

☆ NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Indian-Pioneer History is 50 Years Old

By William D Welge

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Works Progress Administration Project S-149, more properly known as the Indian-Pioneer History Collection. The Indian-Pioneer History Collection (IPH) was the brain-child of Grant Foreman, pioneer historian and member of the Board of Directors of the Oklahoma Historical Society. The project was set up to provide employment for persons on relief. All of the employees used as field workers came directly from the relief rolls.

The other goal of the project was to collect biographical data on both living and deceased persons of Indian and pioneer heritage whose lives have been important in the history of the state. There was also an effort to collect information on family customs, tribal histories, social organizations, folklore, legends, cemeteries, old trails, ferries, forts, trading centers, and other unrecorded facts known only to oral tradition.

Over 25,000 questionnaires were mailed to various old settler organizations, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Daughters of the American Revolution, members of the Oklahoma Historical Society, and professionals such as lawyers and physicians. Results from the questionnaires proved interesting. The director of the project noted that people in western Oklahoma were more history conscious than those in the eastern half, reasoning that the pioneering memories were still vivid. It should be mentioned that in the final product, there are far more reminiscences concerning eastern Oklahoma than western and there is a definite tapering off of interviews west of Canadian County. Response from professionals was negligible and with some exceptions, the best interviews did not come from persons of education.

From January, 1937, to June, 1938, some 11,000 manuscripts were received, reviewed, and edited for inclusion into the collection. The greatest difficulty with advancing the project was finding enough qualified individuals to serve as field workers to conduct the interviews. Efforts were made to secure workers who had an intelligent conception of the work and a sense of historical values. Each county was to have two field workers with the exception of Tulsa and Oklahoma counties, which had ten.

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Grant Foreman examined bound volumes of the Indian-Pioneer History in 1938 (Courtesy OHS).

Each worker was limited to 100 hours a month to carry on the interviews. Field workers were selected by having the candidate write a "test manuscript" concerning some historical person. Candidates who met the criteria of the supervisors were appointed. One field worker still living, Anna R. Barry of El Reno, remembers that she had to produce ten manuscripts a month to keep her job.

The cost to undertake the project was shared by the University of Oklahoma and the Oklahoma Historical Society. Grant Foreman was appointed Director of the project by the Historical Society Board of Directors on December 9, 1936. He served in that capacity until August 31, 1937, at which time he resigned and his successor, J. Stanley Clark, continued until the project ended in June of 1938. Serving as manuscript editors were Dr. Angie Debo and Mrs. Laurie Bronson. At various points there were as many as 100 workers associ-

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ated with the project, over half employed as typists. All work was directed from Muskogee, Oklahoma.

Although indexing of the manuscripts was conducted at Muskogee, the two supporting institutions were responsible for the binding of their copy of the manuscripts. Hence the differences between the set at the University of Oklahoma and the Oklahoma Historical Society. The university bound their volumes with an average of 400 pages per volume, while the Historical Society bound an average of 500 pages per volume. This also accounts for the variation in indices at the two institutions. It should be noted that the index at the Oklahoma Historical Society is more complete with over 80,000 entries.

The Indian-Pioneer History Collection presents a cross-section of the most diversified pioneer society that has ever existed in the country. The interviews recount the life of the Five Civilized Tribes with its curious combination of native and borrowed institutions. They preserve personal narratives of Plains Indians who can remember in their own experience of the mobile tipi village and the life of the chase. The interviews provide a window to the lost techniques of the cattle trail and hardships and aspirations of homesteaders. No other state has ever had the opportunity to collect such material, and it is impossible to overestimate its value. Not a day goes by in the Archives/Manuscript Division of the OHS when someone, whether they be scholar, free-lance writer, or genealogist, requests information from the IPH. It has become an indispensable resource tool of our past. The Archives Division has microfilmed the collection to preserve the volumes. The microfilm is available for sale.

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