

[Mrs. J. W. Britt]

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FOLKSTUFF - SKETCH

Mrs/ C/M. Cohea

Amarillo, Texas

Pioneer Women, Experiences

Wordage:

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Potter County

District 16

200

Interview with Mrs. J. W. Britt, 809 Jackson, March 2, 1938.

Mrs. J. W. Britt, who in June, 1938, will have been in the Panhandle 49 years, was is the daughter of pioneer Tennessee parents. In the wooded regions of Middle Tennessee she watched the clearing of the soil for cultivation, the cutting down of trees, the removal of the stumps, and the hauling away of [?] debris. In her singularly mature childish mind she wondered if [there?] were not fertile acres waiting somewhere for someone to come and take them where this back-breaking, heart-sickening toil would be unnecessary. Still, pioneer life held its glamour for her and she sighed for a frontier of her own to conquer,

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little dreaming at the time that she would pioneer the last frontier of her country, the Panhandle plains.

With her parents she came to Ustin Austin, where she spent [?] six years before coming as a wife to the high plains of Northwest Texas.

When Mrs. Britt arrived in Amarillo at midnight one hot summer night, she was met by her husband, who was boarding in the young cow town while he plied his trade of tinner in the town and over the entire Panhandle.

The next morning Mr. Britt took his wife and their small son, Harry, now a solid and respected citizen of Amarillo, out to their new home on a section of land about two or three miles southeast of town, south of the present site of Elano cemetery.

Mrs. Britt [entered?] the pine lumber and corrugated tin-roofed shack of one room, 32 feet by 14, with the nostalgic misgivings of the housewife accustomed to finer things, but she gave no sign. This was her home. Her husband and her son were with her. That circumstance counted for more than fine furniture and painted walls.

With the instinct of the born housewife to make a home in mansion or shack, she set about arranging her household. There were not enough corners in which to put the few articles of furniture that she had. 2 Boxes which had contained five-gallon tins of gasoline were camouflaged as kitchen cabinet, shelves, tables, and what-not. The simple pins table was [?] surrounded with pretty hangings to hide stowaways, articles not needed and put away from unsightly prominence. Sleeping and eating, everything was done in the one room. But she soon changed all that. Taking her husband's strong wagon sheet, Mrs. Britt doubled the vast canvas and tacked the material to the ceiling and one side wall of the room, leaving the other side free to be used as a doorway. With an ingrain carpet on the living room floor and crisp crisps, fresh draperies at the windows, the bare walls began to look like home.

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When her husband came home from his work that evening, Mrs. Britt stood with tired, but flushed , and but happy cheeks against the background of a miraculously transplanted home and saw the look of wonder and pride that came over his face as he saw the difference made by a few deft touches of a woman's hand - his woman, his wife. The wagon sheet fell into place just then and shut out the envious world as he gave her a great bear-like, appreciative, home-hungry, heart-hungry hug.

Mrs. Britt, who brought the first geraniums to the plains country, placed the potted plants in time of assorted shapes and sizes upon a wooden frame [constructed?] by her son, Harry. The cheerful flowers brightened still further the little home and the life within its walls.

But only for that first summer did she have to raise her little family in the dreadfully hot tin-roofed building, for soon a half-dugout reared its head proudly beside the prairie shack. Several rooms [???] gave a greater freedom and enjoyment of home duties and home pleasures.

Behind that pioneer home lies an interesting story, which can be read in the files of the Texas land office and the court records in Amarillo. When Mr. Britt applied for a land patent after filing on the section of land later occupied by the little home, he was informed that another man had filed on the same section. The land office refused to issue a patent to the land until the two claimants had settled the question of priority between themselves.

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The other contestant for the homestead was a man from Claude. Mr. Britt consulted his lawyer and the latter reminded him that possession was still nine points of the law. According , Mr. Britt gathered up lumber and some tin for roofing and went out to the site and started building a one-room shack to substantiate his claim. He had scarcely begun

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when he saw a strange sight which evolved into a wagon, a surrey, some lumber, and his rival coming across the plains with the same thought in view.

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Mr. Britt greeted the new comer pleasantly. There was no animosity between them. That night a terrific rainstorm came up. Mr. Britt, in the comparative comfort of his new home, which he had completed sufficiently for shelter, he alked walked over to the other claimant and invited him to share the refuge with him. With no other thought than that of common [hospitality?], he made his quest welcome and comfortable.

Later, when the case to try title to the land came up in court, Mr. Britt's lawyer, interrogating the second claimant, asked, "Did you stay all night on the land that first night in your home or in the house of Mr. Britt?"

The honest contender for the homestead rights had to answer that he had taken shelter in the home of his rival. That point cinched the case for Mr. Britt. The homestead was declared his. [??] on the plains south of the section upon which the Britt home stood, many thousands of cattle from south Texas remained for weeks while they were under quarantine, forbidden to progress farther until they were disease free. Cow chips, dried to a crisp in the strong sunshine of the Panhandle, was sometimes gathered to be used on summer days to make a hot, quick fire. Mrs. Britt called the strange fuel very appropriately, "surface coal". However, she used coal and gasoline for her stoves for the most part. Many early settlers were glad to have herds "bed down" [?] or stay near their homes to harvest a supply of this "prairie hay". Before the railroads came, bringing coal conveniently near, fuel was scarce on the plains. Buffalo chips and cow chips were cheap and easily obtainable.

Sometimes trail herds were held for weeks at a time near the Britt homestead. Mrs. Britt had [occasion?] to learn the generous and considerate nature of the cowboys who tended the cattle. She found that they were not the dreadful creatures of whom she had heard

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so many tales “back there” in Tennessee, That they were gentlemanly, courteous, and respectful of womanhood. Frequently they would come up to the house with a quarter of beef which they had killed. Mrs. Britt has many kindly memories of those “knights who came riding”.

Mrs. Britt, unlike many of the first pioneer women, had near neighbors from the very first, some living from one to two and three miles away. One of these neighbors, a very sweet woman from Iowa, could not seem to overcome her nostalgia for the trees and greater vegetation “back home”. She complained to her neighbor, Mrs. Britt, that her young son had no tree under which to play. However, she became reconciled to the plains in time and learned to love them, as does everyone who comes and stays for any length of time.

Neighbors in those days were “closer” than they are today, in spite of the long distances between neighbor and neighbor. At Christmas and other holiday periods they all gathered at the home of one or the other of a group, like relatives in other places and times. And they had great fun and pleasure together. And they They had good things to eat, also. Those persons who have the mistaken idea that the pioneers of the plains set scant tables would [????] drool at the mention of juicy buffalo steaks, antelope meat cooked as only a plains housewife or range cook could prepare it, wild turkey, done to a turn, broiled quail or plover, and prairie chicken, which their predecessors enjoyed. Vegetables were supplied from gardens or from tins. Canyons and river breaks provided wild grapes and plums and a few wild currants for jellies, preserves, and pies. No, those days were not all hardships, far from it. Mrs. Britt agrees with other pioneer women that those years were the happiest and best of her life.

One of the greatest pleasures enjoyed by friends and neighbors [??] together was an occasional outing trip to the Palo Duro Canyon, during which they would remain for several days or weeks, reveling in the beauty of the scenery, gathering fruit, and indulging in the usual pleasures of the camp. Mrs. Britt, who recalls that fifty years have wrought great

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changes in the erratic course of the Palo Duro gorge, stood amazed at the picturesque panorama which spread into the distance on her first sight of the canyon.

It was on this initial visit to the Palo Duro Canyon that Mrs. Britt, upon seeing the peculiar natural formation now known as the "Devil's Kitchen", exclaimed, "[Why?] that must be the Devil's Kitchen!"

Another member of the party, [?????] pointing to a stray piece of cloth, shouted laughingly, "And here is a part of his wife's dress".

To [????] Mrs, Britt's knowledge, the canyon feature had not been named before this time. Ever afterward it was spoken of as the Devil's Kitchen.

Mrs. Britt lived on the homestead near the outskirts of Amarillo during the early days when the citizens were moving from Old Town. She recalls one of the devices used by the promoters of the new townsite of Amarillo to get the people to settle on their land. Passenger trains coming into Amarillo on the Denver tracks passed a siding near the new site. To induce travelers who were prospective settlers to stop in the new location, some one was prompted to announce "Amarillo" at the siding pause. thus Thus many unsuspecting persons got off at that point , thinking they were in the real town. This scheme also brought guests to the Amarillo Hotel on the Sanborn acreage.

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Mrs. Britt was living in Amarillo when several hundred head of wild cattle, shipped in on the Fort Worth and Denver, broke through the ice on Amarillo Lake near the tracks and drowned because they were unable to move themselves due to their weakened condition and the coating of ice. Their owners salvaged only the hides, which were taken from the dead animals by kindly neighbors.

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At the time Amarillo was the largest cattle shipping point in the world. Thousands of cattle were held at the prairie west of the town , awaiting shipment from the stockyards located on the site of the present zinc smelter of the American Refining Company.

Mrs. Britt remembers riding in the first passenger trains on the old Pecos Valley line to Canyon, and points southwest. The passenger trains were frieghts freights with travelers riding in the caboose. She was delighted to [be?] permitted to ride in the tower, or lookout of the caboose, which she had heretofore thought of as the throne room of the impressive “conductor” of the train.

Sue also recalls a humorous story about the railroad which was long in coming to Canyon. A Mr. Conner, pioneer ranchers of the region, was most hopeful of the railroad's coming. Every morning he would climb the slope upon which his ranch house stood and look toward the northern horizon, folks said to see if the train's smoke were visible. “Connor's train smoke” came to be a common jest. Anything chimerical was likened to “Conner's train smoke”.

When Mrs. Britt first come to the plains she was met by the sight of a vast sea of waving grass, high and lush mesquite. Grama [grass?] seems to have been a later comer to the plains grass range. She recalls no weeds or many [??] flowers on the open plains when she first came into the region. Weeds followed the plough. She often heard the expression by early settlers, “If we could only make a weed grow”.

Furrows were ploughed, Mrs. Britt recalls, about each section of land to prevent the destruction by fire of the precious range.

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The prairie fire was the greatest dread of the early settlers on the plains. A disastrous fire could destroy in a few minutes the pastureage for the wintering of herds and farm stock.

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Mrs. Britt has a theory that the stunted wild plum thickets hovering together in canyon and river breaks are a result of former great prairie fires.

Mrs. Britt was living on the outskirts of Amarillo at the time of the Indian scare of 1891. Her husband, returning late from town, told her of the wild rumors over the plains concerning an Indian attack, jokingly, she told him, "I suppose if they had really come, you would have left us here to be scalped". However, Mr. Britt had ascertained the falsity of the report, which was spread as a practical joke, so it was said. But many men and women hurried to a central point in Amarillo for common protection , [?] as did the inhabitants of both rural and urban districts all over the plains region at the time.

Mrs. Britt, remembers Dr. Cartwright, whose [wife?] still resides in Amarillo, as one of the first doctors in the town. Dr. McGee was another physician practicing in Amarillo in the early days. His daughter is now teaching in [?] Tech at [Luebock?].

Mrs. Britt, with others, gathered the impression that a certain man who donated land for [?] St. Anthony's Hospital and another building at the oppsite side of town, did so with the thought of the ultimate connection of those two points by a street, which later became known as Polk.

Mrs. Britt knew the four girls who were the first graduates of an Amarillo school: Eula Trigg, now Mrs. Twitchell; Mary Brookes; Daisy Martin, now Mrs. Tom Curry. Among early teachers in the town school were professors Witherspoon, Woodson, and Ramsey, who was the first teacher to grade the school. A man named Twitchell was the first to establish a college in Amarillo. Harry Britt attended this college and one established by J. D. Hamlin, Mr. Franks, and Mr. Bryney.

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Freighting at the time was done by settlers on the south plains from Amarillo, preferably, as it was nearer and the [???] travel better, or Colorado City, although no regular road existed between these towns and the plains.

Grass in those first days grew so high that a pony staked with an ordinary rope could not graze off all the grass in the circle enclosed by his right's pasturing.

Mrs. Britt, as do many other old-timers, recalls the harder winters and deeper snows which [???] typified the plains weather in those early years in the Panhandle.