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Paradox Undisputed

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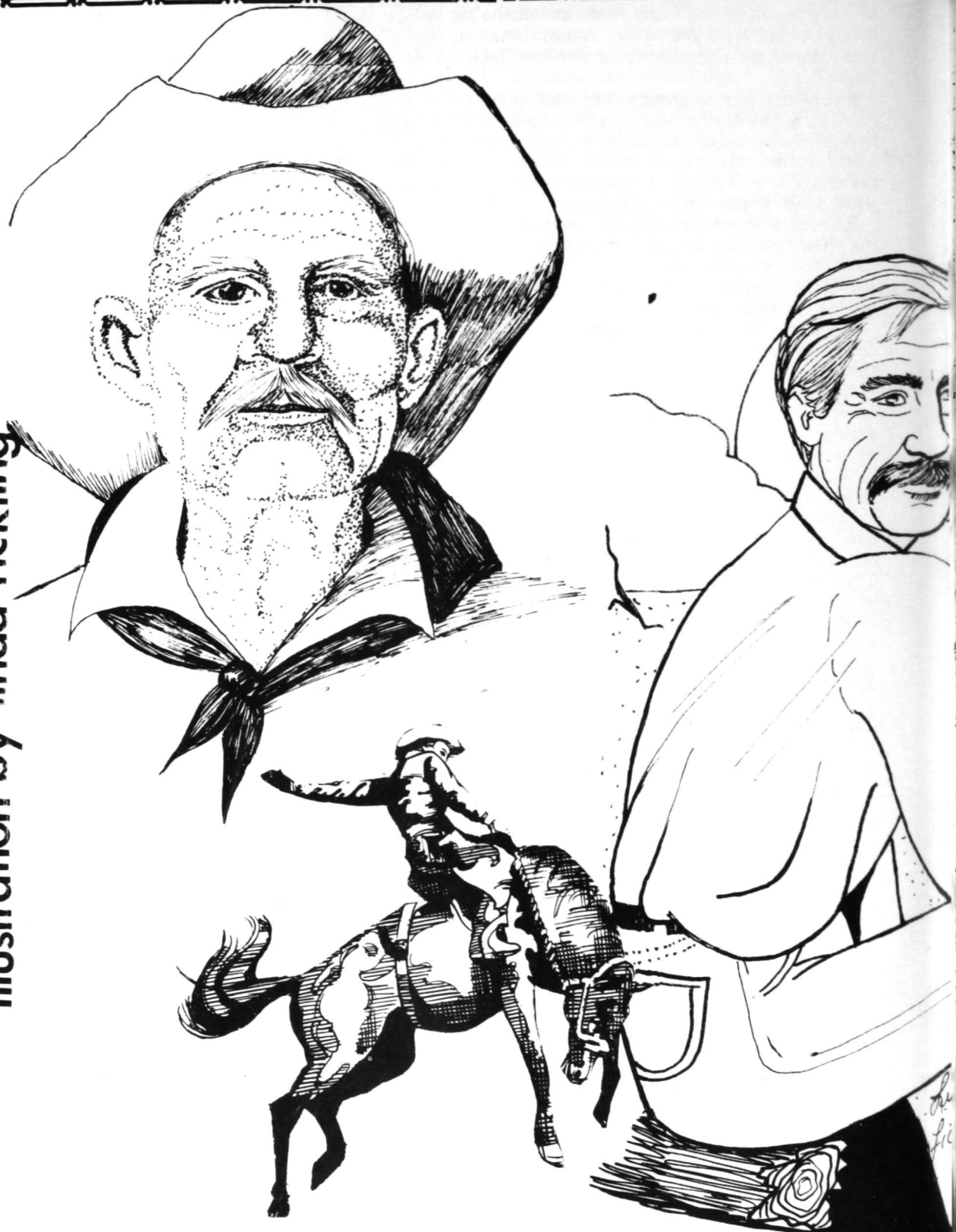
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Paradox Undisputed by Leroy

illustration by linda fickling

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He was bent and wirey, standing about 5' 5" and weighing 140 pounds soaking wet. The day before he died of a heart attack, he had pulled 595 pounds of cotton to his wife's 400 and had personally emptied the sacks containing the combined total of almost a thousand pounds.

The next day, John Elmer Thomas got up at 6:00 a.m. to do the chores. The date was October 15, 1955. Even as he died, he was preparing the breakfast coffee prior to doing the milking and feeding. It was one of his practical ways of saying "I love you" to Emma, his wife of 30 years who was still asleep and who would soon get up to cook the first meal of the day.

With their four children now "out of the nest," Elmer and Emma could take life a little easier. That fall they had been pulling cotton to make money for some extras and on the Saturday of Elmer's death had planned a little trip into the county seat to shop for some new kitchen appliances. But life hadn't always been so easy. . .

Elmer was born on September 12, 1896, in Williamson County, Texas, son of James William and Sarah Jane Thomas. He was the fifth child (third and last son) of seven children. The parents were poor sharecroppers; and when Elmer was still a small baby, the family moved to Greer County, Oklahoma, to try to start over again. Like many other Oklahoma pioneers, however, failure dogged the family's steps in the new land.

An almost tragic accident occurred when Elmer was about five months old. His parents, while they were working in the fields, had left him in the care of two older brothers and two older sisters. He was in a wooden cradle, and his siblings were making sport of jumping over it. Several months passed before Sarah Jane discovered that her baby was crying continually because he had several broken ribs and a caved-in chest cavity.

The accident was the beginning of a series of problems that would bother Elmer all his life. When he was five years old, his father died; and from that time on, he and his siblings had a difficult upbringing.

In any way he could make money--whether it was by breaking horses, resulting in many broken bones, or doing farm chores--he helped to support his mother and three of his four sisters from the time he was a very young man.

Since Elmer had so many family responsibilities, he was never able to go past the second grade in school. As an adult, the only thing he could write was his own name; and the only writing he could read was his signature and that only because he knew by rote what it was.

There being little time for courting in his busy life, Elmer was 28 years old when he married Emma Mullins on February 9, 1924. The newlyweds settled down on a rented farm in Southeast Greer County. But Elmer's obligation to the first family didn't end with his marriage. He was still responsible to his mother, one sister, and a niece.

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"Paradox Undisputed," cont.

Life was difficult for Elmer and Emma during those early years of marriage. Oftentimes Elmer would go into the county seat to buy supplies armed with grocery lists for his two families and return with nothing for him and Emma because his mother and sister's list was too extensive.

Their children came along quickly. Fortunately for the children, Elmer and Emma didn't wreak vengeance in the names they gave them. Emma had been named Margaret Emmaline by her mother, Martellie Albertine, who had named another of her daughters Lela Etheline and a son Joe Lonzo Claud. When Elmer and Emma's first daughter was born in 1925, they named her Juanita. The second child, a boy, Floyd (Pete), was born in 1927. Joyce was born in 1929, and the last child, another boy, Leroy, was born in 1934--thus, two girls and two boys.

Although Elmer didn't remember a father's love and had no father-model, he was a loving, sensitive father. His children remember him nostalgically as one who was kind in his ministrations during their childhood illnesses. One child remembers having very bad earaches and being doctored by a father who applied heat and cigarette smoke to the aching, throbbing ear. Evidently Elmer was sensitive to suffering since he had suffered so much.

Life on that windswept sandyland farm wasn't all darkness and despair--even though there wasn't an overabundance of material wealth. Elmer and Emma always enjoyed telling, for instance, about the Sunday afternoon that they dammed up a creek on their rented farm and pulled out an endless number of channel catfish for their supper.

30 And then an event that has become legend in the Thomas family occurred during the early years of their marriage. Not ever really having a normal childhood since he had worked all his life, Elmer felt that he had to find some enjoyment occasionally.

He liked the taste of alcoholic drinks, and his appetite was often appeased by some young single men in the community who liked to make homebrewed grape wine. They liked the activity partially because it was against Federal law and partially because it was against Emma's law; in short, they liked to make trouble for Little Elmer, as they called him, with his wife.

One day Little Elmer left for the neighbors' farm, and Emma knew where he was even though he had said that he was going "to town." Being an ingenious woman, she knew that he would come home drunk, and she had made plans for his arrival.

By nightfall, Little Elmer had fulfilled her expectations: not only did he come home drunk, but he was also ill. Each time he vomited, Emma, according to plan, laughed. He looked so pitifully helpless and wretched that she couldn't keep from laughing. Then Little Elmer conceived the plan of drinking a glassful of water after each regurgitation. The water only aggravated his condition, which triggered more laughter from his wife.

The next day he was sober but still extremely nauseated. His throat was parched because of thirst; but each time he drank water, he would begin vomiting again. And then of course, Emma's laughter would begin anew. The more she laughed, the angrier he became. But when time came later for reflection, after he had been cured of his malady by the pioneer wizardry of Dr. R. Z. Taylor of Blair, Oklahoma, Little Elmer promised that he would never take another drink of alcohol. He kept his promise and eventually could even laugh when Emma told about his foolishness.

During the long days of winter on the family farm, Emma taught Elmer some things that he had never had a chance to learn as a child: how to read printing and to write his name. Later she would jokingly say, as he kept his head buried in Western magazines throughout the long days of winter, "I wish I'd never taught you to read! I can't get a thing out of you!" He would only smile mysteriously and continue his reading.

His partial illiteracy wasn't pleasing to Little Elmer; and although he was ordinarily very open about things, he never made very much of an issue about his disadvantage. He could figure numbers well in his head, and he could also write down his cotton weights and tally them. Therefore, his deficiency was fairly well guarded.

Since he had never had an opportunity to be schooled, he firmly believed in education. He wanted his children to have the educational opportunities he never had. But still when a teacher unfairly punished his older son, Little Elmer went to the school--intent on whipping the superintendent, who had upheld the punishment, not even considering that the school official was twice his size. The problem was solved, however, because a temper that had boiled up suddenly and erupted was somewhat cooled by the time Father and Son drove into the schoolyard.

Considering the stock he placed in education, Little Elmer found it difficult to approve when one of his sons and later one of his daughters dropped out of school at age 16. Conversely he felt great pride when one daughter finished high school and his other son went on to college. He didn't live long enough to see that same son earn a doctorate.

Little Elmer didn't handle grief well. He was a very sensitive man given to weeping when something touched him deeply. He was manly, but he evidently didn't believe in the theory that "grown men don't cry." He would cry over hurt feelings or over the death or sickness of a loved one. For months after his older son died in an Army camp, he was constantly grieved. His own empathy for mourners made him a prime confidant, for instance, for a neighbor whose wife had died or for anyone else who needed an attentive ear or strong shoulder.

Little Elmer was in one sense a paradox too. He loved his children deeply, but was hard on them almost to the point of brutality at times. His temper would erupt violently and subside quickly. He wasn't disposed to pouting, and he couldn't tolerate it in others--especially his children. He could wield a walloping blow to the body of one of his children and then love him back to submission. He also told them that when they married, that was the end of their living at home: "If you make your bed hard, you'll lie in it." It was possibly because of his declaration that his children formed stable marriages.

Another aspect of the paradoxical in Little Elmer was his insistence on proper pronunciation, regardless of his own lack of education. One of his pet peeves was **wite** for **white**. He constantly reminded his children that the word was **white**.

And he was a paradox in his treatment of his work-horses. If they misbehaved or tried to slack up on work, he would beat them into obeisance; but he was always sure that they were well cared for. If one of his horses died, Little Elmer always provided a deep grave in a secluded area. Once a fiesty horse that hadn't been worked all winter attacked Little Elmer during a routine disciplinary session. The master ended up with a broken collar bone, but he continued to keep the horse on the farm.

Little Elmer was the last person in the community to

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give up his horses. While everyone else used modern machinery, he hitched up his team and plowed straight rows. When he finally bought a Ford tractor in 1950, he grumbled about it. During the next five years, however, he learned the inner workings of that tractor and thus adapted to an easier life without his horses, but he was never able to plow a straight row with a tractor.

Even up to his last days, Little Elmer was a gregarious entertainer. He had favorite sayings like "Oh, he'd gripe if he'uz gonna be hung with a new rope" and "It's as hard to get him to talk as it is to count a hen's teeth." Also the strains of music would make him break into a lively jig. He also could do an impersonation of a dog fleeing itself, which is impossible to illustrate in writing.

He never owned his own farm; he always lived from one crop to the next—always hoping to break even after paying off loans, always working extra for other farmers in the hope of having a few extras. He also kept up his life-insurance policy. When Little Elmer died in 1955, Emma had enough money from the policy to give her husband a decent burial and buy a modest frame home in Mangum. There she lives today at the age of 77—with her memories of fishing for channel cats on a Sunday afternoon, of breaking Little Elmer of the grape wine habit, and of thirty challenging years with that good man.

ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE TOAHTY



Shortgrass Viewpoints

— by Alma Eileen Dill

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CLEAN COTTON GROWING

The cotton rows are long, and the reckless sun
Spills heat profusely on the sagging shoulder
That Jim swings backward — forward. Hoeing is done
By measured effort as the arm grows older.

It's done by looking out across the rows
Already cleaned — and not the ones that wait.
Clean cotton growing cheers a man who knows
How fat, white bales help meet a mortgage date.

THOUGHT AT DAWN

This moist, tender wind is beauty's breath.
A nameless scent, a texture at its core,
Is gentle witness that no gust of death
Can close the spirit's wide and brightening door.

THESE ACRES

*For better, for worse. . . a grudging dry-land farm,
Till death do us part . . . the scarcity, the alarm
That comes to those, at the mercy of chance and weather,
Who have no margin of capital. Together
They have met the seasons, always toiling
With singleness of aim and spirit, foiling
Loss of love and joy, for these acres
Know happy wells — the faith of homemakers.*

TWO WOMEN

She made my garden seem too much abloom;
She had such tailored, sleek, expensive grace.
The car she drove was long as our front room.
Her bored and petulant unhappy face
Smoothed out and looked plain housewifely when she
Examined my hooked rug and crocheted spread'
But when her shadowed eyes looked up at me,
The restlessness had all come back. She said,
"But what in God's name does a woman do
To exorcise her devil off out here?"
Although I knew that she might laugh, I drew
A breath and made my timid voice clear
As I defended my own simpler ways:
"I have no devilish moods — just busy days."