

DALE, ETTA.

INTERVIEW

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

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Anna R. Barry

Field Worker's name _____

This report made on (date) March 22, _____ 1938

1. Name Miss Etta Dale

2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) 505 South Rock Island St.,

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month April Day 29 Year 1872

5. Place of birth Missouri

6. Name of Father John Dale Place of birth Indiana

Other information about father July 1832

7. Name of Mother Syrenah Ann (Tyle Dale Place of birth Kentucky

Other information about mother November 11, 1832

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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Anna R. Barry,
Journalist,
March 22, 1938.

An Interview with Miss Etta Dale,
505 South Rock Island St.,
El Reno, Oklahoma.

We first came to Oklahoma in 1887. My father brought his family into this country before settlement, locating on the border in what is now known as Beaver County. He operated a general store there with the aid of my brother. It was permissible to come into the Territory to live at that time, if one set about it in the proper way, which was to obtain permission from the Government. It was necessary then for individuals desiring to operate any kind of business in the Territory to have a permit from Washington. This, of course, my father had and was allowed to own and conduct his business under government supervision. He could only sell what was allowed in his lease, or contract. His store was listed as a general merchandise store, but certain commodities were forbidden, such as any kind of intoxicants, and at first, he wasn't permitted to sell any firearms or ammunition to the Indians. Later, this ban was lifted.

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My uncle was also with us; he was a doctor and had offices in the building with the Government Agent. He was a semi-official doctor. However, most of his practice was private, although he had scores of patients among the Indians. The latter did not pay their own doctor bills, the Government settled for that. It sometimes took six months or a year to obtain the amount due for treatment. Whenever Uncle would make a call on an Indian family, he would have to have an order from the Agent before he could present his bill. These bills were presented twice each year, through the Agent, and if allowed immediately, Uncle would get his money in August and February. Should the Committee that handled these affairs consider that too much was being paid out for doctoring, his bill was held up until the next meeting, six months later. So you can see he would have to have private practice in order to meet his current expenses.

Father, Uncle and my brother were there several weeks before we girls came down, as they thought it much better for them to precede us and prepare a place for us, than to risk our having to rough it while a house was being constructed. Of course, the four roomed shack they built, looked anything

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but luxurious when we first caught a glimpse of it the afternoon of our arrival. However, we soon found that we had the best house in that community, not only as to appearance, but its size and few little conveniences excelled those of all the others. Brother had built in two closets, a pantry and various shelves.

Previous to our arrival, brother had talked about his four sisters, until many of the cowboys were anticipating our coming, thinking it would augment the local social activity; consequently they planned a dance to be held that evening in a large barn-like structure in the center of the village, as a sort of welcoming party. What they had not guessed was the fact that none of us girls cared for that sort of entertainment. The boys had said nothing to my brother or father about their plans, or they would have been apprised of our tastes and wouldn't have experienced the disappointment and chagrin which was theirs as a result of their impromptu affair. It was necessary for us to drive out from Dodge City, as there was no train or bus to be had from that point. Father met us with a two-seated

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surrey; it was the best obtainable, but even with the robes he brought, the drive proved very tiring and uncomfortably cold. Naturally, we arrived in no mood for anything except rest, food and bed. When the cowboys discovered we had no intention of attending their dance, they were quite disgruntled and proceeded to make known their displeasure in a rather emphatic manner. They had evidently been imbibing a trifle freely of alcoholic beverages and were in a reckless mood, to say the least. They came swooping down upon our house circling round and round it, shooting and whooping in the wildest way imaginable, frightening us half to death. It was an entirely new experience to us girls, and we hastily donned our wrappers and rushed into the "main" room in search of father or brother. We found father sitting in front of the fireplace, very calmly reading his almanac. When we spied him there so placid, we almost gasped in amazement. We couldn't believe our eyes. Surely he couldn't help hearing the commotion outside, yet there he sat reading. "Father"! we cried, "Don't you hear that shooting and wild

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shouting outside? What does it mean? Are we being attacked by the Indians?" He threw back his head and laughed heartily. "Páhaw! Girls," he said, "That's just a few of the cowboys celebrating, and trying to convey the idea to you girls that they don't appreciate the fact that you have failed to make an appearance at their dance given in honor of your arrival". Well, that was the first we knew of the dance, but needless to say, we wouldn't have gone had we known earlier, and after such a display, we would have been afraid to attend. After chatting a while with Father, we returned to our rooms. A few minutes later, all was as quiet as though we were alone in the universe.

I recall another incident during our stay in Beaver County. Of course, it wasn't Beaver County then, but I always think of it as such. There was another groceryman who operated a store just across the street from my brother's business. This man was from Connecticut and did not like anything about this country and didn't understand the ways of the Westerner, nor did he try to acclimate himself to our ways or our land. He was well-educated and cultured in some ways, but certainly lacking in common courtesy with his neighbors.

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Especially did he dislike the cowboys, and never lost an opportunity to make known his distaste of them. Naturally, they very much resented his attitude. Even when they came into his store to purchase an article, he would treat them with hostile civility. It wasn't long before they retaliated in many ways, irritating him in any way they could think of, and their minds were indeed fertile. Eventually, an open eruption occurred and from then on hostilities assumed serious and dangerous proportions. It changed almost over night from a silly and rather ridiculous quarrel, to an open, deadly feud. It progressed to such an extent that when any cowboys were in town, one took his life in his hands if he appeared on the street as shots were apt to fly thick and fast if any of the boys spied the groceryman, or he they. So if one didn't care for the pastime of dodging bullets, he was wise to remain indoors when they were about.

One afternoon when things had been unusually quiet for days, two of my sisters and I, decided to walk down the street two blocks to the post office. When we had traversed half the distance, we heard horsemen and glanced up to see

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a group of cowboys riding down the street. We dodged into the first doorway we came to, and weren't any too soon, for the groceryman had just stepped out of the post office. The groceryman and the cowboys began firing simultaneously and when the shooting ceased, two cowboys and the groceryman were badly wounded, a third cowboy lay in the street dying. It all occurred so quickly as to appear unreal. One moment they were alive, riding blithely down the street, the next; there was death and destruction. My sisters both fainted, and I felt like doing so, but someone had to remain calm and sensible in order to look after them, so it fell to my lot to be the heroine. In a second, one might say, the street was filled with men and women. The wounded were carried into my uncle's office for treatment. After a perfunctory examination of the dead man, Uncle ordered him carried to the rear of father's store, where he was laid out in the store room. His friends built him a plain wooden coffin and in this crude affair he was later interred. No one knew where his people lived, or who they were so no one was notified. There was no minister nearer than Dodge

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City, so father was asked to conduct the funeral services for the dead cowboy. This he did, asking us girls to furnish the singing, and thus was that poor cowboy laid to rest, out on the lonely prairie, no one to mourn his passing, no stone to mark his last resting place.

It soon developed that the groceryman had only a superficial wound, and was able almost immediately to again be out and attend to his usual business. It also soon became apparent that something was brewing among the cowboys. They would gather in groups when in town and hold rather heated discussions among themselves. If some of the town people approached, they would cease talking until that person was out of hearing. It was finally discovered that they were planning to lynch the groceryman who had shot their friend, although they themselves had fired the first shot on that memorable day. Well, when this news was noised about, the citizens saw the issue could no longer be evaded or ignored, but something must be done immediately, so they held a mass meeting and voted to ask my father to act as judge to hold court for the trial of their townsman.

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There was no kind of law and no officers of any kind in the Territory at that time, so the logical thing to do, was to form a court of their own. As father was a much respected man, one whose good judgement and fairness was something acceded by all in the community, he was the choice of cowboys and townspeople alike.

The first thing he did, was to set a day for the trial. Then he impanelled a jury, trying to place only fairminded and just men in that important position. He next issued an order, that no guns or firearms of any kind were to be brought into our store or store room, the latter being used as the court room. When the day of the trial arrived and the crowd began gathering, he appointed two deputies to relieve men of all firearms before allowing them to enter. This was done with quiet dignity and no one objected to the request to deposit their guns outside. The trial lasted one whole day. The jury deliberated all night, handing in their verdict early the next morning. They acquitted the groceryman, their reason being that he had fired in defense of h's own life.

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Although the cowboys had been so hostile before the trial, that it was necessary for the groceryman to take to the hills with his gun, hiding there by day and coming home under cover of darkness for food, after the trial they seemed perfectly satisfied with the jury's decision, and everything quieted down. Once more ours became a quiet sleepy little village.

In 1889 my father came to Fort Reno, and participated in the celebrated "run" of that time. He homesteaded on land south of El Reno, on the highway which is now paved. He lived there until his death, several years ago. I came to this country when father did, and the Fall of '89. I taught my first term of school in Canadian County. It was in a little frame shack built by the people in the neighborhood who raised funds with which to build by giving a concert. Fifty dollars was the total sum of their building fund, but it was sufficient. Each student had to furnish his own desk and seat. Some had pretty good looking ones, some just a dry goods box with a smaller one upon which to sit. I brought a small table and chair from home for my use. The usual term of school lasted three months. At that time we

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built the school, no school district had been laid out. When districts were laid out we found ourselves two miles from where we were supposed to be. The building was moved and I taught there until 1892, when I began my work as teacher in the city schools of El Reno.

The school building at El Reno wasn't completed until December first, so the opening of the school term was delayed until half the winter was over. The first building here consisted of three frame structures, two rooms in each building. We taught in these until the old Irving school was built, when we all moved there except two primary teachers. I was later made Principal of Central School, which position I have since held.

In those early days much was made of every outside event in the community, and school was invariably dismissed for every parade, circus or what have you. The Principal, Mr. Hopkins, had ordered that there were to be no more dismissals for parades, as it broke into our routine too much. Not long after that statement, a circus came to town. Our mayor, Pete Duffy always led the circus parades, and took

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as much delight in it as the kiddies. He was very surprised when he found that we didn't intend to dismiss for the great event. Instead of routing the line of march down Bickford Street, as usual, he led it right down past the school, and when he came abreast of the yard, rode up to my door, opened it and said, "Miss Dale, you are hereby ordered to dismiss school for the day". Naturally, the children didn't wait any further orders from me or anyone, but made a wild stampede for the great open spaces. In the wink of an eyelash, not a child was left in any of the buildings. Mr. Hopkins was very angry, but there was nothing he could do about it. At that time, the head or president of the school board was the city mayor.

In those schools, we also had home-made desks at first then the school board bought double desks and these were used for years. Our first blackboards were only painted black, terrible things, but the best we had. I have been teaching in the El Reno schools steadily since 1892 without a vacation other than the usual summer vacations all teachers have each year. I expect to spend the remainder of my life

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in usefulness and shall teach here as long as I feel I am a benefit to the school. I have greatly enjoyed my work among the children of El Reno, and many of my former pupils have attained success in the world of art, music, business, etc. I am very proud of this offering. Recently El Reno honored me for my forty-nine years of service to the schools of Canadian County, by naming the new Junior High School the "Etta Dale Junior High". A portrait of me was done in oil by a noted artist and hangs in the Junior High Building.



Miss Etta Dale, principal of Central elementary school and an instructor in the El Reno system 45 years, was given a signal honor when the board of education voted to name the new junior high-school building for her. Miss Dale's portrait, painted by the noted French artist, Pierre Tartoue, also will be placed in a corridor of the new structure, now being completed.