Overalls were patched with flour sacking on which the brand and description of the flour still shone in bright blue letters. Men had to lie in bed while their wives mended their only pair of trousers. Wash day brought its problems

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to this frontier family as curing this time there was no bar soap. Soft soap and hot water were put into a keg and then the clothes were dumped into this mixture, the clothes were first punched with a stick, then taken out and laid on a block and pounded with a battling stick.

When they thought the clothes were clean they were hung on bushes to dry. Washboards, boilers and washing machine were unheard of, and great care was taken not to break any of the buttons with the battling stick for buttons were scarce and costly: they were made of pearl or bone, mostly bone.

Another way they washed their clothes, was to take a small piece of rope tie it around the waist and rub the clothes with this rope until the clothes were clean.

Soap-making was another hard job for this family; a rack was made of poles, over this was spread a layer of straw, the ashes were saved and thrown on this rack. Wood ashes were best, with the exception of black walnut. Corn-stalk ashes were used largely on the treeless plains. While the ashes were saved during the winter, the meat scraps were collected in a can, all kinds of fat, the drippings of tallow and lard, and bones, for marrow makes good soap grease.

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When the time came to make soap, water was poured over the ashes on this rack and the liquid which soaked through the straw was caught in the pans, and for good soap this brown liquid had to be strong enough to hold up an egg. The meat scraps were put into a large iron kettle and this lye added. After several hours boiling, this formed a slippery mass called soft soap. It was usually kept in this form, but in later years hard soap was made.

Starch for use in laundering was made of the waste which forms at the bottom of the vessel when potato water is allowed to stand for several hours. Another method was used after wheat growing had been introduced. Wheat and bran were soaked in old wooden tubs for several days and the mixture of water and softened grain was then strained through clean straw and poured back into the tub to settle and as soon as the water was clear, it was drained off and the white pap placed in the sun to dry and bleach.

One of their greatest dangers were prairie fires; they feared these more in the autumn when the grass and leaves was dry; these fires were generally set from the camp-fire of a careless Indian, or the burning wads from the discharge of a gun were enough to start a blazing, leaping fire which

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moved across the prairie with the speed of the wind, destroying settlers barns, feed, winter range, stacks of hay and many times stock. They tried to protect their range and their homes by plowing around them. Two sets of furrows were plowed two or more rods apart and on a calm day the grass between was burned and this was called a firebreak. A person traveling alone on the prairie always carried a few matches with which to save himself from a prairie fire, it was many times necessary for him to burn a little spot, making a little island on which to stand while the roaring blaze passed him on each side. A number of times the Walkins family saved their lives by sitting down on plowed ground.

When Mr. Walkins went to the mill at Springtown which was seventeen miles away, Mrs. Walkins and the children looked after the stock; it took several days for him to make this trip with his team of oxen and when it was time for him to return, Dora would slip upon the hill and watch across the prairie to catch the first sight of her father.

They very seldom went to town and Dora was sixteen years of age before she ever remembered seeing a train. After her father would return from a trip they all enjoyed hearing

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him tell of his trip. He said that after he arrived at the mill he sat around the store, or office of the livery barn, ate his lunch, and soaked up the heat until closing time, then would take his blankets and go to the hayloft or an empty stall in the livery barn. A few straws could be seen in his hair and country people were often called "hayseeds".

Every town had a blacksmith shop and the frontier blacksmith was no mere cobbler nor makeshift workman; he could make a complete wagon or put spokes in a wheel that had been broken, although most of his work consisted of shoeing horses and oxen and sharpening plows.

Harness-making was another trade and the harness-maker made and repaired harness and shoes. One of the main attractions in a harness shop was a large assortment of buggy whips. Of the luxurious places to go in a prairie town the eating saloon, was outstanding. The countrymen who wanted to enjoy a little luxury went to one of these eating saloons for a meal while in town. Fresh cakes and pies were served, soda pop and ice cream, treats to these poverty-stricken homesteaders.

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Nor was the livery stable without a lively bunch. The office of the barn was a comfortable place for the loafers of the town. A hot stove made it comfortable and enabled travelers to heat bricks or stones for foot warmers, on lonely trips across the cold wind swept prairie.

In the evening the stable man entertained his cronies at checkers or cards. During the summer days horse-shoe pitching was done in the shade of some building.

The liveryman could tell the stranger all about the country; where the most desirable claims were, which trails were best, where to cross the various creeks and rivers, and how to get to an out-of-the way place. A stranger in these towns desiring to make a business trip could secure transportation at the livery barn and these conveyances were called "livery rigs". Fifty miles was considered a full day's work for one of these teams, usually the rate was \$5.00 for a day's drive anywhere within a range of fifty miles. In the little country stores men gathered around the roaring red-stove and with heels high, chewed tobacco, talked religion and politics, whittled, and ate cheese and crackers.

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Many customers came long distances and had to be accommodated for the night; in warm weather they camped out, sleeping under their wagons, but in winter months they sat around the fire visiting until bed time and then spread their blankets on the floor and slept.

Meat was seldom sold in the stores as town dwellers bought their fresh meat at the butcher shop. The butcher secured game from the homesteaders and hunters and butchered beef raised on the ranches and farms. As the towns grew, butchering was done at slaughter-houses on the outskirts of the towns.

It was in 1836 that Dora Watkins was married to Henry Oliver Campbell. She is the mother of ten children. In later years her husband passed away and Mrs. Watkins was married to Lee Roy Miller and today Mrs. Miller is considered one of the oldest pioneers of Oklahoma.