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# Water To Drink And Use

By Dick Chapman

Illustration by Kelley Doyle

The first thing a homesteader must do when he reached his new home was to secure water for man and beast. Food might be delayed a few hours if necessary or cut down in quantity, but everyone was thirsty and horses wanted water even before grain. After all, water was required to make that ever-wanted staple of the traveler—plenty of hot coffee. A small amount of drinking water was always carried by the traveler, but this was insignificant when so many were demanding a drink. If a spring or a stream wasn't far away, it could do for a time, but streams were far apart and scarce in a dry land; besides, the water might not be fit to drink, especially if it had alkali in it.

If you were lucky enough to locate a friendly homesteader who had a well or a good spring of water, you could camp in his yard until you could dig a well of your own. The land along the creeks and rivers was the first to be filed on; except for the Indian allotments, most of these choice plots were secured by some cowboy or cattleman who had spotted them long before the settlers came along.

Such was our condition as Father had come down the summer before and located a friend who lived close to our homestead. This person was an old ex-Union soldier by the name of George D. Bennett. Mr. Bennett was batching, and he despised having to cook. When he found out that Mother would do the cooking for all, we had a place to stay for as long as we wished.

This arrangement allowed Dad and Abe to begin work on our big half dug-out as winter was approaching. After unloading one of the wagons, Dad returned to Weatherford, twenty-five miles away, for lumber and shingles—also a month's supply of groceries, as once a month was as often as he could afford to drive that distance. Brother Abe began digging the dug-out. As soon as the dug-out was partially finished so we could move into it, they began

digging a well entirely with a pick and shovel. One day after many days of hard labor, they were down twenty-four feet and had struck a layer of gyp rock. Abe told Dad it was near noon and he would let the bucket down and draw him up. But Dad said, "I want to hit this rock one more lick and then I'll quit." He slammed away with full force and broke a large slab of rock loose; water came gushing in about his feet. Dad yelled, "We've got water, Son! Let the bucket down!" By the time he was drawn up, the water was up to his knees; as far as I know, the well was never dug any deeper.

The well water proved to be alkaline and not good for cooking purposes; also, most people didn't like to drink the water since it had a bitter taste.

Mr. Bennett had told us about a small spring of good water that was on the north slope of a large red hill only a mile away from our home, and Dad made a sled. With two barrels, we hauled water for use in the house—once a week. That was my job and a tricky one to say the least.

A cattleman-homesteader who still ran four or five hundred head of cattle on remaining open range in that area offered to erect a windmill and install a pump and tank if Dad would allow his cattle to come there to water. The arrangement was quite satisfactory to us, and so Fred La Bouc's cattle, as well as other range stock, came there to drink until barbed wire fences soon closed the range for keeps.

Fred La Bouc was a French Canadian cowboy who had drifted south to the Texas ranges and had finally homesteaded in Oklahoma Territory. This solved our water problems until a cistern could be made.

And now a mystery. Only a few years later, the spring on the hillside, which no doubt had produced water for ages, went completely dry and to this time, over eighty years later, is as dry as the surrounding prairie. ●