

RANCK, LINNAEUS B.

PERSONAL REMINISCENCES.

8323

438

LEGEND & STORY FORM
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma

RANCK, LINNAEUS B. PERSONAL REMINISCENCES 8323

Field worker's name Linnaeus B. Ranck

This report made on (date) August 19 1937

1. This ^{story} legend was secured from (name) Self

Address Gage, Oklahoma

This person is (male or female) ~~or female~~ White, Moore, Indian,

If Indian, give tribe _____

2. Origin and history of legend or story Personal Reminiscences

3. Write out the legend or story as completely as possible. Use blank sheets and attach firmly to this form. Number of sheets attached 15

RANCK, LINNAEUS B.

PERSONAL REMINISCENCES

8323

Linnaeus B. Ranck,
Interviewer,
August 18, 1937.

An Early Day Country School of western
Woodward County.

I question much whether at any period in pioneer Oklahoma history were rural school facilities more limited and primitive than they were in Northwestern Oklahoma Territory during the first few years immediately following the turn of the century. In the northern part of what is now Ellis County my father homesteaded in 1901; it was then Woodward County. By 1902 or '03 this section had attracted numerous "settlers"; the majority of whom had families and in most of these families there were one or more children of school age. It necessarily followed that to establish some sort of an organized school for these pioneer youngsters ^{would} solve another of the multiplied problems confronting and surrounding these "nesters". My father's "claim" was situated eight miles north and two miles west of Gage which at this period was but a sprawling, diminutive "cow-town" of some forty souls, in the sage brush and sand hills adjacent to the Santa Fe Railroad right-of-way. If I am not mistaken an ordinary box-car served for a depot in Gage then.

RANCK, LINNAEUS B. PERSONAL REMINISCENCES 8323

- 2 -

To the west of my father's homestead just about two miles and about half this distance north, a rather decrepit and elderly gentleman who became known to the "settlement" as "Uncle" Phil Guntrip, had ventured from the state of "Indianer" and filed on a "free home." Beyond great doubt the hardships and privations of this new and undeveloped country were too tough for "Uncle Phil and he yearned for his old home and friends. Of course, he "established residence" on his "claim" and stayed in the community for awhile but not much longer than was necessary to "prove-up". As a matter of fact during this "proving up" period "Uncle" Phil gave Indiana the benefit of his presence as many months out of the calendar year as the Homestead laws permitted and it is possible, at least, that he "stole" some time on the United States Government as was done by a few "settlers" in the process of "holding down a claim". "Uncle" Phil's "claim" residence indeed was crude, primitive and uncomfortable, no more so, however, than were the abodes of some other homesteaders of these parts at that period. "Uncle" Phil merely dug down and into the west bank of a comparatively shallow ravine,

- 3 -

on his claim to construct a dwelling place. This excavation, as best my recollection of it serves me, was about twelve by fourteen feet horizontally and about six feet vertically at its greatest depth. In the northeast corner, facing the east and the morning sunlight, he arranged for an entrance and exit to this dugout. A small cottonwood log, extending lengthwise of this "hole", from the top wall of either end bank, served as a "ridge-pole", and resting upon this timber lengthwise, of the center and upon the north and south banks respectively, he carefully placed a thick layer of willow limbs and brush and upon these a very thick layer of native sod. Thus was fashioned a roof for "Uncle" Phil's claim abode. Did this "den" have a window?

No! The door in the east end was constructed of rough pine boards and swung on improvised old leather hinges and afforded the only light for the dugout during the daylight hours. Once in this dugout you were surrounded by bare, native, Mother earth. Beneath, and next to your feet, was the bare ground and immediately overhead you were "protected" by a combination of native timber and native sod.

RANCK, LINNAEUS B. PERSONAL REMINISCENCES 8623

- 4 -

During one of "Uncle" Phil's absences, not later than the spring of 1903, the settlers of the community having children of school age, arranged for a two months' term of school for their children and selected and secured "Uncle" Phil Guntrip's dugout for the school to be held in.

About two miles north of ~~this~~ location- in a dugout top-dwelt a scholarly young man from far away New York State who had homesteaded in this new prairie country. By name he was J. E. Feigel, and, a polished, gallant and educated young fellow this man Feigel was. Too, he was a veteran of the then late Spanish American War of robust and erect physique. The settlers soon "spotted" young Feigel as one resident of the country decidedly best qualified for the position of schoolmaster they had to offer him. With Mr. Feigel's consent they employed him, though the exact terms of his tenure as our teacher I do not fully remember and I have found it impossible to learn. I have a faint recollection that his monthly stipend approximated \$20.00. Professor Feigel took his chair in this pioneer school which was one of the first established in this entire section and there gathered around, within "Uncle" Phil's dugout, a motley

RANCK, LINNAEUS B. PERSONAL REMINISCENCES 8323

- 5 -

group of hardy pioneer boys and girls. A few of them, I distinctly remember, were nearly grown; for example there was Bob Cox, a wiry, stalwart youth and Tommy Yarnold was another boy well up in his 'teens, who attended this first settlement school. A nearly grown girl in the group was Ethel Whipple, the daughter of Jim Whipple, an ex-cowpuncher of the old west. Another one of Professor Feigel's nearly grown scholars in this school was widow Holmes' daughter whose given name I do not remember. The exact total of the number of children attending this school in "Uncle" Phil's claim residence I do not remember but I can estimate by the number of "settler-families" represented: there were the Rancks, the Whites, the Funks and the Yarnolds, the Blacks, Taylors, Coxes, Holmes, Holcombs, Whip Ies, Crouses and probably others I have entirely forgotten. Most certainly there were thirty pupils in the group under the careful and efficient instruction of schoolmaster Feigel. Is it possible for people of the present period, knowing only our more modern schools, to imagine approximately thirty people huddling together in this dark,

RANK, LINNAEUS B. PERSONAL REMINISCENCES. 8323

- 6 -

dingy mouldy hole in a ravine bank not over twelve feet wide and fourteen long? My answer, as one who attended it, day in and day out, is only that we did and we really had school. Everybody walked to this school. And from the four corners of this early-day community trod the settlers' children to this primitive assembly. For a few it was a distance of three miles. There were no roads from our respective homes thence, just an occasional cow-path or trail that for a greater or lesser distance lead in the general direction of our course to and from school.

There existed real hazards for the children along the way over the rolling and bare prairie country. There were wandering or strange range cattle for us to reckon with and these "critters" were wild as antelopes and sometimes ferocious. The country was literally infested with rattlesnakes, too, and how well I remember my childish and mortal fear of these venomous reptiles. Strict caution and diligent alertness on our part, however, were fairly practical

RANCK, LINNAEUS B. PERSONAL REMINISCENCES 8323

- 7 -

Whenever we observed them on our course to and from school we never failed to avoid them by as great a distance as possible. In this dugout school we had only pine store-boxes, crude stools or chairs to sit on, which were placed within its confines quite without regard to orderly arrangement. Some of the pupils even sat on the ground floor. As to books- we had a few and they were used by this motley group of pupils much in common when it appeared that our mutual school interests were thus best served. But taking them collectively they were as divergent as to authorship and kind otherwise as possibly could have been true under the circumstances. Included in the total collection were the adopted texts of Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Illinois, etc. Some had no books of any kind and books for a complete course in the intermediate or higher grades were available in not a single instance do I believe. Yet, we had school and absorbed considerable book knowledge. Those screechy slates, unknown in our modern schools, were then in common school use; we had a few of them and used them, for tablet paper and lead pencils

- 8 -

few books and school supplies is more or less of a question in my mind to this very day: We must have intermittently tossed them to the ground floor, sat on them, etc. In this particular respect I vividly remember that Mr. Feigel kept his meager supply in a rather large knapsack suspended from the rear end of the dugout ridge-pole. The professor had a substantial oak dining chair from which when he was seated he dispensed knowledge and reigned supremely but diplomatically over his class-room.

There were cold days, too, during the fore part of this eventful term of early day school. Therefore, some patron donated a "monkey" stove for the dugout. Obtaining fuel for it was a simple and easy task for us since the prairie around about was with the most usual and common fuel of the settlement during that period. Suffice is to say that few people of today except early settlers know what "cow-chips" were; and this product of the native prairie grass and the range cattle combined, constituted exclusively our fuel supply for the school stove. The children from every family

- 9 -

represented in the school were requested by Professor Feigel to bring a "gunnysack" or two; and whenever necessary, whether it be before class work began in the morning, at recess, the dinner hour or any intermission period, it was the policy and the rule for the scholars to take their sacks and fill them with "cow-chips" picked up from the abundant supply over the prairie surrounding "Uncle" Phil's claim home and sometimes this chore was fun; even the professor gave us a helping hand occasionally.

There are risks and hazards, I guess, connected with most every undertaking- even so was this true in gathering cow-chips to keep our school room comfortably warm on cold days. There were two distinct grades or classes of cow-chips and for the inexperienced person to distinguish between the two different grades was not so easily and quickly learned. Like whiskey, cow-chips improve with age: however, they can become so aged that they disintegrate and become natural fertilizer. As a matter of fact, it was more or less a personal accomplishment to become a good judge of cow-chips

RANCK, LINNAEUS B. PERSONAL REMINISCENCES 8323

- 10 -

during those pioneer days. We had two grades of this abundant supply of stove fuel, the "green" chips and the matured chips. When gathering them it was imperative not to pick up too green a chip. But as a rule children learn and develop judgement along certain lines about as readily as do adults and consequently the curriculum in this school included some training, possibly, in the art of judging cow-chips. A cow-chip properly matured, though of a fibrous composition, was, nevertheless, quite solid and we children used them freely to throw at the many gopher, plovers, horned toads etc., and sometimes even at each other. Another hazard in picking up cow-chips was that often underneath this "prairie fuel", lurked the mammoth and poisonous black fuzzy covered species of spider, better known as tarantula. Also the scorpion and centipede lay hidden underneath many cow-chips which evidently was a favored and natural habitat for them.

Most of our supply of drinking water at this school we carried from home. I remember of Mr. Feigel occasionally

RANCK, LINNAEUS B. PERSONAL REMINISCENCES 8323

- 11 -

detailing a couple of the older boys to go for a bucket of water. To just which settler's well they went and the distance it was from the school site, I do not remember, though I do recollect that away on such a detail they were absent for a long period of the school day. Incidentally, few of the people in those days had water wells, and well digging during that period was the sole and only occupation of some men, usually the single fellows for it was extremely hazardous work. A well digger worked for 25 cents per foot of the depth of the well he dug.

Vividly do I remember some of the greater discomforts of attending this early day school. Our crude, improvised seats were wearisome and fatiguing. ~~Sufficient light was~~ uniformly lacking, and in case of a hard rain that dugout roof would leak and what a mess much leaking would necessarily cause inside. To break monotonous spells the boys, especially, (most of the children went barefooted) would "root" up the ground floor, more or less, with their toes and the more persistent of those engaging in this pastime kept their toenails worn off to the quick. Too, we had too many unwelcome

RANCK, LINNAEUS B. PERSONAL REMINISCENCES 8323

- 12 -

visitors, usually appearing suddenly, such as bullsnakes, toads, scorpions, centipedes and lizards. Many was the time that one or more of these pests were observed crawling about the crevices in the walls and the roof. The timbers making up a part of the roof was just the place for a five or six foot bullsnake to entwine and unexpectedly glide out along the ridge-pole or the top edges of the side walls. Such a place as this dugout was a good hideout for mice and rats and anyone familiar with the habits of a bullsnake, as the writer is, knows that a mouse or rat is a delectable morsel to one of these slithering serpents. Occasionally, however, a cowpuncher would ride by and pay us a very welcome interesting visit.

Oddly enough a deaf and dumb boy, one Ollie Cox, attended this school. He was an oddity to me but an intensely interesting fellow, as I remember, up in his teens. How earnestly this good and intelligent man Feigel, endeavored to instruct Ollie Cox through the medium of the deaf and dumb alphabet and language. How and when Professor Feigel

RANCH, LINNAEUS B. PERSONAL REMINISCENCES 8323

- 13 -

happened to learn this medium, I do not know, but I do remember well that he had sufficiently mastered it to communicate readily and freely with Ollie.

Nothing remains of this unique pioneer school site but a faint impression in the ravine bank where it used to be. "Uncle" Phil Guntrip long since departed this life. Professor Feigel is still living, at present in the State of Arkansas. This old school site is ^a memorable landmark to me. Mr. Feigel was a man of sterling qualities, a man among men; a splendid, thorough and earnest teacher.

The manner and spirit in which he undertook and carried through this first term of rural school held in western Woodward County, Oklahoma Territory, under unthinkable handicaps, adversities and trials, should be ever lasting and monumental testimony to his high intellect, noble character and superior degree of fortitude. It seems fitting that this historical narrative should not close without mentioning those who attended this eventful term of school and whom I know still to be living and to give their present location.

- 14 -

Their names and their present locations follow. Bob White now resides in Pampa, Texas. Olive Feigel, whose maiden name was Holcomb and who later married a brother of Professor Feigel's, is now living in Shattuck. Roy and Jim Whipple, Jr., I think still live in Laverne. Bill Funk at present is near Waynoka, and his sister, Selma Funk, is a resident of Gage at this time. Some of the Taylors live near and in Laverne. My living sister who attended this school and who, years later, taught in the Oklahoma City schools many years, is now Mrs. F. W. Diacon living in Oklahoma City. A brother of mine, William A. Ranck, is a Captain in the United States Army and at present located at Fort Logan, Colorado. Tommy Yarnold is a merchant at Gem City, Texas. His sister Zula Adams, now lives on a farm with her husband in the northwestern part of this county. The legal description of this old school site's location is about midway of and near the north line of the south $\frac{1}{2}$ of the north east $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 26, Township 23, Range 25, Ellis

RANCK, LINNAEUS B. PERSONAL REMINISCENCES 8323

- 15 -

County. And for sheer primitiveness I venture the
emphatic declaration that it was not excelled anywhere
within the Territory which later became the state of
Oklahoma.