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Margie Cooke Porteus

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another family memory by a distinguished contributor

He Braved The Elements

By Margie Cooke Porteus

When Frances returned after answering the knock that had disrupted the evening meal, she told Henry the visitor wanted to see him. The child sensed that Frances' mood had changed. The visitor hadn't been invited to eat, which was unusual, but it was more than that. When the child asked about the visitor, Frances replied, "It doesn't matter. Let's not talk about him. Finish your supper."

Henry left with the visitor and returned late. Sometime during the night, the child had been awakened by the voices of Frances and Henry, voices that at times rose in heated discussion.

It was years later that the child learned the cause of the discussion and who the visitor had been. the discussion had been about Henry seeing more of the visitor. The visitor had

been Watt Nichols, who was seeking information about his brother Tim, who hadn't been heard from for several years (more about Tom Nichols later).

Frances and Henry were my parents. I was that child.

Dad had the natural narrator's enviable knack of turning incidents into fascinating stories. Our family should have copied them. We didn't, but we have pieced together the stories Dad told. These, plus written records and related incidents, have enabled us to discover that plain ol' Dad had a colorful past and that he had performed a man's tasks and taken on a man's responsibility at an age that we today would still consider a child's age.

The story unfolds. . .

Civil War veteran Richard R. Cooke--with his wife, Phoebe, their children, and his cousin John McCay--left Georgia in search of a new home in Indian Territory. When they arrived at Tahlequah, they camped nearby while Cousin John went into town for supplies. While there, he met a brother, Mason, who told him that the territory was no place for a family; he suggested that they go to Texas. With this advice, the family turned south and eventually settled near Springtown.

Three years later, thirty-year-old Phoebe, mother of ten children, died. Two years after her death, young Henry left home. We can only guess why a boy would leave home and why he would go to Oklahoma and Indian territories instead of back to Georgia where there were still many relatives.

Somewhere in the territories, the teenage Henry met and started working with Tom Nichols, a man of questionable reputation. They rode together for three years, rounding up cattle that had strayed from the herds being driven from Texas ranches to Kansas railheads. They were under verbal contract with seven cattle companies. The area they covered was roughly between the Red River and Canadian River, from the Texas border on the west to about where U.S. Highway 81 is (a line from El Reno due south to the Red River).

Any cattle they found were herded into a box canyon in what is now the Anadarko area. They would fence in the strays while searching for others. At a pre-set time, they would drive the recovered strays to a point near the present Taloga, where they would meet with representatives of the cattle companies.

This lifestyle meant sleeping and eating in the open year-around in all kinds of weather unless they were fortunate enough to be near a settlement or Indian camp. Often it was the latter.

Henry's stories frequently were set in Caddo County--down



The Cooke family about 1884.

in the Caddo, as he phrased it. There was one Indian home where the two herders were always welcome, but Henry refused to go there anymore after the father wanted to trade his daughter to Henry for one of Henry's horses. I have always wondered if there were more to it than he told.

Tom Nichols was older, and he may have tried to protect the younger Henry. Some of Henry's stories can serve as examples. Once they went into town—Rush Springs, I think—and Nichols told him, "You're on your own while we're here. It would be best if you didn't know where I go and who it is I'm going to see."

Yet another time when they were down in the Caddo, it was bitter cold when they rode into an Indian camp late in the day. Nichols told Henry to warm himself by the fire while he, Nichols, went to talk with the men, including some strangers who were there. While Henry warmed himself, a squaw approached him and said to him, "You good; Nichols bad. Why do you ride with him?"

When Nichols returned after spending quite some time with the men, he said they had to move on now even if it was evening. They left with several horses that Nichols had acquired and drove them to the Taloga area. Nichols was so eager to get those horses out of the country that Henry believed they had been stolen by or from some Indians.

When the Cheyenne-Arapaho country was opened for settlement in 1892, Henry had been in the area for at least three years. Although he was not yet old enough to file for a homestead, his father, two older brothers—Tom and Willis—and a sister (Fannie—later Mrs. Henry Miller) were to profit from his knowledge of the area. All homesteaded near Thomas. His father was to become one of the first commissioners in G. County.

During August of 1892, Henry, his father, brother Brownlo, and cousin John McCay built a house and dug a well on the father's claim. In October, the other children were brought from Texas. Henry, now 17 or 18, was sent alone to bring back the wagon of belongings and the milk cows from Springtown.

On the return trip he drove into Rush Springs, thinking to spend the night. At the wagon yard, he was approached by a stranger, who asked where he was headed with cows and furniture. When Henry told him, the stranger said that he had better keep on going because there were men in town who were capable of taking both the cows and the furniture. He drove out of town for an hour or two, went off the road, and camped. It wasn't long before he heard three or four horses go by, and later the same number returned. He always felt that the riders were looking for him.

For a time after the land opening, Kingfisher and El Reno were the closest towns where settlers in the Thomas area could get supplies. During this period, Henry hauled freight to Kingfisher from Wichita Falls.

It was while hauling freight or during the return trip with family supplies that he found his wagon completely surrounded by curious longhorn cattle. He admitted that the team was spooked and that he was scared. He said, "I had heard that you could stampede cattle by waving a slicker, so I decided to try it. It worked. When those cattle went crashing through the brush, I got out of there fast."

On another trip from Wichita Falls, Henry remembered, a cougar followed him most of the night. It would show up behind him, then in front or at the side, moving in and out of the brush. He drove all night. He knew if he camped, his mules would be run off—if not attacked—by the big cat.

For at least one season, Henry was camp cook for Eastern



Henry at home in Thomas, 1939.

hunting parties that came to hunt prairie chicken and antelope in Roger Mills County. He also hunted prairie chicken and shipped them to Eastern cities, where they were in demand as a delicacy.

Henry and Lee Mathis, a friend and brother-in-law-to-be, homesteaded near Elk City, where they lived in a dugout among sandhills. Evidently they didn't like batching or trying to farm poor soil because they soon returned to the Thomas area to be near families.

In 1902, twenty-seven-year-old Henry decided it was time to settle down. During a literary meeting in the dugout school east of Thomas, he met sixteen-year-old Frances Speelman, whom he married. They moved to a school section southeast of Thomas near the Swan Community, which at that time had a store, a post office, a church, a blacksmith shop, and a dance hall.

Their first child was born on this farm, but therein lies another tale.

Addendum: by Ross Cooke, one of six children, M. Porteus' brother:

It was the man, not his stories, that impressed me about Dad.

First, there was his pride. He saw to it that he worked longer and harder than anyone else on the job. He was determined never to let his children see him in bed. The man who was Henry A. Cooke was never seen — never known. The person—Henry—was kept inside.

He was a medical anomaly. He drove himself without mercy. He violated more rules of nutrition than he obeyed. He was never "housebroken." His adherence to the rules of sanitation was minimal. Yet he was never ill.

He smoked six sacks of Bull Durham each week. I never saw him use a toothbrush, but he carried with him to the grave, after seventy-four years, his natural teeth.

His determination to see his children attain a position in society that was denied him was awesome, and he did it. Wish I knew how!

Wish I could know his remembrances—his dreams. No one did. ☹