

## [Will H. Berger]

[?] Personal narrative Dakota City S-241-DAK. Dup

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

NAME OF WORKER Edna B Pearson ADDRESS 108 E 18 So Sioux

DATE November 21, 1938 SUBJECT Interview No. 23

1. Name and address of informant Will H. Berger, Dakota City RFD
2. Date and time of interview November 21, 1938 7 P M
3. Place of interview At his home
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant Mrs. George W. (Ida) Bates, Dakota City RFD
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you Mrs. Beulah McCutchan, 123 E 22 St., So Sioux
6. Description of room, surroundings, etc.

A very nice farm home, the house, white, and the outbuildings are very nicely kept up. The rooms are large and airy. C15 - 2/27/41 - Nebraska

FORM B Personal History of Informant

NAME OF WORKER Edna B Pearson ADDRESS 108 E 18 So Sioux

DATE November 21, 1938 SUBJECT Interview No. 23

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NAME AND ADDRESS OF INFORMANT Will H Berger, Dakota City, R F D

1. Ancestry Father, August Frederick Berger Mother, Lucy Ann Murdick Berger
2. Place and date of birth Born in Dakota County in 1856
3. Family Four boys and three girls
4. Place lived in, with dates Dakota City County all his life
5. Education, with dates Dakota County Country School, as far as Eighth grade and took high school work in Bookkeeping and other subjects
6. Occupations and accomplishments, with dates  
Farmer and County Assessor
7. Special skills and interests  
Very good farmer and has been active in boy scout work.
8. Community and religious activities  
Had been member of Lutheran Church but later joined Methodist Church in Dakota City
9. Description of informant  
Mr. Berger is rather tall and rather thin, blue eyes, gray hair, pleasant to talk with and anxious to tell what he can.
10. Other points gained in interview

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About a year ago Mr. Berger fell off a hay stack and broke his back; was in bed in a cast about six months and still wears a steel cast. Is very nice appearing.

[?]

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

NAME OF WORKER Edna B Pearson ADDRESS 108 E 18 So Sioux

DATE November 21, 1938 SUBJECT Interview No. 23

NAME AND ADDRESS OF INFORMANT Will H Berger, Dakota City, R. F. D.

In 1856 my father came to this country from Germany; he was six weeks crossing the ocean. He stopped in New York about a year and a half, then got the western fever and came as far as Chicago, and later wound up in Dubuque. There he met my mother and they were married in 1857. He then came on to Sioux City where he put in the winter of 1858 working at his trade of shoe maker. In 1859 he came to Dakota County and homesteaded in Omadi precinct, on the place now known as the old Rymill place.

He gave up his homestead and enlisted in Company I, in 1862 and went north to help take care of the Indians who perpetrated the Minnesota Massacre. Then he was mustered out of the army in the fall of 1863 or 1864 he bought this quarter section in Townships 24 and 25, Range 8, and 80 acres adjoining. From then on he lived on the farm and worked at his trade some in the winter time, making shoes for the family and the neighbors.

My folks moved to [Boier?] in about 1905 and lived there until 1908 when they moved to Phillipsburg, Kansas, where my father died October 27, 1910. He was buried in Taylor cemetery, near Homer.

They came across the state of Iowa in an old spring wagon hitched to one horse; it took them almost half the summer to get across the state as there were no roads and no

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tiling, and the state of Iowa was just one big swamp. There were several families in the caravan; they landed in Sioux City.

My father's homestead joined the north line of the Winnebago reservation.

It seemed as though they had one hardship after another for years.

The years 1872, 1873 and 1874 were the grasshopper years; 1874 being the bad year. The grasshoppers came so thick. We were harvesting the oats and they had just [????????] [?] a narrow strip, about an acre, to thresh after dinner. When they came back to the field after dinner the stalks were stripped.

They would come over in great clouds. That was the worst I ever saw. They would take everything except sugar cane. Of course the fields at that time were very small; that was the reason they could clean up a field so readily.

The winter of 1880 and spring of 1881 was the hardest winter that was experienced in Dakota County. Snow came on October 14th, 1880 and stayed on the ground until the next May. We didn't start to sow wheat until May 5th; the corn was left in the fields all winter, under three feet of snow, as the snow came so early, before we had done our husking. We husked corn the next spring and put in the next crop of corn right away; finished planting corn the 13th of June, 1881.

From 1880 to 1890 was not easy sledding. In the early 70's and until about 1880 they used to haul surplus grain to Winnebago and sell it to the government and it was issued to the Indians. Winnebago was our main market because we could get more there than any other place.

People would sit up nights on the lookout for the Indians but they never harmed anyone around here. They would go past, fifty or a hundred, going back and forth visiting, from the

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Sioux and Wisconsin to the Winnebagoes and Omahas; a caravan would go back the next year, returning those visits.

The early settlers used to have the Indian men work on the farms, binding grain and doing such work. In 1877 or 1878 the St. Cyr boys and an Indian by the name of Crow used to bind wheat here and shock it and help stack and pass bundles. They were nice boys and good help.

The spring of 1881 was the high water year, following that hard winter. We had a thaw in April for a couple of weeks of warm weather which took part of the three feet of snow they had had all winter, then following the thaw they had a fall of about two feet more of snow on top of that; then all went off, with about four feet of ice in the river breaking up, and then we did have water. From about three quarters of a mile west of me, west to the hills, was a solid mass of water.

I have dug wells in a number of places in the bottom, and from about nine to ten feet below the top of the ground it shows that they had had a dense growth of vegetation, and I have taken out roots that would be in a sort of preservation, and when they would be exposed to the air a while would crumble. That shows that there had been a glacier over this part of the country. And there surely had been a big fire in ancient days because there in a strata of ashes and I have taken out charred pieces of trees over a foot long. There isn't a question in my mind that this bottom, from hill to hill, has been run over by the Missouri river at some time.

The last real blizzard was in 1888, January 12th. We had lots of storms since then but nothing outstanding. I was out in that blizzard from 3:30 until dark. I was south of here; drove up to a stack of hay; looked to the northwest and about two hundred yards away the snow was rolling up, and when it hit it was black.

In 1894 it was exceptionally dry; that year corn was practically a failure all over the country; oats was so short it couldn't be stacked; prices weren't very good. In 1896 we had

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ten cent corn; from that on until 1898 had pretty slow sledding; prices were poor. In 1898 things began to look up; prices began to advance, and from that time until 1914, up until the war, times were the best this country ever saw.

My father paid \$500.00 for the first quarter section that he bought; he got 80 acres on the bottom and 80 acres in the hills. In 1875-76 land had advanced to about \$10.00 an acre. The homesteaders thought that was getting too high priced for them and there were a large number of the old settlers who sold out for \$9.00 to \$10.00 an acre and moved where they could get cheaper land. In 1893 land had crawled up to \$40.00 an acre. Then it didn't advance very much until after 1899, and from 1899 to 1910 it had advanced to \$100.00 an acre. Then, during the World War the prices had advanced to \$250.00 and \$300.00 an acre.

My father and mother had twelve children. I started to school on this place. My uncle owned this farm and he didn't need all of this house so they had school here about two years. In 1870-71-72 they built the Hilemen school. I have walked three miles to school, from the old home place to the Baird school.

The reason my father and mother left their old homestead was this: They were robbed of practically all their belongings; they had what money they had in a trunk and even the trunk was taken while they were away from home. Then father came to Sioux City, and when he went north with Company I he moved the folks to Dakota City, where they stayed for two years.

They went through a number of prairie fires. Once when they were threshing on the west side of this place, in the fall of 1874 or 1875, the separator burned. When they came in to supper father told the rest of the men he was going home. They laughed at him but he said "You see that fire near Jackson?" and by the time the men had their supper eaten they couldn't get the thrashing machine away on account of the fire, and it burned. The grass was so high the fire swept across the bottom and cleaned up everything. We had a

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fire guard burned on the west side of our place and were out watching to see that it didn't get across to our house. It jumped [Omsha?] creek as though it wasn't there.

We had rail fences those days, and that meant real labor.

When I was about seven years old, in 1873, my uncle hired me to chop in sod corn. I would take a hatchet and chop a hole in the sod and put in a few kernels of corn; would chop holes and plant corn every couple of feet. When they were breaking the ground they would break with five yoke of oxen on a 24 inch breaking plow. All work was done with oxen.

They cut grain with a cradle, which was a scythe with several long curved teeth; and they would rake it with small rakes with wooden teeth; I have seen men take a stick that had nice prongs and whittle it out for a hay fork. I have seen them thresh by putting the grain on the ground and have a horse walk on it in a circle; then hold it up by hand and let the wind blow the chaff away. I have also seen them thresh with a flail. A flail was made by fastening two pieces of board about five feet long, together with a strap or piece of heavy leather, and shaping the one end so the men could hold it with their hands. Then they would beat the grain with the other end of the flail.

The winter of 1869-1870 a large number of Texas cattle were sent up here; the government was transporting them by foot; they were driving them; there was less than 25 per cent went through the winter. About 75 per cent froze to death. I have seen four or five stand in a bunch and freeze.

When I was little there wasn't any church; what church they had was in the school house. This was a Lutheran community and they had church in the school house until the Salem Lutheran Church was built.

The young people had their literary societies and they were quite a bit for dancing. They danced all square dances and the [schottisch?]. One of the old dances was the Heel and

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Toe Polka. We had a literary society every winter, regular. It would start in the fall and lasted until about the middle of March, and would then disband. We had debates one Friday night and good program the next.

Father used to drive to Ponca to mill; one of the first mills was at Ponca, Stow Brothers, and I think Ed Ayers was interested in it later. Later the Wellways had a mill at Jackson; then we didn't have to go so far. Then there was the Oakes mill and the Sam Combs mill. We would take our wheat to the mill and either exchange it for flour or had it ground into flour and paid so much for having it ground.

Those were the days when people were more sociable.

From about 1880 to 1900 there were about twenty years that the "Bottom Disease" was awful bad; just hundreds of horses died on the Missouri river bottom; they never found a cure for it. They said it was caused by the horses eating the rattlebox, a plant which grow in the grass on the river bottom and which bore a small pod containing the poisonous seeds. It seemed that that rattlebox didn't hurt mules.

I rode on the first railroad train that was pulled in the county. That was about in 1875. They were about two miles out of Covington with it, and took us for a ride of the train. The railroad at Covington was a narrow guage. And I crossed the combination bridge free the first day it was open.

We have crossed the Missouri river on the ferry boat, the "Undine"; paid \$1.00 for a team and 25 cents for foot passengers.

Capt. Dick Talbot graded from Covington to the McAllister place, about a mile west of Dakota City; graded to within about half a mile of the bluffs at the old o'Connor place near Homer. If he could have bought a right-of-way for the land, instead of trying to use the public road way, be could have put through his railroad and have made some money; as it was, he was forced to give it up.

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We got our telephones through here in 1904.

In our school district, School District No. 13, they had a peculiar way of handling pupils. The advanced children helped the teacher out by teaching the fourth or fifth grades out in the ante-room. They did hire one good teacher; his time was put in with the more advanced children. We went through civil government, bookkeeping, and up to the twelfth grade in arithmetic. As high as sixty pupils, from five to twenty-five years of age, went to the Hilemen school at one time.

I was four years in boy Scout work and teaching Sunday School in Dakota City.