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[Rural Life in the 1870s]

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Title [Rural?] life in the 1870's

Place of origin Portland, Oreg Date 12/15/38

Project worker Walker Winslow

Project editor

Remarks

Form A

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Circumstances of Interview

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Walker Winslow Date December 15, 1938

Address 2069 SW Park, Portland, Oregon

Subject Rural Life in the 1870's

Name and address of informant Miss Nettie Spencer 2071 SW Park, Portland, Oregon

Date and time of interview Afternoon of December 14, 1938 and next day.

Place of interview Kitchen of Miss Spencer's home.

Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant

My landlady

Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you

Description of room, house, surroundings, etc. Miss Spencer's large, old, and somewhat shabby building of the last century and its conversion into an apartment house has done some strange things to the original design. The part occupied by Miss Spencer is on the third story and consists of two bed rooms, a living room, kitchen, and a storeroom. There seems to be no particular design to her housekeeping other than to have a [myriad?] of [mementos?] of her travels always within reach. The kitchen, which serves as her living room most of the time, is stacked with clippings that have interested her, as well as books,

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pictures, documents and all the twins, wrapping paper, etc. that a single woman of her years can collect. This, however, does not mean that the lady is impoverished for such is not the case. Her surroundings are the ones that best suit her 2 busy life and keep her close to the parts of the past which she loves. Interior decoration with her is a thing of the mind, and not the home, and the arrangement of a clipping that recalls some event is more significant than that of a chair in contrast to a couch. The home is clean but not neat, in the ordinary sense. She has another elderly lady to do her housework and cooking.

Form B

Personal History of Informant

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Walker Winslow Date December 15, 1938

Address 2069 SW Park, Portland, Oregon

Subject Rural Life in the 1870's.

Name and address of informant Miss Nettie Spencer 2071 SW Park, Portland, Oregon

Information obtained should supply the following facts:

1. Ancestry
2. Place and date of birth
3. Family

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4. Places lived in, with dates
5. Education, with dates
6. Occupations and accomplishments with dates
7. Special skills and interests
8. Community and religious activities
9. Description of informant
10. Other points gained in interview

1. When I asked Miss Spencer about her ancestors she exhibited a tree full of monkeys and said that they were the first ones. After that came a family [genealogy?] dating back to the 14th century, but it only came up to the early 19th. Her grandfather, Thomas Cox, was born on a farm in Ross county, Ohio, and her mother was born at the same place. In 1833 the Cox family migrated to where the city of Joliet, Illinois, was later located, but they were burned out by the Indians. Thomas Cox then laid out the site of the present city of Wilmington and built a grist mill, and also a water power [wool-carding?] machine. While living there Miss Spencer's mother married Elias Brown, and her twin sister married his brother Henry. In 1843 Thomas Cox got the Oregon fever and with his son-in-law, Elias Brown, loaded \$10,000 worth of merchandise on a steamer for the beginning of the trip. The steamer exploded and the family went on without attempting to salvage the goods.

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Elias Brown died on the trip and left Miss Spencer's mother a widow with four children, one of whom, J. Henry Brown, became a historian of Oregon. The family settled at [Salem?] and Thomas Cox opened a store in the village of ten houses. The mother earned a living by braiding straw hats for the men, and making clothing. Late in 1849 she took up a claim

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south of Salem and in 1851 married [Hiran?] Allen, who died in 1858, leaving her with a total of eight children. In 1859 she married George Spencer and bore him one child, the subject of this interview. Miss Spencer's mother, at the time of her death in 1888, had eight living children, 22 grandchildren and 10 great grandchildren.

2. Miss Spencer was born on the land claim south of Salem, and she will not give the date; it wasn't over a hundred or so years ago, she says. Family, as can be seen from above, is the thing that Miss Spencer has most of. She is a spinster.

3. It would take two weeks to get the places and dates of residence from Miss Spencer, for she has covered Europe and the Orient, as well as all of America, and is blessed with an [extraordinary?] [extraordinary ?] memory for details.

5. Public Schools of Salem and Corvallis, and [O?].S.C.

6. Teacher.

7. Teacher, but Miss Spencer is [adept?] at most of the arts, and is interested in everything. At the time of this interview she was wondering how to rid the world of Hitler.

8. Miss Spencer is something of a Joiner, but I do not gather that she attends church with any frequency, and then has no particular choice. She is President of the Woman's Press Club, a small group of free-lance writers, and is interested in various other groups, Shakespeare etc. The W.C.T.U. finds a staunch supporter in her, and she has written at length on temperance. Peace is also a subject she finds of interest.

3

9. Miss Spencer is a small woman with none of the dryness of appearance usually seen in old maids, and although she must be well past seventy she wears her years well and shows that she was something of a beauty in her day. She does not go in for fine clothes and she says that her nieces and nephews have despaired of her long ago as a well

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dressed woman. She dresses for comfort, and as I interviewed her she had her feet in the oven and made no pretense at any of the so-called social niceties. She is a little hard of hearing, but her ability to hear seems to increase with her interest in what is being said, and so one can believe that the [malady?] is something of a convenience. It is in keeping with her character that it should be, for she has, in her long life, held to the goal of the highest interest and for that reason was never married, although she had opportunity. Looking back she can't believe that she made a mistake. She wanted to educate herself and travel; both of which she did. The men she could have married all were respectable citizens who were hounded by bad luck, and as she has looked over the wives that survive them she finds herself without regret.

10. Miss Spencer would make a good biography for an interested person, and she has her family at her finger tips. Among her scattered documents there might be some things that are of interest to the Historical Records Survey. Also she is a very good source of introduction to interesting people, and a cooperative person. She has many photographs of the "early days".

Form C

Text of Interview (Unedited)

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

Name of worker Walker Winslow Date December 15, 1938

Address 2069 SW Park, Portland Oregon

Subject Rural Life in the 1870's

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Name and address of informant Miss Nettie Spencer 2071 SW Park, Portland, Oregon

Text: I was one of a large family, as you know from the biographical material I gave you, and so I was pretty busy just keeping out of the way and going to school. I can't remember anything special about the school but I do remember a lot of things about home and our clothes. All of our shoes were made by a man who came around every so often and took our foot measurements with broomstraws, which he broke off and tagged for the foot length of each member of the family. The width didn't make any difference and you could wear either shoe on either foot; for a long time, too, for the shoes wore well. Mother carded her own wool and washed it with soap she made herself. She even made her own lye from wood ashes, and when she got the cloth finished she made her own dye. Black was made from burnt logs and brown from the bulls of black walnuts. I think she got her green from copper, and peach leaves made the yellow. The red dye was made from leaves she bought. The dresses were very full and lasted entirely too long. Our styles weren't as bad as the men's though, for they took a blanket, cut a hole in the middle of it, stuck their necks through and had an overcoat. They looked like ingenuous Indians. One of the things I remember most as a little girl were the bundle peddlers who came around. They had bundles made up and you bought them as they were for a set price. I remember that some 2 sold for as high as \$150. In these bundles more all sorts of wonderful things that you didn't get in the country very often; fancy shawls and printed goods; silks and such other luxuries. It was a great day when the family bought a bundle.

Our food was pretty plain most of the time and we didn't have any salads like they do now. The menu for a fine dinner would be: Chicken stew with dumplings, mashed potatoes, peach preserves, biscuits, and hominy. We raised carrots for the stock but we never thought of eating them. Grandfather was eating peaches in St. Joe, Missouri, before he came West and forgot and put a peach pit in his pocket and left it there all through the trip. It was a variety that was later named after him and became famous. We had cobbler often. It was made by putting biscuit dough on stewed fruit and baking it. Dumplings were

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another staple. They were dough, like the biscuits and made to go with everything that had enough juice to boil them in. We didn't have any jars to put up preserves in, like they do now, but we used earthen crocks instead. The fruit to be preserved was boiled with brown sugar [md] we never saw white sugar and when we did we used it as candy [md] and then put in the jars which were covered with cloth that was then coated with beeswax. Another good cover was a hog bladder [md] they were the best. Sometimes we had molasses pulls and once in a great while we would have some real striped, candy. That was a treat[!?!]

Most of our medicine was homemade too and I think I can remember some at the old standbys. There was an awful lot of ague [md] chills and fever [md] and it come, they said, from turning up new soil. Almost every pioneer community has had it. For that we used patent medicine mostly, but the standard was goose grease and turpentine. It was supposed to cure every thing. It was all you could smell in a schoolroom. Of course the old fashion mustard plaster was a standard remedy, and then there were the teas. We had a tea for everything and 3 most of the herbs could be picked on the place. Tansy tea was one [md] I saw a tansy patch down the block yesterday [md] and [mullen?] tea was another that was used for asthma and bronchial trouble. Sage tea was used for the measles. Soft-soap or bread and milk poultices were used on boils. There was a lot of scarlet fever because of the poor sanitary conditions, and a lot of children died of what we called Putrid sore throat [md] diphtheria. I never heard of a dentist when I was a little girl and my grandfather had the only false tooth in the country side and was a curiosity because of them. The plates were made of gold. Mother had some plates made and didn't like them so had them melted up into rings for the children. I had a ring until just recently and I think that I let it go with a bunch of old gold I sold so as to get it out of the way and into circulation. There wasn't much social life on the farm and I didn't pay any attention to it until I was older and moved into Salem and Corvallis. The churches didn't have any young peoples[/ ?]organizations and they were dead serious with everything. Sermons lasted for hours and you could [smell?] the hell fire in them. We never had church suppers or the like until way past my time. The only social thing about the church was the camp meetings.

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That was where most of the courting was done. When a boy would get old enough for a wife the father would let him use the horse and buggy for a trip to the camp meeting to get him a wife.

The Babtist Church, of the hardshell variety, in the far away country places were typical of the period. In them they preached hell-fire, fore-ordination and damnation once a month. The meetings were held in the country school house. The Reverend Cranfield [in?] speaking of foreordination set forth the idea that unborn infants were condemned to hell. He propounded his solemn belief that there were infants in hell not a span long.

The style of delivery was unique, high pitched, strained, almost a shout with an ending of the words with 'Ah'. Good english was absent because of the lack of education. "Ah God, Ah well, Ah all evil doers, ah", was the vogue. There were no song books so the minister would recite the words of a song two lines at a time; some doleful [hymn?] such as 'Hark from the tomb a doleful sound'. This was sung in the quavering sopranos of the musically erring sisters; some of them singing in a double air roared above the bellowing brethren. It was an assortment of inharmony.

During the vary long and lurid prayer the congregation knelt on the dirty school room floor. The prayer was delivered with [vehemence?] and in voice loud enough to reach the vault of Heaven. This warranted God's not turning a deaf ear. Vehement were the 'Amens' from the over-wrought kneelers until some excitable soul ended in "Glory", Glory", with shouts and hand clapping. This high state of joy, with repeated "Praise the Lord", was shouted while the men chewed and spit in the sand-box under the stove, and the mothers rocked their babies in their arms to keep them quiet.

Most of these people came to church on foot over the muddy roads. The ones who came by wagon used a hay-rack, and mother and father sat in a chair at the front while the children were churned about in the straw strewn in the wagon bed.

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Most of the woman folks were calico and linsey-[woolsey?], the latter still made in their homes in Oregon (1871), and the men often wore jeans. The little girls in particular wore sun-bonnets and shakers. Old ladies wore lace caps under their sun-bonnets; some of the better class wore very prettily frilled with lace and lavender ribbons [md] but not in this country community that I am describing.

After a long service “meeting” was out, and neighbors had a grand hand-shaking party, and then families often invited other families to dinner. This crude church, located where Alfred Station now is on the Southern Pacific Railway, a few miles north of Harrisburg, which then was a small village, was 5 the only public gathering place, except perhaps on the Fourth of July, when families went on mass, with shiny new shoes to Corvallis, to “the Celebration”.

In Corvallis, about 1873, the Methodist Episcopal, the Southern Methodist Episcopal, and the Presbyterian churches were very nice buildings, with painted pews and better dressed people, and the ministers were educated. The only libraries in vogue were the Sunday School books. Even the district school did not have any. It was after this date that the Oregon State College had a library.

The games played were: ante over, crack the whip, base, hide and seek, tag, ring around the rosie.

In town it was different, but I was something of a young lady when I went there (Corvallis). We had lots of surprise parties and gave them on any occasion we could think of. At them we would play all of the old American games and sing. Everyone sang in duets, sextets and quartets, and there were singing schools every place. Some of the songs I remember were, Gypsies Warning, Empty Chair, Brooklyn Theatre. Only a Pansy Blossom. Those singing schools were pitch [fights of?] voices and there was a lot of jealousy. We also had Writing Schools for penmanship. Some of the writing they did then was beautiful and

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there was a lot of competition in it. We had theatricals too, for there weren't any traveling companies and we had to take their place.

The big event of the year was the Fourth of July. Everyone in the countryside got together on that day for the only time in the year. The new babies were shown off, and the new brides who would be exhibiting babies next year. Everyone would load their wagons with all the food they could hawl and come to town early in the morning. On our first big Fourth at Corvallis mother made two hundred gooseberry pies. You can see what an event it was. There would be floats in the morning and the one that got the [girls?] eye was the 6 Goddess of Liberty. She was supposed to be the most wholesome and prettiest girl in the countryside [md] if she wasn't she had friends who thought she was. But the rest of us weren't always in agreement on that. She rode on a hay-rack and wore a white gown. Sometimes the driver wore an Uncle Sam hat and striped pants. All along the sides of the hay-rack were little girls who represented the states of the union. The smallest was always Rhode Island. (All this took place at Corvallis and the people from Albany used to come up river by boat.) Following the float would be the Oregon Agricultural College cadets, and [some / kind?] of a band. Sometimes there would be political [effigies?].

Just before lunch - and we'd always hold lunch up for an hour - some Senator or lawyer would speak. These speeches always had one pattern. First the speaker would challenge England to a fight and [berate?] the King and say that he was a skunk. This was known as twisting the lion's tail. Then the next theme was that any one could find freedom and liberty on our shores. The speaker would invite those who were heavy laden in other lands to come to us and find peace. The speeches were pretty fiery and by that time the men who drank got into fights and called each other Englishmen. In the afternoon we had what we called the 'plug uglies' [md] funny floats sad clowns who took off on the political subjects of the day. There would be some music and then the families would start gathering together to go home. There were cows waiting to be milked and the stock to be fed and so there

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was no night life. The Fourth was the day of the year that really counted then. Christmas wasn't much; a Church tree or something, but no one twisted the lion's tail.

There weren't any young [womens?] clubs that I remember of. If we put on a play or anything the organization was just for that and was spontaneous. Young women in Oregon didn't play much of a role in community life unless they were being courted. Our favorite magazines were [Godey's?], [Peterson's?] and the 7 [Bazaar.?] Later we had the [Delineator.?] Years later I saw the covers of the old [Godey's?] magazine selling in Paris for a great price, and they tell me that people in high-class homes now use them as prints on the walls. All they meant in those days was that Oregon stores were two years behind with the styles. Speaking of prints! We used to get chromos with subscriptions to papers, and we didn't have to work out an intelligence test as you do now. Some of them were pretty but I have seen farm houses where they covered one whole side of the room with them solid. Recently I saw a picture in the paper of a well known pioneer woman holding up a little statue of Dickens her grandfather was supposed to have brought across the plains. If he did he must have sent west for it, for I bought one of a paddler when I was a girl. That was our art then. The head got knocked off the statue I have but it is around someplace.

After I had gone to the Agricultural College for two years I went out and taught at a summer school in the country, for three months for eighty dollars. It was enough to pay my tuition the rest of the way through. I boarded with the parents of the children and it was pretty rough board sometimes. After I graduated I taught in Portland and roomed at the home of Judge C. B. Bellinger. I got fifty dollars a month to start, and then was raised to sixty. I think I was getting seventy-five when the depression of ninety-three hit, and they cut us 25[%?] twice. It was a bad depression, but everyone had their own gardens and didn't go hungry. [percent/?]

I left Oregon soon after this and went to Europe, where I taught school for several years.

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Mother was an uneducated woman but she was bitterly opposed to superstition. When she was a girl she lived in Illinois, where the Irish were building the canals and they were so superstitious that she never forgot them. For 8 that reason she didn't encourage any talk about superstition around the house. I remember I was horrified when the neighbor boys said that witches had been riding our horses because there was electricity in the air and the horse's manes were curly. These same children also said that any one who had their hair burnt across the front was in league with witches [md] even a girl who had bangs.

One thing mother used to say that has stuck with me, and she didn't believe it and I don't either, is that we children would have good luck if by accident we put some of our clothes on backwards. To this day I have a hard time bringing myself to change anything I have put on backwards and I can't recall that I have ever had any great luck as a result. It is just one of those things from childhood that clings in spite of anything. None of our family had any time for superstition.

There were a great many sayings in those days, but I can't recall any now but the ones we all know and they aren't important. Professor Berchtold, a grand old man, once spoke to me about a book of sayings he was collecting. He had been collecting them for years. I think you could get in touch with him through the Oregon State College, although he is retired now. I remember that he said that America was too young to have many sayings of its own. You could write him if you wanted to and I would give you an introduction.

Form D

Extra Comment

Federal Writers' Project

Works Progress Administration

OREGON FOLKLORE STUDIES

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Name of worker Walker Winslow Date December 15, 1938

Address 2069 SW Park, Portland, Oregon

Subject Rural Life in the 1870's.

Name and address of informant Miss Nettie Spencer 2071 SW Park, Portland, Oregon

Comment: A careful study of Miss Spencer's ancestry, their pioneering instincts and forceful traits, is furthered by the knowledge that in her these qualities are not lost. As a girl she decided against marriage and in favor of travel and independence. She got them just as she planned and did what would have balked many a stronger appearing person. She told me something of her experiences in India, and they were such that one can marvel at the woman who went through them, and who now laughs at them. Too, Miss Spencer is no mean artist and while in India she painted in natural color all of the native flowers. Her main reason for doing this was because a camera could not catch the reality of the bloom. The paintings, which she has preserved, show a fine capability. As a character study it might be worth while to interview her further. However, she has little more to contribute along folk lines. She will be on the lookout for further subject for this interviewer, or others. It was through her that I got in touch with Mr. [Hampton?] (see Hampton interview).