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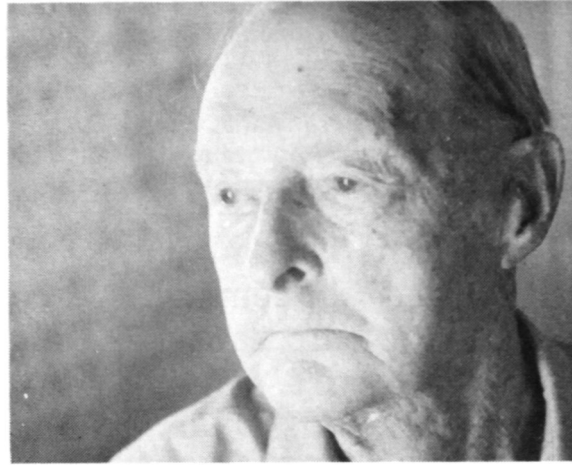
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# DICK CHAPMAN FINDS GREEN PASTURES IN POETRY



**I HAVEN'T EVER SOLD ANY OF MY POETRY. I HAVEN'T EVER THOUGHT TO TRY TO DO THAT. I JUST SHARE IT WITH PEOPLE WHO LIKE POETRY. THERE AREN'T MANY FOLKS WHO REALLY ENJOY POETRY ANYMORE.**

**By Dee Ann Ray**

Although Dick Chapman didn't discover he was a poet until he was 83, he's still going strong at 97. Always a reader of books, Dick didn't ever have much time to reflect and write what he thought. He was busy working and making a living. When he was recuperating in the old Oklahoma General Hospital in Clinton in 1970, he decided to write his first poem, a tribute to the nurses who had cared for him. The inspiration for his poem came to him late at night and he began to write.

Dick's poetry has been published in WESTVIEW and in the CLINTON DAILY NEWS as a part of the Arapaho Column written by Helen Gossman. "I haven't ever sold any of my poetry. I haven't even thought to try to do that. I just share it with people who like poetry. There aren't many folks who really enjoy poetry anymore. I just send my poems to friends," smiles Dick, speaking softly.

One of the sad things about living to the age 97 is that many of one's friends pass on to eternal rest. Of his brothers and sisters, Dick says, "They're all gone now except me." When Nina, his wife, died in 1970, it was a difficult year for Dick. "I've lived alone now for

fifteen years, which is too long for anyone to be alone," he says.

Perhaps the nicest thing about living to the age of 97, being healthy and able to care for oneself, is that there is time to think and reflect and write as Dick does now.

His eyes are clear and rested. His skin is age-marked, but he has few wrinkles and is very healthy looking. Dick keeps a clean house and a neat yard. He retired from painting, which was his last occupation, only about twelve years ago; so he is just now getting good at enjoying his golden years. He has made peace with God, and he says, "The Lord has been merciful to me — much more than I deserve. I am now thankful to him, but it took me a long time to come to my senses."

Dick's memories are of Arapaho as the major town in Custer County; of squirrel hunts; bobcat hunting, breaking horses; and moving frequently. His father, he says, was a green pastures seeker — always looking for a better place to locate. "Dad was a born mover, and he never quit looking for the right place to settle down. My folks lived in seven states or territories before moving back to Oklahoma for a second time. They also lived a second time in Iowa and Missouri. Both of them were natives of Illinois. They lived in Iowa and Missouri before moving to Western Nebraska where I was born," relates Dick.

Dick's father was James Chapman, and his mother's name was Clara. Since he was the next to the last child born to his parents, Dick is unsure how many brothers and sisters he had. Some of the other children died before he was born. He knows that some of the children died in Iowa and some in Nebraska. Only one sister, Nellie, came to the Cheyenne-Arapaho country with the family. There were three boys — Avery, Dick, and Paul, the youngest child.

Both Avery and Nellie married into the E. D. Dunn family. They married a brother and sister in a double wedding held in the Dunn Family dugout. Dick has four living nieces from those two unions — Gladys Snider, Nellie Stocks, Mable Snider, and Viola Goss.

Dick was born on June 24, 1887, in Cheyenne Country, Nebraska, about twenty-five miles north of Julesburg, Colorado. He remembers from his family's stories the scarcity of water and fuel of any kind on the high



**A COWBOY, A HORSE BREAKER, A TRAPPER AND A HUNTER. DICK CHAPMAN AS A YOUNG MAN AROUND 1910.**

plains. Cow chips were frequently used for heating and cooking. "We would have used buffalo chips, but the buffalo were mostly gone then and we seldom saw any in the breaks or canyons along the North and South Platte rivers.

There was other game, however. "Antelope were about as common as range cattle and we saw the gray wolf often."

The Chapman family moved to Northern Kansas from Nebraska and settled in Clay County for several years. Dick attended five terms of grade school during that time.

"Three wagons of us came to the Cheyenne-Arapaho country in the fall of 1898. We were twenty days on the trail. We began the trip on October 11, my mother's birthday. A young couple named Carl and Jennie Eads accompanied us. They had just married on October 10. They settled three miles southwest of Weatherford, which was a new town with a railroad just appearing on the horizon. We came west and settled nine miles southwest of Arapaho.

"Our first Arapaho home was a half-dugout twelve by twenty feet. We dug into the bank of a small canyon so we could keep warm in the winter and cool in the summer. Our

dugout wasn't completed during that first winter, so Avery and I slept outside."

Dick was able to attend three more terms of school at Union District No. 3, Custer County. He was taught by three different teachers — two of them men and one a young lady. Of those school years, Dick says, "That finished my schooling except what I have learned during the last eighty some years."

The early settlement years were work-filled. People didn't take vacations. They didn't have many rest breaks. At first, they didn't even have a church to attend on Sundays. Later, church was infrequently held when there was a preacher available. Often he was shared with other churches. A celebration was a picnic with other families. A good meal was the main attraction. "If we got a few sparklers or firecrackers, we really had a big time," laughs Dick.

Although there were stores in Arapaho, James Chapman and one or two family members usually did their shopping every two months in Weatherford. That way, they could visit friends who settled there and perhaps stay two or three days with them. Neighbors were scarce on the prairie.

Dick killed his first bobcat with a

double barrel muzzle loading shotgun which was longer than he was tall. He learned to ride a horse soon after that. He broke horses for many owners before he hung up his saddle for the last time. "The easiest one I ever broke was a five-year-old the owner said couldn't be broken. He was glad to turn her over to me because he had tried to break her and had failed. She never bucked a buck for me. I soon had her ready to ride and use with a buggy. I always worked with horses and cattle when I could get that kind of job."

There were adventures for any traveler on the prairie, as is proved by Dick's memories. In the fall of 1904, he and Avery made a freight-wagon trip to Missouri. Of course, Dick also took a saddle pony along. Their first night out, they camped in the Hydro wagonyard. When they started the trip, the weather was clear and warm. During the night a Northerner blew in and when they crawled out of the wagon the next morning, there were four inches of snow on the ground. The traveling conditions dictated that some of their freight load be shifted. They crated some items to send on the railroad. The delay shortened their traveling day, and they made it just to Bridgeport that night. The next morning at the river crossing, they found a man with a four-mule team and a heavy trail wagon turned over. The vehicle was blocking the road. Dick and Avery helped the man get his wagon righted and across the river so they could make the crossing themselves. That night, the travelers camped near one another. During the night, the Chapman boys were awakened by loud noises. The other man was trying to care for one of his sick mules. The mule kicked the man, breaking the man's leg. The Chapmans helped the man get to Medford, Oklahoma, cooking his meals and hitching his mules to the wagon. The man did drive, but he had to be lifted onto the wagon seat.

"We didn't see the ground without snow the entire trip," says Dick. We wore our clothes to bed. We took off our boots but slept with them to keep them from freezing."

The journey to Missouri was made through Kansas to avoid the horse thieves and outlaws who menaced Northeastern Indian Territory (now Eastern Oklahoma). There was also

danger of holdup in Kansas, where horses were often stolen. The Chapman boys made the trip safely, however. Avery did lose a horse out of a stable and was never able to recover it.

In 1907, the three Chapman boys went with their father to Beaver County in the Oklahoma Panhandle to look for land. They found that the prices were too high for them. A quarter section was selling for \$500.

The year 1907 is memorable for Dick because he saw his first circus that year. He and a girl friend rode their horses to Clinton where they caught the train and went to El Reno to see Ringling Brothers. They made the return trip that same evening and got back home about three o'clock in the morning.

In 1911, James, Clara, and Paul decided to go to Arkansas, and Dick went with them to see the country but not to stay. He met Nina, his wife-to-be, on that trip. They were married in 1912 in a buggy parked at the edge of Beebe, Arkansas. The minister walked out to the buggy to perform the ceremony.

After moving back to Arapaho, the young couple began to rear a family of whom Dick happily says, "They are all an improvement over me." Four of their five children are still living. The only deceased one is Nora Lue Nonast, who lived in Bessie. Lucille Langley lives in Arapaho. Irene Chapman is an x-ray technician in Houston. Elvin, a retired mechanic, lives in Arkansas. Raymond, a teacher for many years and later registrar for Cameron College until his retirement on May 1, 1984, now lives in Lawton.

Dick was employed in many different jobs during his working years. He continued to work as a cowboy and often trapped during the winter, selling the furs. He painted houses for many years. During the Great Depression, he earned \$18 a month as a laborer for the WPA. When he was advanced to the job of painter, his pay increased to \$35 a month. His last job, painting a house for Mrs. Bill Lacey in Arapaho, was twelve years ago.

Although many years have passed, Dick recalls clearly the early days of Arapaho — for instance the debates between Democrat Wadsworth and Republican J. W. Lawton, editor of the ARAPAHO BEE. He remembers that they were friends in their discussions until they got into politics.

Then voices were raised and anger was evident.

"I wish we had had cameras in those days the way we do today. One time a cousin of ours from Kansas came to visit and he had a camera. He kept the photos he took, so we didn't get to have any of them," Dick recalls.

Having lived in Arapaho for eighty-one years, Dick has had ample opportunity to watch the development of the town. "The town hasn't changed so much, but the people have," he says. "When I first came here, the town was about the size it is now. But we lost population until a few years ago."

Dick is glad to see the courthouse renovation and addition. "I helped to tear down the old Coleman Hotel after it was no longer the Custer County Courthouse," says Dick. The old Coleman Hotel was the most infamous courthouse Custer County ever had and served for many years as the home of county government. The stories of its inadequacies as a courthouse are legend. When the present courthouse was constructed in 1934, the Coleman Hotel was used as a community building for a short time and then torn down.

"I helped paint the inside of the old county jail too. It was located across the street to the east of the present courthouse," recalls Dick.

Dick is currently working on re-copying his poetry. He has written between 100 and 150 poems and continues to write. He wants to get them in good shape in one or two notebooks. His penmanship is excellent and easy to read. All of his writing is done in longhand. His formal education may have been sparse, but evidently the lessons were of quality.

Dick Chapman is a remarkable man at 97. His hearing is somewhat impaired, but he has a clear memory. His voice is gentle and low-pitched. He enjoys each day as it dawns. His poetry reflects on nature and the pioneer days. One poem is about saddle sores, which were an everyday experience for the oldtime cowboy who rode hundreds of miles on cattle drives. Using his poetry to share his feelings and memories, Dick is recording his life and with it 97+ years of history. (Editor's note: Since this article appeared in the September 2, 1984 issue of the CLINTON DAILY NEWS, Mr. Chapman has observed his ninety-eighth birthday.)