

DICKEN, JOHN S.

INTERVIEW

9666

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BIOGRAPHY FORM
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma
DICKEN, JOHN S. INTERVIEW. 9666

Field Worker's name Linnaeus B. Ranck

This report made on (date) January 4, 1938 1938

1. Name John S. Dicken

2. Post Office Address Gage, Oklahoma

3. Residence address (or location) _____

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month March Day 13, Year 1865

5. Place of birth Iowa

6. Name of Father _____ Place of birth _____

Other information about father _____

7. Name of Mother _____ Place of birth _____

Other information about mother _____

Notes or complete narrative by the field worker dealing with the life story of the person interviewed. Refer to Manual for suggested subjects and questions. Continue on blank sheets if necessary and attach firmly this form. Number of sheets attached _____.

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Investigator, Linnaeus B. Ranck,
January 4, 1938

Interview with John S. Dicken
Gage, Oklahoma

I am a native of the state of Iowa. I was in Kansas in the early '80's and came into the Cherokee Strip in '84 as a cow-puncher for the old Comanche Pool cow outfit. This cattle company had its main headquarters over the line in Kansas but had one of the largest ranges in the Cherokee Strip during the years of the Cherokee Strip Livestock Association. The Comanche Pool outfit maintained a continuous camp-like sub-headquarters in the Strip, however. They had several dugouts for the men, supplies, etc., at this camp.

During the years that followed, I worked for various and sundry cattlemen then operating in the Cherokee Strip. I was working on a ranch during the severe winter of '85 and '86 when cattle on the range died by the thousands. Along the fence lines in some places the carcasses lay so thick and numerous that one could walk on them for some distance and never set foot on the ground. Many cattle had their feet frozen off the latter part of that cold

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winter end by spring they would find them hobbling around on the stub-like ends of their legs with the hoofs entirely gone; these cattle, of course, were shot.

Wolves used to be a great menace to the ranchmen in the Strip. These beasts killed lots of cattle and sometimes even horses. The ranchmen detailed men each with a bunch of from ten to twenty wolf hounds to do nothing but ride the ranges trying to kill wolves. As a rule the wolf hunter got the money from the sale of the pelts of the wolves he killed in addition to his monthly pay from the outfit employing him. A good wolf pelt brought about \$5.00 those days. One especially ravaging wolf became known to many Strip ranchmen as "Threetoes." Presumably this wolf had been caught in a trap some time for he had only three toes on one fore foot. The cowboys could track him easily on this account and when more than the usual number of cattle were found to have been killed by wolves it was at once suspected that "Threetoes" was back on the range again. This wolf was larger and more savage than any others, killed more cattle and was such a fierce fighter that he slashed to pieces the average pack of wolf hounds if they pressed their attack on him. Finally a number of cowmen joined and offered a reward of \$500.00 for the killing of the beast.

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Some time during the years before the Strip opened I was trapping for wolves in the rough country northeast of Fort Supply. I found a brown cub bear about one-third grown in one of my traps one day. Not thinking such animals inhabited that region, I left the bear in the trap and rode back to camp to get some of the other cowboys to return with me to make sure of the animal's identity. One of the men removed the young bear from the trap since it appeared so harmless and carried it back to camp with him on his saddle horse. We tied it near camp with a chain and the bear became quite a pet for the men about camp within a short time.

There used to be a wonderful growth of cedar timber throughout the rough country north of Fort Supply extending east nearly to Alva. In some localities the cedars were dense and some of the trees had trunks two feet in diameter. The freighters to Fort Supply during the early days used to cut mammoth loads of these cedars and haul them back to points in Kansas. These freighters also hauled many great loads of bones from the Strip country back to Kansas markets on their return from Fort Supply for a year or more following the hard winter of the middle '80's.

There was never such an ideal cattle country as the

Cherokee Strip. Our saddle-horses used to get so fat on its abundant grasses that they were sometimes unfit for hard or continuous saddle work.

I prepared to run for a claim when the Strip opened. I registered at Kiowa. I made the run from a point on the line south of Hardtner, Kansas. A man named Short, living not far into Kansas, owned a number of race horses and hired these to a large group of men who made the run from the same section of the line as I did. They were intent on staking lots in the town site of Alva and hence hired the race horses to ride in the run. I rode a Montana range horse in the race and was able to keep abreast of most any of the best horses in the run. I crossed the line with the group riding the race horses and was less than a quarter of a mile behind the party when I stopped about seven miles south of the border to stake my claim. I had come into a lovely, valley-like level area and the grass stood as high as the body of my horse, and I thought, "This is good enough for me," so got off and drove my claim stake. I think that the men on good horses had all the advantage in the run and that the land near the line was in greater part

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left for the maimed, the crippled and the women and those on foot. Along the border near Kiowa some one in the waiting line discharged a gun some fifteen minutes before the official signal to advance was given and as a result a small segment of the column nearest the place where the gun was fired broke in a dash off the line and sped away for the interior and the soldiers were unable to stop or return, most of them. @

Within two hours after I staked my claim all the land in the locality surrounding me had been taken. People in wagons and those obliged to travel slowly otherwise trundled on by until nearly night on the day of the opening. Before dark I rode out to call on my near neighbors--four other men who had staked claims adjacent to mine. These neighbors and I agreed we would join in ascertaining the corners and boundary lines of our claims and in case of any dispute resulting that the majority decision should govern in arriving at a settlement. We secured the aid of a man experienced in surveying and started from the Kansas border to run our lines. The Government survey marks were still easily recognizable and we followed them in defining our own boundary lines. The Government survey designated section corners by a mound of sod in the center of four shallow holes dug in the ground,

each one in the corner of the square they formed. A half mile corner was designated by a mound of sod on either side of which was a shallow hole.

A few days after the opening I went to Alva, the nearest land office, to file. I stood in line for hours in a drenching rain with mud and water well up on my boot tops, waiting for my turn to get into the Land Office. The Land Office was in a rough pine board structure and was the only building then in Alva, situated on the very site of the location of Alva's present post office. After I had filed I established my residence on my homestead in a small dugout. I then went back to work on a ranch for a while. In the course of time, however, I began some farming on my claim. Our first crops were Kaffir corn and broomcorn, the latter was the settlers cash crop and the former they used for feed. My first wheat crop I raised in the year 1896 and sold for 30 cents per bushel. I hauled water from a spring about two miles distant for several years until I was able to build a house with a roof suitable to turn the rain into a cistern. Then I made a cistern which supplied water for house purposes so long as the rainfall was sufficient. When the cistern's water supply became exhausted I hauled water from the spring.

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The majority of settlers in our community subsisted in large part for the first few years by going to Kansas to work during the wheat harvesting and threshing season and later for the corn shucking period. The families of the settlers remained at home on their claims.

I was the first man to plant alfalfa in Woods County. In 1896, I bought seed at \$10.00 per bushel and sowed several acres. The neighbors ridiculed the undertaking but it was the most profitable crop I ever raised.