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## Bob Taft

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PHOTO BY CAROLYN LEONARD

## GIANT IN OUR LAND

Taft loved a good joke — especially if it was on himself.

BOB TAFT: SPIN A ROPE, SPIN A YARN,  
SPIN A LADY

— Carolyn Leonard

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The most colorful character who ever lived in Harper County has to be Bob Taft. He could spin a rope, spin a yarn, or spin a lady with equal enthusiasm; and even though in his later years black gold brought him great wealth, he was still just a cowboy at heart.

He met his wife, Ida, at a country dance and in the 46 years of their marriage, they never missed many country dances after that.

"Ya always had to find a gal close to home back then, ya know," Taft would drawl in his deep raspy voice. "Ya had to ride horseback to go see 'em so ya couldn't go looking too far from home. Even if ya had a car, it wouldn't run half the time. Lucky for me, Ida lived just about eight miles away — over by Gate."

Some people said that Taft decided to turn his machine shed into a dance hall because the May OK Corral Dance building burned down. Taft said he just always loved to dance and have a good time with his friends. After the May location burned, his friends didn't have anyplace to go.

"Awww, I don't know," Taft would say with a grin, the crow's feet around his twinkling blue eyes growing deeper. "Guess I just had more damn money than I knew what to do with because of these oil wells. Guess that's why I did it."

And it isn't just an ordinary dance hall either.

The original barn is equipped for basketball games as well as for dancing. The restaurant addition seats 90 people in the splendor of cypress paneling, black leather upholstery, plush red carpet, and a half dozen chandeliers. (Taft's friends were hungry after all that dancing.)

Arthritis attacked his legs, so Taft added an olympic-size heated indoor swimming pool featuring skylights that rolled open, lights that dimmed, a sauna, and a whirlpool hot tub.

The leathery lanky cowpoke's registered Hereford stock sale was held the last Saturday in January as far back as anyone can remember. Wearing the dark pinstripe suit and bowtie that became his trademark and topped with a wide-brimmed black hat tilted at a rakish angle, Taft would take the microphone and salt the auction liberally with his stories.

"That's why they call it a bull sale," he would drawl.

Taft's deep voice moved as slowly as his long legs, with pauses scattered like punctuation marks. One of his friends says those long pauses were what made his stories so interesting.

Milton Messner of Laverne was Taft's partner in the Hereford sale for many years.

"Ol' Bob's been real close to me and we've rode probably millions of miles horseback together in the last thirty years," Messner says.

Messner tells the story that one time one of the bulls wasn't selling very well so Taft grabbed the mike. Most owners would have begun touting the good qualities of the Hereford.

Not Taft.

"This cussed bull isn't worth a damn!" he shouted. "I know he may be sway-back and pot-bellied but he is carrying a hell of a mortgage, and I'll appreciate it if one of you will start the bidding to get him off my hands."

His tirade continued until the bids drowned out the laughter and the bull sold.

"Back there in Governor Roy J. Turner's time, he invited Bob down often just to get to hear his stories. Bob is probably the best-known Oklahoman in the Hereford business," Messner says. "He was voted Hereford man of the year in 1979 and in '78 Bob was the featured speaker at the convention. He had them rolling in the aisles."

In the 1920's Taft worked as a cowboy driving cattle on the old Tuttle trail between Darrouzett, Texas, and Dodge City. Except for that short time, he spent all his 75 years on the 2,500 acre Gig Bar Ranch.

His grandad and grandmother were headed from Kansas to a homestead in Texas where land could be had for a dollar an acre. They had been on the road three weeks when they reached the Oklahoma Panhandle — then a lawless and unclaimed strip known as no-man's-land.

Taft's story was that when they got this far, Mrs. Petty told her husband, "I'm tired. This land looks good enough to me. You can go to Texas if you want to, but this is as far as I'm going."

She meant it.

They stayed and Taft's mother, Mae Petty, was the first white child born in the area. She was born in 1888, the same year the Gig Bar cattle brand was registered.

"It cost my grandma probably a dollar and a quarter to register that brand back then," Taft would say. "Don't know where in hell she got the dollar but she did."

Just a few months before his death early in 1981, at his annual stock sale, Taft hinted that his grandson, Randy Prophet, might be taking over the whole Gig Bar operation.

"I'm slipping already," Taft said. "I'm wearing over-shoes, riding my horse at a walk, and watering my whiskey."

Maybe someday Randy will be able to fill his grandad's overshoes. He has already mastered the spinning rope trick. ■