

NEWMAN, CORNELIA.

INTERVIEW

9859

383

BIOGRAPHY FORM
WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION
Indian-Pioneer History Project for Oklahoma
NEWMAN, CORNELIA. INTERVIEW.

384

9859

Field Worker's name Anna R. BarryThis report made on (date) January 18, 19381. Name Mrs. Cornelia Newman2. Post Office Address El Reno, Oklahoma.3. Residence address (or location) 146 North Shepherd Street.4. DATE OF BIRTH: Month November Day 24 Year 18705. Place of birth Pike County, Illinois.6. Name of Father William Mauk Place of birth Virginia7. Name of Mother Eliza Dunham Mauk Place of birth West Virginia.

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 _____

Anna R. Barry,
Journalist,
January 18, 1938.

Interview with Mrs. Cornelia Newman,
146 North Shepherd Street,
El Reno, Oklahoma.

I was born near New Salem, Illinois, on November 24, 1870, the daughter of William Mauk and Eliza Dunham Mauk. When I was very small my parents moved to the state of Nebraska. Then when I was seven years of age my family moved to Iowa, locating on a farm about fourteen miles southwest of Council Bluff. In 1878 my father died, but Mother continued to live on the farm, an older brother doing the work on the farm.

I attended a small rural school called "Pointer", located two miles from my home. At this school considerable bad feeling was aroused in the neighborhood over the exact location of this little school of learning. Five or six men had worked one-half day on a small log house when another citizen asked them to move it one-half mile farther west. They agreed to accommodate their neighbor and started working again in the new location. Another neighbor then requested them to move it one-half mile

farther west so it would be close to his place. They moved to accommodate him. This process was continued until they moved four times and were two miles away from the original location. For this little school, each man furnished so many logs of a given length. Various settlers donated money for the necessary lumber and hardware. The children furnished their own books and what a motley array of books for the cultivation of knowledge! The parents brought the old texts from their former homes and often in a class would be three or four different kinds of readers or Arithmetics. This little school was the only school I ever attended.

On August 28, 1888, I was married to Arthur H. Newman and in 1890 my husband came to the Indian Territory and located on a claim his father had purchased near the little town of Richland in Canadian County.

It was not until the Summer of 1891 that I came out by rail with several other relatives. Before we left our home in Iowa, farewell parties were given, presents exchanged, homes broken up, and large hampers of food made ready for several days journey. Many wakeful heads were

pillowed life on Tuesday to rise early on Wednesday. Accompanied by loved ones, those departing gathered at the station in Council Bluff on that hot summer day to say a last goodbye. We were leaving behind those whom we could scarcely hope to see again, an aged father and mother, brothers, and sisters. The good-byes and God-bless-yous were repeated again and again. The train rolled into the station; there was a last clasping of hands and hurried farewells and as the train puffed out there was a flurry of tear-stained handkerchiefs. Swiftly the iron horse drew us farther and farther away from familiar scenes. We busied ourselves stowing away luggage and dinner baskets and arranging everything for a comfortable journey. This task finished, everyone began getting acquainted for all were bound together to share the same toil and hardships as well as the pleasures and prosperity of the new home in the land of opportunity.

After a long tiresome journey we arrived at the lonely little station of El Reno. We came by the way of Enid and on down to Okarche, and when I arrived I found to my surprise, that our only home was a half dugout - a room dug in the side of a hill. A few rails or posts had been used to make a door

NEWMAN, CORNELIA. . . INTERVIEW.

9859

4

frame and a window. The door, of course, opened out into the ravine. The front wall was made of logs; a roof sloping back onto the hill was made of poles and logs covered over with brush, a layer of prairie grass thick enough to hold dirt, and finally a layer of dirt over the grass. A few days after I arrived a heavy rain came and drove us from our home. It was necessary to dig a trench from the house, so as to carry the water off the floor. This little house had one small window which permitted little light and air for ventilation. It was a difficult matter to keep this little house clean. The dirt and straw kept dropping on everything in the house and when the roof was well soaked, its weight was immense. The heavy rafters sank deeper and deeper into the soggy walls until it was necessary to place heavy posts in the house to support the roof to prevent an accident. These were a great nuisance because they took up so much room.

At the time of leaving the old home in Iowa, the romantic spirit and the air of adventure obscured the unpleasant thoughts of the hardships I was to face, and it was only

when I got my first view of this dugout and realized that such a hole in the ground was to be my home that I realized the utter loneliness and drab realities of my future life. It did seem so good to see a woman coming to spend the day! But the good housekeeper who had been used to a good house never felt at home in a hole in the ground. Even those who had the good fortune to live in frame houses in the prairie towns had their trials. The gritty dust sifted into the house filling men's beards and women's hair. A newly washed window was almost as dirty within a days time as before it had been washed.

The hard water with no devices for softening it, hardened and roughened the skin and left the clothes in bad condition. Every time it looked as though it might rain, I set about to supply myself with wash water by strewing tubs, dishpans and other available vessels under the eaves. The wind usually scattered these in every direction. A little later, rain water from the roof was used and was carried to the barrel by means of a trough. Swarms of hungry flies buzzed through the house as there were no screens and the insects drowned in the food, annoyed the diner, and awoke

the children at such an early hour that they remained cross throughout the day. A smudge was built regularly each evening to scare the insects away and make sleep possible. Many times I wondered whether this country would ever become worth-while and whether my children would ever have an opportunity in life.

It was easy enough for a person to get lost on the prairie at night under any circumstances, but it was doubly easy on a burned-over prairie or during a storm. When out on the prairie on a dark night people lost all sense of direction and could scarcely believe their own eyes when they came to a familiar scene. A certain kind of panic seemed to seize individuals which so completely bewildered them that they did not know their own residences when in sight. It was not uncommon for a person endeavoring to walk in a straight line, when lost on the prairie to travel in circles unbeknown to himself. The hardships drew the settlers together and a kindly feeling existed among them. All were on a common level and felt their dependence.

One of the greatest terrors was the prairie fire.

The greatest danger from these fires occurred in the Autumn when the grass was dry and seared. The campfire of a careless traveler, a streak of lightning, or sparks from a steam boiler were enough to start a blazing, leaping fire which moved across the prairie with the speed of the wind, destroying settlers' barns, feed, winter range, stacks of hay and feed. During these early years a person traveling alone on the prairie always carried a few matches with which to save himself from a prairie fire. It was only necessary for him to burn a little spot making an island on which to stand while the roaring blaze passed on each side.

The settlers attempted to protect their range and their homes by plowing around them. Two sets of furrows were usually plowed, two or more rods apart, and on a calm day the grass between was burned. This was called a fire-break. Occasionally fires were started in this way by some careless person letting the fire get beyond control. These fire-guards caused no end of trouble among the settlers; often they were used for boundary lines. Some of the settlers forbade persons to cross their fire-guards,

and the more timid were forced to go miles out of their way in traveling across the country. For hours after a prairie fire the black ashes blew; the black dust blew through the cracks into the house until the clothing and bedding and many times even the peoples' faces were smudged.

The life of the women was much more tedious than that of the men during these early years. The men seemed to have a jolly time as their exchange of work took them from farm to farm or on trips to the distant towns, but women were tied down to their homes by the tiny children and the lack of adequate means of travel. Much of their time was spent alone in surroundings that compared very unfavorably with the old home.

We regulated our work by the sun as closely as possible so that we might get along with a minimum of artificial light. This was possible during the summer, but the winter with its long evenings made lights necessary. In the homes of the more prosperous, kerosene lamps were used but my husband's mother made home-made candles.

There were two common methods of making candles.

If there was no candle mold available, she used the dipping process. The wicks, consisting of twisted string, were dipped into a kettle of hot tallow. When withdrawn a certain amount of tallow stuck to the wick and hardened quickly in the cool air. After this became solid it was dipped again. This process was continued until the wick had accumulated layer after layer of tallow and formed a regular sized candle. In the second method, a candle consisting of a dozen tubes was filled with tallow. Wicks were drawn in the center of the tubes and hot tallow was poured into them. When the tallow was hardened, the mold was dipped into hot water for a moment and the candles slipped out readily. This was a great improvement over dipping and the candle molds were lent often. The tallow for candles was secured from deer in the earlier times, and from beeves in later years. The kerosene lamp, a great improvement over the candles, brought an endless round of cleaning sooty lamp chimneys and filling smelly kerosene lamps.

When we had company in our little cabin it meant to take part of the meager furnishings out of doors before

there was room enough to set the table.

In 1893 we built a little two-room house to live in. My husband and I are the parents of six children, the three oldest of whom live in Oklahoma, while our three youngest make their home in California.

In 1917 we moved to El Reno and own our little home on Shepherd Street.