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THE OLD SADDLE

- Charles T. Abernathy
MEMORIES

glimpse once again those golden moments of childhood days? Wouldn’t it be enjoyable to flights of imagination that brightened our quite an imagination. My imagination was adult. The old saddle has a story to tell, that struck my fancy. I’d be Buck Jones, rated by the men who used it. That story that fancy up our saddle to Hollywood standards. It was sweat-stained, scarred, work-worn and Gene Autry had on his saddle, nor was there patched. There wasn’t a trace of silver like story of the old saddle. We missed our first lively daydreams. Those daydreams were so only one we owned. It became a ritual for the saddle. so often repeated by the old-timer who owned ride. The ritual was a combination of the even back in the days when the old saddle was the slow drawled “saddling phrase.” As he we missed a lot of the meaning that phrase had "This is a real working saddle, boys, the sweat his gnarled rope-calloused hands moved in hypnotize us with his skill with a horse and in it. Then too, the Old Timer could nearly that put him squarely and gracefully in the best place to tell where that saddle has been since then, and that’s what I’ve supposed the best place to start this story is with the XIT Ranch itself. The XIT Ranch was made up of the three million acre block of land that the State of Texas called the Capitol Reservation Lands. This land had been the boundary of the Texas Legislature in the 1870’s to be traded to anyone who would build them a State Capitol Building. A group of eastern financiers formed a syndicate and traded the State of Texas a Capitol Building for the land in the 1880’s. The syndicate then started the XIT Ranch with that three million acres of Texas Panhandle rangeland, and several thousand head of South Texas Longhorns.

Soon after the title to the land changed hands the syndicate put out a lot of effort just to establish the property boundaries. When the survey was finalized the ranchland had the following description: Syndicate lands lay along the Texas-New Mexico border for roughly 200 miles north and south. The ranch bordered New Mexico at the west boundaries of Dallam, Hartley, Oldham, Deaf Smith, Farmer and a small portion of Bally County, Texas. The eastern boundary of the ranch lay through Hockley, Lamb and Castro counties to the south, then through the four northernmost counties already mentioned. The tenth Texas county that contained XIT land was a small corner of Cochran county. The northern boundary of the ranch ran roughly along the state lines separating the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles.

This great expanse of land took in a lot of varied Panhandle geography. Starting at the north boundary near Buffalo Springs rolling plains marched southward to the breaks of the Canadian River. The Canadian cut the ranch from east to west, and presented the stockmen with some peculiar problems all it’s own. Rolling plains went south from the Canadian to the Caprock which marked the breaks of the Llano Estacado, or Staked Plains. This topography extended southward and included the bluffs at the south boundary called Las Casitas Amarillas, or Yellow Houses.

I was fresh from the Indian Territory, not yet twenty years old, and very much impressed with the High Plains country. Of course, by the time I came to the XIT the Longhorns had long been replaced with more modern beef breeds. But there were still bands of Antelope and an occasional Loafer Wolf on the XIT.

The country and the wildlife on the vast expanse of the XIT were only a part of the excitement. There was a pride in being a part of the ranch that included ten counties in Texas. That feeling of pride started at the headquarters in Channing, worked it’s way through divisions named Rito Blanco, Buffalo Springs, Middle Water, Ojo Bravo, Spring Lake, Escarbada, Bovina, and finally worked it’s way right down to the individual cowhands.

Remember now, that this ranch was as big as some states back east, and bigger than most European countries. It employed the latest techniques in beef production on an immense scale and was the major economic contributor for a large chunk of the Southwest. So there was a great deal of Chamber of Commerce pride in the XIT that filtered right down to me, a former sodbub from the Territory.

To illustrate that feeling of pride, imagine how I’d feel at age seven when ladies at dances or on the street would ask, “Who’s that fellow wearing the big hat?” and someone would answer, “Why that’s Charley Elston, he rides the rough string for the XIT’s.” That made me feel pretty big, yes sir, and proud to be a part of the XIT."

Listening to Grand-dad tell his experiences on the XIT, we could almost feel the frosty High Plains sunup when the cowhands would rise from their bedrolls on the ground. We could almost smell the breakfast frying and the coffee boiling on the potrack by the chuckwagon; could almost hear the wiry little cow-ponies greet the sun with spirited snorts and whinnies. We could almost feel the bone-wearying fatigue from long hours in the saddle in boiling heat and freezing cold; could almost hear the slow plod of tired horses as they carried the cowhands back to the chuckwagon at the end of the day. Slowly we began to understand why the Old Timer was proud to be an XIT hand and could truthfully say, “It’s a real working saddle, boys, and the sweat goes in from both sides.”

We heard stories of nights when our old saddle sat aboard an XIT cow-pony tied to a hitchrail in Old Tascosa while Grand-dad played cards. We heard how our saddle had been used to break horses for the XIT; and a special story of one of those broncs that bucked two silver dollars out of Grand-dad’s pocket and was promptly named Two-Dollars.

We heard Grand-dad recall the long distances that separated one part of the ranch from another. Distances on the XIT were long, and to a cowhand on horseback it looked like miles and miles of nothing but miles and miles. Good horses were not only necessary for the work, but also made the difference to the cowhands of dying young or living to a ripe old age. Some recollections of an old cowhand of his XIT experiences soon turned to the subject of horses.

We thrilled to the story of how the cowhands came to call a little horse “Two-Dollars” after they picked up two silver dollars he had bucked out of Grand-dad’s pocket. We listened to stories of working cow-ponies with such names as Fiddler, Bay Fiddler, Croppie and Comanche Bill. We heard many tales about the stamina those wiry little ponies exhibited as they carried men and saddles over the long...
distances on the XIT.

The story that always stirred the most excitement and raised our eyebrows the highest was the one about a Loafer wolf and a cow-pony named Rubberneck. This tale combined the color of the country and the excitement of the cowboy life wrapped up in a chase across the XIT.

The wolf race took place west of Old Tascosa on an interesting part of the XIT range. Between the Alamositas division headquarters which lay just north of the breaks of the Staked Plains, and the Rito Blanco division headquarters north of the Canadian River lay some very interesting country. The breaks of the Canadian’s north bank separated the river and the caprock which marked the beginning of a long stretch of rolling prairie. The north boundary of that prairie was the breaks of the Punta de Agua river, a tributary of the Canadian.

This story stirred our imagination because it portrayed a particular excitement found almost exclusively in the life of the American Cowboy. The country was wide and beautiful, the daily work was hard and dangerous. A man’s livelihood and even his life depended on his skill as a horseman. Sometimes an incident could combine those ingredients of beautiful country, hard work, danger and horsemanship in such a way that the end result was fun and a stirring glimpse of independence.

Grand-dad related, “There were several of us camped on the Canadian just west of Tascosa. Our camp was what we called a ‘pot-rack’ outfit, which was just a chuck wagon.

We cooked, ate and slept on the ground. Our job was to move the stock out of the rough country along the Canadian river breaks north toward the Rito Blanco headquarters where the country wasn’t so rough. We would ride along the edge of the breaks early in the morning and catch the cattle out in the open heading back into the rough country.

Some of the stock preferred the breaks and had been there so long they were downright wild. We’d actually have to rope and tie some of those old mossbacks and then drive a bunch of cows around them before we let them up. If we untied them without a bunch of other cows around, they would run straight back into the breaks. Those mossbacks would graze out onto the flats at night and the only time we would see them was in the morning while they were back heading toward the breaks.

Loafer Wolves also liked to live in the breaks and feed out on the flats at night. There were quite a few Loafers on the XIT then, and they posed a definite threat to the herds, especially calves and poor cows. Because of that threat there was a good bounty on wolves. The wolf did his part to set the stage for a good morning’s drama. He was the epitome of the wild freedom of this High Plains setting as he covered the ground easily with long graceful strides. Powerful shoulders sloped back to slim hindquarters. Muscles grown to their prime bunched and rippled causing ray’s of white teeth gleamed in the morning air. I eased him back to a long easy lope. Three miles of the XIT.

Standing on the caprock of the Punta de Agua breaks in the middle of a West Texas High Plains grandeur I felt a sadness for the passing of the wolf. The echo of the heavy blast from the Colt’s rolled into the vastness of the breaks as I watched the sun glisten from the wind ruffled fur. The powerful creature that ruled this land lay dead at my feet there on the rise overlooking his wild domain.

Hearing the horse’s movement behind me, I turned and the feeling of awe and sadness for the wolf passed from me. Seeing Rubberneck’s expression as he slowly moved to my side washed all regret from my mind. We stood side by side for a long moment, savoring our triumph as we stared at our conquered adversary. Feeling an emotion I’d never before experienced, I hugged that horse’s lathered neck. He pawed a time or two and said he liked this too by giving his head a couple of spritely bounces in spite of his exhaustion.”

Through the years as we heard the true story of our old saddle unfold we came to understand Grand-dad’s “saddling phrase” more fully. We realized that there was a real excitement in the story of the saddle which lent in time a sense of perspective to our flights of childhood imagination. This experience has provided us with a bridge between the real and the imagined excitement. It’s left us something of real value, a legacy wrapped up in a phrase and an old saddle.

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