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The Recollections of an American Cowboy: Reflections Upon the Life on the Range

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I have lived in Texas since 1870, when my father moved his family here from Atlanta, Georgia, where I was born on July 11, 1865. We settled in Dallas, Texas. My father labored at any kind of work he could get to do when we first lit in Dallas. The Civil War sort of tore things up for father back in Atlanta, so he came to Texas calculating on getting a new start. . . .

In 1880 I landed a job with the Red Robinson outfit located eight miles north of Denton on Denton Creek. There I got my learning of the cow business. . . .

I was a greener of the first water when I landed on Robinson's outfit. The only thing that I could do was to sit in a saddle; but to ride a hoss was out of the question, unless the hoss was an easy saddle. . . .

The range life didn't stack up to home life, with a good bed to bunk in and a mother to fuss over fixing the chuck to suit, and such we hankered for, but the work got into my blood and I couldn't leave it. I stayed with the cattle and hoss business so long as I was able to work.

The Denton County range was a brush country, and that kind of a range is no picnic to work. It takes better roping, riding, and more gizzard gravel to stay with the brush range. . . .

The RR was not a large outfit; it run around two thousand head, more or less, according to Robinson's selling and buying activities. Robinson worked from five to ten hands, depending on the season. Negro Joe was the cook, and there was my brother, myself, John Munson, and Joe Jones which made up the steady crew.

We slept in a ranch house and ate in a cook shack most of the time. During the roundup, and occasionally other short spells, we slept in the open and ate our chuck squatted on our haunches around the chuck wagon.

Our chuck run strong to beef and beans. The beef was not considered as costing anything, because the country was full of cattle, and when some beef was wanted, a waddy would rope a fat yearling and never look at the brand. . . . Besides beef, we would have wild game whenever the cooky took the notion or one of the waddies would decide to vary the meat deal by going out and shooting some game. Our bread was biscuits, sourdough, or corn pone. We had some vegetables which came in the can, dried fruit, and all the black

coffee we called for. The cooky would regularly fix up something for our sweet tooth, such as fruit pies made from dried fruit, pudding of some sort, and once in a while a cake. Negro Joe was a good belly-cheater and knew it, but the boys used to hoss-play him a lot, all in fun, and he would hoss-play us back. . . . Once he made a cake with cotton stewed through it. To try and eat that cake sure put sadness in your heart, but we had a tolerable lot of fun about it when we discovered the cause of our eating trouble. . . .

One time the boys sent me out to get a “wouser” that was supposed to be in the creek bottom, because they feared that it would get some of the critters. My instructions were to stay after the animal until I located it and got a shot at it. The boys said, “If the animal is shot at it will leave the section pronto, but kill it if you can.” The animal was described as having a body like a calf and a head similar to a wolf. I left to locate the wouser early in the morning and stayed with the job until dark, but nary a glimpse did I get of the critter. I came into the camp sort of ashamed of myself because I had fell down on the job. I reported how I had watched and sneaked quietly here and there. While I was telling the tale, I noticed that all of the bunch was mighty interested and noticed some smiles. It then came into my conk what had been pulled on me. I then sure enough was riled for a bit.

After about three months, I had gone through all the rackets and was a real rawhide. I was able to ride, rope, and do all the other jobs tolerable well. I got to be a real brush rider. Riding in the open range, with no brush, is sunshine on a winter’s day compared with working in the brush. When a rider is high-tailing it through the brush, it is necessary for him to swing from side to side, dodging limbs, trees, and brush. Then when a waddy can ride in the brush and, at the same time, smear a loop on a critter, that waddy can call himself a cowhand. To smear a critter running in the brush, one must be able to handle a loop from any position.

We were compelled to keep close watch for the rustlers, and they were hard to keep up with because the brush gave the varmints plenty of hiding spots. Robinson did his own topscrewing, and his standing orders were to make buzzard food out of any rustlers that we knew for sure was rustling our critters. . . .

There was a young lad whose father had a small ranch a few miles west of the RR outfit that we all hankered to hang up to dry one time. That young fellow caused one of the worst stampedes I ever had to deal with.

It happened during the dark of the moon one night when we could not see well. The critters were the longhorn breed and could run about as fast as a hoss. They were full of running notions, especially when fretful because of weather conditions or lack of water or feed. That herd had all the water and grass it could take, and the weather was pretty. The herd was bedded down, chewing on their cud and as contented as any bunch of critters could be.

My brother and I were night-riding at the time when we suddenly heard a strange noise off a distance. It steadily came louder, and we could tell it was coming our way. Finally it was passing us. It was that lad, with a cowhide dragging at the end of his rope behind his hoss....

The herd rose, as a flock of ducks do leaving the water, and were off. They went at top speed through the brush. When that herd hit the brush, it sounded as trees do when falling. Riding orders were given to all hands, telling them to get going, but with all of us working it was impossible for us to do anything with that herd. For one thing, it was dark and we could not see where we, or the critters, were heading, and, in addition, they had been scared loco. So all we could do was to try and hold the critters together....

The animals slowed down for a spell but kept going until daylight, and only about half of the herd was together. The whole crew worked two weeks picking up strays. We found some up in Wise County, some in Dallas County, and some in Tarrant County. Part of the crew worked a whole month picking up strays...