Form A-(S-149)

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

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ELLIOTT, GERTRUDE A. INTERVIEW

Field Worker's name Amelia F. Harris

This report made on (date) April 4th, 1937

1. Name Gertrude A. Elliott.

2. Post Office Address

3. Residence address (or location) 124 West 2nd St.,

4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month Day Year

5. Place of birth Braden, Oklahoma.

Mrs. Elliott is one-sixteenth Choctaw Indian.

6. Name of Father D. Robert Welch Place of birth Alabama

Other information about father Intermarried citizen

7. Name of Mother Phoebe Harris Place of birth Mississippi

Other information about mother One-eight Choctaw Indian.

came to Oklahoma when a baby -- now dead.

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.

Interview with Gertrude A. Elliott.
By - Amelia Harris - Field Worker.

April 21, 1937.

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I was born at Braden , Oklahoma, just a small place seven miles southwest of Fort Smith, Arkansas. Braden was well known as "Gary Lane". Father and our family owned eight hundred and ten acres of fine bottom land, and here our first home was built of native logs. We lived in this place for about three months, or until our nice frame home was finished. Then we used our log house for a tenant house. Father was quite a cattleman, raising cattle,hogs and horses, but he also farmed. He raised lots of cotton, corn, and plenty of feed stuff to feed the cattle in the winter. We had open range at that time; with fine grass and water to fatten stock on in the summer. We lived on our farm about four years, but we were always sick with chills and fever. Father decided to move out of the bottoms so he sold part of his cattle and moved to Poteau. Then he branched out into the general merchandise business and he had three stores, a cotton gin, and a grist mill. These were located as follows; a store at Poteau and Cavanal , the other store, gin, and grist mill at Brazil. The gin and old grist

mill were built on the banks of the Brazil River and operated by water power. The river was quite deep at this point, and just below the bend there was a big wooden wheel with large paddles, similar to the wheels and paddles used on a steam boat. We used to grind meal and chops too. Meal grinding day was usually on Saturday . This was a weekly event. The farmers always selected the nice white corn for meal, shelling it off of the cob, and were very careful to keep out any rotten grain. The near neighbors would swing sacks across their shoulders, and be there early, and others would come horseback, in carts, wagons, surreys and buggies. All waited until the last of the week to go to the mill, each taking his turn, waiting patiently because the mill didn't grind very fast. No one seemed to expect it to, and Father always took a toll for grinding meal and chops. This was about one tenth I think. The cotton gin press was the kind that you tramped down with your feet. I tormented my father many times to let me get in the press and tramp the cotton down. This procedure had a great fascination for me but Father would not allow me to come down to the gin very often.

Brazil was quite a historical place. The Choctaw Council house and whipping post played a big part in its history. The Choctaws came from all parts of the Nation to hold Councils here and mete out their punishment for all crimes. At first the Indians held Council in our school house, a big frame building with a belfry on the front where hung a big bell. Its chimes were a timepiece to most of our neighbors. The first bell rang at eight-thirty A. M. and that was a warning to start to school. The second bell rang at nine for the children to form a line and march in to their seats. Again it rang at recess, and again at one. It rang often but it usually was a welcome sound.

There also was an old ferry boat built across the Brazil River and a charge of from twenty-five to fifty cents was made according to how many persons and what they were driving. The old ferryman lived about one fourth of a mile from the bridge. If he wasn't at the bridge when we wanted to cross we would call "whoopie, whoopie", and he would answer, and we would wait patiently until he came to ferry us across. People didn't seem to be in such a hurry then.

Brazil was a stopping point for the old stage coaches.

They changed horses here as this stage line was from Fort Smith, Arkansas, to the Texas Line, somewhere near Denison. Later, the stage coach was abandoned and the mail was carried on horseback. The carrier had a regular mail pouch divided in the middle, and this was tied securely to the back of the saddle. A pouch hung down from each side of the horse. Ben McCurry was our carrier. He was on the route from Brazil to Poteau for several years.

The whipping post was a big tree located about fifty feet from father's store. They always administered the whipping in public, and there would be hundreds of people gathered around to see the whipping. They would strip the criminal to the waist line, bring his arms around the tree and tie his hands together. They whipped the criminal's back with a black snake whip, as it was called. The number of licks given was according to the offense. The punishment varied from ten to one hundred licks. Their backs would look like a checkerboard and the licks often brought the blood. Sometimes they would faint at the post. The one doing the whipping would wait until the prisoner came to before

starting whipping again. In those times the Indians were tried and sentenced and permitted to go home for a month or two on their honor. They were told to return at a certain date to receive their punishment. We never heard of one failing to be there at the appointed hour.

Around Brazil there were dense woods. This was a good place for petty thieves, and I remember of an instance in which I played a part. Our hired help was always up at the break of dawn, and on this particular morning when the clerk in our store, Howard Martin, went out to the lot there stood two big draft horses. A black, and a dapple grey. Howard told mother about them and she bade him lock them in the stable as we knew all of the horses for miles around. The farmers came from ten to twenty miles to our store and we thought they must be stolen from Fort Smith or that vicinity. About seven o'clock two trampy looking men came to the store and inquired about their horses. Howard said he hadn't seen them, but they loafed around about an hour and then went down in the bottoms. About an hour later they passed by the store driving two wagons. One had a camping outfit, and the other one had a wagon sheet thrown

over something but we couldn't tell what it was. They drove on down for about one-half mile and camped again. Howard always closed the store about seven o'clock, and he ate his meals over home. He slept in the back store room, but that night Howard sat around and talked until ten o'clock. He went back to the store room to go to bed, but when he got to the store there sat these men on the porch, (all stores had front porches in those days). Howard asked them what they wanted, and one said he wanted to buy some sugar and coffee. Howard opened the store, and they went in. The sugar was kept in barrels and this barrel was almost empty. As he stooped over to scoop up the sugar, the men pulled their guns and said;"hands up".. Howard dropped the sugar and up went his hands. One of the men kept the gun on Howard and the other tied his hands behind him. They were there to rob the store, and the first thing they took was tobacco. They packed one of these plug tobacco boxes full, then took a box of groceries. They decided to make Howard help carry these things to camp so they tied his hands in front of him and placed the tobacco box on top. They made two trips this way, but on the third trip back

they decided it was best for one to stay at camp and watch their things. The other took Howard and started back for more things. In the meantime Howard was trying to unloosen the cords and as they got nearly to the store, he succeeded in freeing one hand. He stepped back and made a grab for the man's pistol and yelled for Hunter, our negro who ran the blacksmith shop for us. He slept in a little shack close to the store. In the meantime Howard and the thief were grappling on the ground when Howard grabbed his head and bit him on the nose so he turned Howard loose. Howard grabbed his gun about the time Hunter, the negro, came up. The two of them took him into the store, sat him down in a chair and tied his hands and feet to the chair. Then put a chain through the chair, chaining it to an iron rail that ran around the counter of the store. Howard sent the negro over to notify us what had happened and so we all came over to help guard the prisoner. I was about eleven years old and very excited. I would go to the candy counter and eat, then I would cut off a big slice of cheese, and eat crackers. I kept this up until daybreak. I never ate so much cheese and crackers in my life. Early the next

morning they took him to Fort Smith and turned him over to the officers. On the way over to Fort Smith, as the thief knew he would be sure to go to the pen,

he told Howard when he got out he would come back and grind him up into baloney sausage. He was tried, convicted and sentenced to ten years in prison. The other thief at camp grew suspicious when the one at the store didn't return so he took the wagon with the camping outfit and skipped out. The next day Howard took an officer to where they were camped and found one wagon and all the groceries. They had several shot guns and Winchesters and three saddles. One of the saddles was beautifully hand carved and hand stiched, and had a bridle to match. The officer took everything except the groceries back to Fort Smith. There were some campers about five miles from Brazil in the bottoms who had camped there all winter. The neighbors would miss chickens or meat from their smoke house, even some horses and hogs, and they suspicioned these campers. My stepfather deputized about eight men and they went to where these campers were. They recognized some of the horses tied out in the woods and

knew they were the guilty ones. They rode up to the camp to arrest them, but they resisted, and started shooting. The officers dodged behind trees and returned fire. Dad was behind a big tree and he peeped around to get aim when a bullet whizzed by grazing the end of his nose. It took part of the bridge of his nose out too. When it healed up the end of his nose dropped down some. They seriously shot one camper, killed one, captured two, as there were four of them. They took the prisoners and wounded men to Fort Smith and turned them over to the officers.

The first school I attended was at Cameron. I boarded with Captain Reynolds, a relative. Their home was called Reynold's Castle, and was built out of rock and stone, like a castle on the side of a mountain. It was beautiful but I will not try to describe it, for I wouldn't do it justice. The yard was terraced two or three times up this mountainside and was gorgeous. Lovely flowers and shrubbery, Magnolia trees, Cape jasmine all grew here. Much money was spent on their yard with a winding road built from the iron gates to the carriage house. There was a winding road around the mountain that led to the "Presbyterian Institute", as it was called. This was a day school,

and here is where I went to school for two terms. The next two years I went to Tuskahoma. Peter Hudson, a Choctaw Indian, was in charge of the school. Then I spent two years in Central Baptist College at Conway, Arkansas. Two years were spent at Williams Woods College in Fulton, Missouri.

Our entertainment was nothing out of the ordinary. We had community singing, church suppers, spelling bees, or country dances. We didn't think ~~of driving~~ anything ten or twelves miles to a dance. Then we went to Indian crys which were held at a cemetery and always in the summer. This was a very sacred affair with the full blood Indians and they would come prepared to stay four or five days. They camped out and would bring their mortars and pestles. This mortar was made from a hickory log about three feet high and with a hole hollowed out about eighteen inches deep and twelve inches across in the center. This is where they put the corn to be beaten. The pestle was about thirty inches long including the handle, and the pestle part was from eight to ten inches long and about five or six inches across at the bottom. The mortar and pestle were round.

After beating the husks off of the corn they would boil the corn in a big iron pot with hog meat. They had a rock oven similar to what is now built in the camping parks. They cooked Sofka bread and Ba-ka-ha bread. This is scalded meal, cooked red beans and rolled up in a shuck and boiled. They had plain shuck bread also and many other Indian dishes. This would all be ready to serve after the cries. These Cries were opened by prayer, then they would have an Indian preacher who would preach in Choctaw and someone to interpret the sermon into English as many mixed blood and whites attended as well as the full-bloods. After the preaching they would go out to the graveyard, pull their shawls over their heads, get down on their knees, and moan and wail. It sounded so weird that it was frightening but they actually cried real tears. After the cry was over for that day they would have a big feast. Everyday they would pray and preach and cry over another grave.

When I was seventeen years old I married Turner Elliott from Lutie. We went there to live in the small coal mining district. The coal mines were owned and operated by the Hailey Oklahoma Coal Company. This was in 1898. This was a hilly place, and the homes were built

on the hillsides. The main road to Wilburton ran by these hills and the stores were built along this road. One of our neighbors was "Bandit Starr", whose real name was supposed to be Reed. He was the son of Belle Starr who lived on the border of Oklahoma and Arkansas. She rarely ever came to visit her son, but when she did she always rode a fine horse. She rode sideways in a side saddle. Young Starr and family were peaceable neighbors but folks say he had a colorful career in stealing, killing and carousing around. He never did this in Hailey and he seemed quiet enough there.

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