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Stranger-Friend

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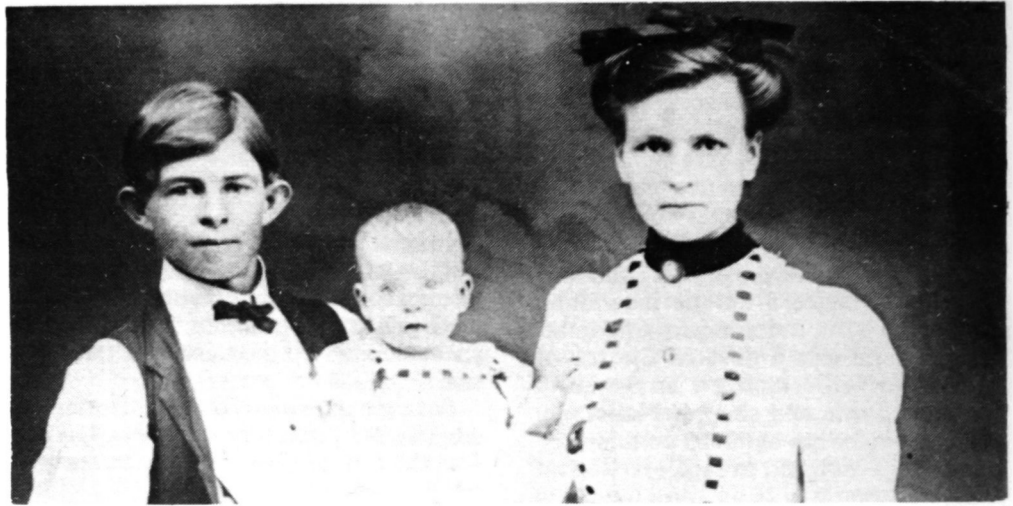


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machine on the back porch. She kept mentioning the house to her sons and sons-in-law, but none of them took her seriously. So one day she walked to the lumberyard and ordered boards to be cut to a specific length. When the lumberyard delivered her order, she set to work nailing the boards together. Then she asked two of her grandsons to hold up the sides while she nailed them to a frame. After they had nailed shingles on the roof, she had a "wash house" to show her embarrassed children the next time they visited.

Her cantankerous actions sometimes backfired, though. Once when a son-in-

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Mary and Will Higgins and baby Clara.



(another Western Oklahoma story by our favorite story-teller in Arapaho)

Stranger-Friend

— by R. R. Chapman

One early fall day in 1903 a young man of about 25 rode up to our dugout door in

Custer County, Oklahoma, recently a part of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation.

The youth asked, "What is the chance to stay and get grub for the next week or so?" His blue suit showed considerable wear, but he was clean, except for the usual dust. He wore regular cowboy boots and spurs and a wide-brimmed Stetson hat. His voice was rather low and easy-spoken. His face had known a razor and was free of real dirt.

While he no doubt knew the hills and prairies, he didn't appear to be a working cowboy. He rode a good-looking grey pony and led another grey carrying a heavy pack. His saddle and bridle were good quality, finished off by a quirt and little maguey rope, with a yellow Fish-brand slicker tied on behind.

The stranger said he wanted only board, as he had his own bed and didn't care to sleep in the house. He declared, "I'm not too particular and have the money to pay my own way."

His request was granted; Dad seldom turned anyone away. Dad had traveled and knew what it meant to be without bed and board in a newly settled country of strangers.

The days turned into weeks. Still Joe (as we knew him) lingered in the area. He spent most of his time in Parkersburg, a new town on the new Rock Island Railroad near the Washita River. Parkersburg consisted mostly of twelve saloons, six or seven stores, and a cotton gin. It had quite a reputation for being tough for the few years it held sway at the end of the line before the railroad moved west up the river and Turkey Creek and on toward Amarillo.

Some evenings and stormy days Joe spent at our warm dugout, just visiting, playing dominoes with us or checkers with some happenby cowhand.

The only time I saw Joe make a quick move was when he and a range-riding youngster were playing a close game of checkers. Joe made a foolish move he couldn't change. The other player, through a wide grin, called Joe a disrespectful name Joe apparently had not heard. Before he realized it was only a silly joke, his hand darted quick as a snake's tongue toward a gun under the right side of his coat. He quickly saw he had almost made a serious mistake and joined in the laughter caused by his blunder, which cleared the board.

No matter the weather, Joe slept outside. We noticed he almost always moved his bed to a new location, regardless of where his ponies were staked not far away.

Joe was seldom gone long after dark. Soon after the sun disappeared beyond the red shaley hill, he would come riding in alone to where he had left his bedroll.

One day after he had been with us several weeks, at the place he sometimes called home, he came in earlier than usual. He rode by at a distance from the house, directly to where his packhorse was staked, without giving his usual signal. After tying his bedroll on the pack saddle with a diamond hitch, he stepped into his saddle and rode up to the door. Without explanation, speaking hesitantly, no smile, Joe said, "I am ready to go. If you will tell me what the bill is, I will pay what I owe. I may see you-all again some day; at least I hope so." With a flit of his hand, he turned and was gone. Thus, a friendly stranger passed into the land of somewhere.

Where did he come from? Where did he go? Was his name Joe? Mother said there were tears in his eyes as he turned away to ride over the ridge, away from the setting sun.