

[Early Experiences in New Mexico]

Interview

Mrs. Belle Kilgore

718 Wallace Street

Clovis, New Mexico 1st

JUN 1 1937

2,200 Words Clovis

EARLY EXPERIENCES IN NEW MEXICO

In 1902, I sold a paying photo studio located in Grand Saline, Van Zandt county, Texas, and moved to the plains. I left mu wife and baby at Plainview, Texas, with her mother and came to New Mexico, in October of that year, to look for a new location.

My first stop was at [Texico?], on the state line of Texas and New Mexico. There were two or three stores, several saloons and a two-story wooden hotel. I called for a room and the proprietor, a lady, told me that she could let me have a room with another man, altho'ugh the party was not in just then. She said that he was a nice young man no older than myself. (I was twenty-three) I had lived in the west long enough not to expect eastern accomodations, and assured her that that would be O. K. by me if the other gent did not object. I went out and played pool until about ten o'clock.

When I returned to the hotel there was a glass-eyed [?] looking hombre [sittingin?] the lobby. The landlady introduced him as my roommate. I didn't like his looks, but said nothing. We went to our room which was upstairs. I threw the door open and asked my

Library of Congress

companion to enter and light up. He grabbed hold of my arm, his eyes shot out like a dog-owl's and made a couple of revolutions, as if he had seen a ghost, and said: C10 - N. Mex.

2

"For God's sake, don't go in there!" There's a dead man in there. Can't you see him?"

'You're [?] house," I said and walked into the room and lit the lamp. He [camein?] and witho'ut speaking another word began to undress. I was sore because I tho'ught the man had taken me for a tender-foot and expected to have some fun at my expense.

I said: Guy, I don't know who you are but if you pulled that act a-purpose to scare me you ain't got any busy wasting such [t?] talent a-way out here on the plains, punching cattle. You ought to be able to draw good money as a vaudeville tragedian. But if it is a natural affliction you should buy a nice padded cell to sleep in."

He paid no attention to my poor joke, lay down turned around two or three times like a dog making his bed and was soon sawing wood.

The next day I rode the '[PeaVine?]' to Portales arriving there about night. I called for a room at the hotel. The proprietor was a Mrs. Kidd. She said: "I can [putyou?] with another man. He is a nice fellow. Has a claim near town and comes in pretty often."

Remembering my roommate of last night, I [didnot?] think much of the arrangement, yet it was this or nothing. I paid a dollar for the room and she gave me the key. I had already seen enough of the town to know that it would appeal to my romantic and adventurous nature. I walked out to investigate a littl further 3 before I went to bed. There were a lot of restaurants most of them in the back of the saloons. Every saloon had a gambling room in front. When I was a boy I had knocked around Fort Worth, Texas, with my uncle who owned a saloon and a gambling house. I know that a gambler was a migratory breed that usually traveled west. I was not surprised to see a lot of faces that I recognized, altho'ugh I knew none of them by name.

Library of Congress

Finally I went back to my hotel and turned in. My roommate had not yet come [?] in . I locked the door, blew out the light and went to bed. Soon I was fast asleep. I was awakened by a horrible noise. Someone was coming up the stairs drunk. I recognized the familiar tread of high-heeled boots, the tinkle of large spur rowels. By the time he reached the top of the stairs, he began to call for room number 9. Of course, I knew it was my roommate, but I did not get up just then to unlock the door.

When he reached my door, he shook it and bellowed his war cry, but it was so dark in the hall he did not see the number [a?] and before I could rise and find a match to light the lamp, he had gone on down the hall not noticing that I had lit the lamp and was opening the door. I sat down on the bed and waited for him.

He came into the room with a big Colt's .45 in his right hand and a quart bottle o whisky in the other. It was then that I realized that to be high-jacked in the dark ought to be a blessing to the victim, for he at least is spared the horrid countenance 4 of his assinalts features. This man was not only drunk, but was stark mad and raving crazy. He threw his forty-five in my face and cursed me for everything in the world. He handed me the bottle of whisky and said, "Drink, curse you." Until this day I am glad that it was not [?], if it had been, I would have thanked him and drank.

Afterwards, he himself took a drink his delrium changed. It seemed that some one had jumped or attempted to jump his claim. He would make vile denunciation of the claim jumper and thro'w his gun in my face and cry, "Bullets shall pierce their hearts."

Finally he put his bottle of whisky under the pillow, as carefully as if putting the baby to bed, laid down with his spurs and boots on, holding his six-shooter by his side. At least he went to sleep and after making sure that he was sound asleep I went down stairs and sat in the lobby until morning. The next morning after eating breakfast I walked up to town.

Library of Congress

I had ordered a photograph outfit sent from Dallas, Texas. I went to the depot and found it had come. My way of ordering stuff from the stockhouse was one -fourth down, the balance sent open. But I found out by having been sent outside of the state of Texas, it had all been sent collect, and as it was about \$100 C. O. D. on the equipment, I lacked just \$75 having enough to lift it. I went back to town feeling very discouraged. Here I was in a new country in a new town and as far as I knew I didn't know a soul in the territory. I was agreeably surprised when a young man slapped me on the back and said, "Hello, Charlie, What are you looking so blue about?"

I recognized the fellow as Fred Erosby, a boy who I had gone to school with when we were only kids. Of course, as I had not seen him since we were boys, I had no idea at the time that he could be of any help to me as the main incidents I could remember of him was that we had played hookey together, played keeps with marbles and stole chickens. However, I explained my predicament to him.

"[?]," he says, "let's got to the bank and get the money."

"Bank, hell," I says, "I didn't come out here to rob a bank."

"Well, come on don't feel so blue. May-be-so I can fix it for you."

We went to the bank. Fred walked to the window, introduced me to the cashier as an old friend and said that we had often robbed chicken roosts together. I can't remember the cashier's name, but I can still recall the expression on his face, and the words he used to Fred in reply. "Sure," he says, "of, course, that makes it binding, but what security have you got?"

"Aw, that's all right," Fred said.

Library of Congress

In a few minutes I walked out of the bank with a hundred dollars. I remembered that when Fred was a boy that he had a pretty hard time getting by, as his father was a widower with several small children to provide for.

6

“How come,” I said to him, “that you are now able to act good [Samaritan?] to a broken bum and to address a banker on such familiar terms[.?] as that?”

“Oh, it's just luck,” he said, “I took up a quarter section right out there and these people built schoolhouses, churches, banks, saloons and gambling houses right on top of it, so thro'ugh the process of evolution, I find myself in town with a pocket full of rocks.”

I rented a building and by night, I had a well equipped studio. There was another studio in town run by Reeves Manker of New York and it was known as the Kid Studio. Reeves was a fine fellow, but on account of his eastern polish he didn't take well with the New Mexicans at this date. However, he and I were good friends as long as he stayed in town. He was, also, operator of the telephone office and was always having trouble with the telephone customers.

One day he came over to my office very much excited and told me a story that was very typical of New Mexico in that day. It seemed that he had got into a dispute with a customer and [?] this customer came down to the office and slapped him. Reeves reached for his handkerchief to wipe the blood from his face, [b?] but his opponent had thro'wn a gun in his face before he could get his hand out of his pocket and dared him to draw. Of course, Reeves didn't understand this kind of a customer.

7

I told him that he must remember he advertised as The Studio Kid and by using that name it was like thro'wing a red flag in the face of a westerner. The only kid these people

Library of Congress

knew was Billy the Kid, who would not only have expected it, but would have been fully prepared for such a draw.

Now before I say anything else, I want to say the life of a town to me is like the life of an individual, it has its childhood, its youth and its mature stage. If the individual ever amounts to anything it depends on its early train of its parents So it is with a town. When I first visited Portales it was in its youth, it had been a wild child and was a big handful for [i?] its city dads, who fortunately never all wed ti to get beyond their control altho'ugh they sometimes had to use peculiar metho'ds.

Roswell was the [??] court of autho'rity and as that was before the coming of the automobile the citizens did not always feel it necessary to spend their time and money to worry the court with minor affairs.

I recall one incident of this kind. A vagabond stole \$30 from a monte table. He was not sent to jail, nor was he fined, but he was strapped over a barrel and was given 30 lashes and told to leave town. This had the desired effect. There was no more shop lifting in Portales. As I remember, the first real court I ever saw in Portales was when Club Foot killed Billy Farris. Of course, Club Foot had another name, but I have forgotten what it was. However, as I attended the trial, I know that he came [?], and was adjudged innocent by the court.

8

I remember this case on account of the Cowboy connected with it. The Cowboy was a girl, Of course, it is nothing unusual now to see a girl with short hair, dressed in men's clothes, wearing boots and spurs and sombrero, but remember this was in 1902. It was said that [?] the cow outfit that she had rode in with picked her up some place along the Texas line and she had made such a good cowhand that none of them recognized her as a girl until they reached town.

Library of Congress

Anyway, it was not long after that when her man was shot. Judge Evans was the territorial judge at that time. He lived at Roswell and an other reason why I remember the case so well,[,] the [,?] Judge was a friend of mine. I had known him since I was a little boy. He was county judge in Coleman county, Texas, where I was born. I also recall a little innocent joke they used to tell on the judge in Texas. He was a quail hunter and used a single barrel muzzle-loading shotgun. The tube was loose on his gun so he [seldom?] got but one shot at a time for when he shot the tube always blew off his gun and by the time he found it the birds would have all flown away. He would be looking around int the woods, muttering to himself:

“Where is it at? Where has it gone?”

Afore I find it, the birds ‘ill be gone.”

Anyhow, Judge Evans was conducting the case. [?] Cowboy was called to the witness stand, and the judge asked:

“What do you know about this case?”

“I was living with Billy Farris.”

9

“Were You there when the shooting came off?”

“I was in the restaurant after Billy's breakfast. I got the breakfast on a platter and went back to give it to him and he was lying on the floor and Club Foot was beating him with his gun.”

“Do you know if Billy's gun was loaded when you left the room?”

“No, it was not loaded.”

Library of Congress

“Why do you know it was not loaded?”

“Billy and I walked down the railroad track late yesterday evening and Billy shot all his shells practicing at a target.

“Why were you and Billy so thick?”

“We were planning to go in business together.”

“What kind of business?”

“The highway robbery business.”

I was in Portales some months ago and I noticed a few oldtimers still there that probably remember the Cowboy, but they have been voting the prohibition ticket so long, I doubt if they would admit it. However if you should look over the territorial files of Judge Evans in the last of 1902 or the first of 1903, I am sure that you will find this to be a recorded fact.

Shortly after opening up my studio, a young man by the name of Henry Watkins came from my home town. He worked at the drug store and I let him room with me. It was one of the coldest winters I have ever known on the plains and to make matters worse we had a real coal famine and Henry got down with the measles 10 and there was no place to move him. Of course, it was practically the same as closing my business as the children were two-thirds of the pictures taken. The worst of it we got cold and there [w?] was no fuel to buy. By providence or mistake or some unknown [r?] reason, the Santa Fe side tracked a car of coal. It was billed for some other town, but the next day the car was carried out empty and people were warm and happy. The next day was Sunday and I [wnet?] to church. I expected the text to be, “The way of the Lord is mysterious and past finding out.” but it wasn't.

Library of Congress

The telephone company [?] operators. Reeves Manker of New York was succeeded by Alonzo Bowen of Albany, Texas. He was quite a contrast to Reeves. 'Lonzo was a big vaunting bully with a habit of making this [?] good. When he first came to town, he came looking for a scrap.

One day he told me that he believed that he would have to go to Reno to get someone to fight him. I told him that there were plenty of men in Portales that could lick him. His eyes lit up like a lover's that just recognized the object of his affection and asked, "Sure, you don't mean that you will attempt it?" "With pleasure," I said.

We went all overtown trying to get gloves and a house to fight in. We found a pair of cheap gloves but had to fight the bout in the street. We had no referees. We just fought until we were both give out. I was still on my feet, but my right lamp was out, however, I saved [?] my friend 'Lonzo the fare to Reno.

Told by Chas B. Kilgore