

## [Noah Armstrong]

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Range-Lore

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San Angelo, Texas.

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RANGE-LORE

Noah Armstrong, Ex-Texas Ranger and retired ranchman, came with his parents from Lincoln County, Missouri to Bell County, Texas when he was only one year old.

“My childhood”, says Mr. Armstrong, “was spent on the open range with my father, who owned the first horse ranch in Navarro County. Dealing in horses made our danger from the Indians much worse than any other business we could have been in and on moonlight nights father would give the hired boy and me a gun each and he would take two of his best guns and we would guard our horses. We usually had about 1,000 head. Many were the times that we fired into Indians sneaking upon our horse camp at night. C12-Texas 2 Usually a few shots would frighten them away and we had only to be on guard an moonlight nights. On one occasion my father was severely ill and had only the hired boy and me to put on guard. Mother insisted that she take father's two guns and go out with us but he would not let her go. I was only ten years old at that time and had been helping this way for two years. On this particular night the boy and I went out and you would think the Indians had known father was ill. We hadn't more than settled ourselves until we saw six redskins coming up to the horses about half bent. We opened fire as we had done

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before but we must have been too scared to hit them or they saw only the two of us, as they rushed into the group of horses, mounted one each and rode furiously away. We fired again as they left but never got one of them. Father had heard the shots and mother said he was too delirious the balance of the night for her to leave him long enough to come see about us. We never heard of our horses again, but father recovered and lived until I was about grown. After his death I got a job on the Slaughter Ranch and my boss sent a Mexican boy with me to take a bunch of horses to Erath County. When we delivered them, the fellow gave us a check for them. Our boss had sent word that he make out a certain amount to us so we could get home. We walked ten miles to the nearest town and when 3 we presented our check it wasn't any good. We were both just a couple of kids and didn't know anything else to do but start hoofing it in. The Mexican had 35¢ and thought we could live always on that. His lack of concern was as provoking as our plight. I didn't have a penny and was as mad as an old wet hen. The Mexican had kept his halter, so he sold that for a trifle and felt that we should be able to make a trip around the world on that and his 35¢. He made me feel that he was doing me a great favor to share with me and help me to get back home. He bought a bottle of molasses and some crackers and this was to be our fare for the several days we tramped our way back home.

“One night after we had walked all day we lay down under a big tree for the night. I was tired but it was a moonlight night and to this day I get jittery on moonlight nights. The Mexican fell asleep at once but tired as I was I could not sleep and kept feeling that an Indian might appear at any moment. After I had rolled around awhile though, my exhausted condition got the better of my fear and I fell asleep. Pretty soon I felt something nudging me in the side, thinking it was my partner I opened my eyes to see a big bear standing right over me. How I ever remembered that I had heard a bear would never molest a dead man I do not know, but for some reason I did not move but lay so dead still that after sniffing and nudging around over me for awhile he went on his way as if 4 nothing had happened. I was too disturbed to sleep, though, and as I lay tossing about trying to rest my weary bones I heard foot steps creeping up to us. I sat up as two big ugly

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Indians came up and told me they were hungry and only wanted food. I knew their manner too well to refuse them, so I gave them the syrup and crackers and they went on their way. The Mexican slept right on through the whole thing and was sulky and angry next morning when I told him how I was forced to give up the food. We made it back home, finally, and our boss thought by our being so long that we had collected for the horses and left the country. When we gave him his check and explained about ours he was plenty sore. He finally got his money but it took him a long time and I had joined the Texas Rangers before I ever got mine for that trip.

“When I joined the Rangers in 1876 my company was stationed at Pecan Springs in Runnels County. Our captain got orders to look out for one Bone Wilson. He was an outlaw and had killed the sheriff of Erath County. Captain Sparks took us out to scout around and look for him. Finally we struck his trail in the Santa Anna Mountains and trailed him across the Colorado River through Salt Gap and on by Rock Springs. We lost his trail there and could not pick it up again. After several days we heard of a mysterious bunch around Snyder, Texas. Captain Sparks took five of us and started for Snyder. We came 5 upon a big plum thicket, some ten or fifteen acres, and as we went around it investigating as best we could, we saw a new trail leading to the interior. We were sure this was the place so we started single file down the long narrow path. When we rode upon them, a cousin and brother of the outlaw were making coffee and roasting buffalo meat over a campfire. They gave up readily and told us that Bone had gone out to kill a buffalo. We hoped for as good luck with him as there was a \$1500.00 reward on his head. We had always rather bring them back alive if possible and he had boasted that he would never be taken alive. Captain Sparks left three boys with the prisoners and took the other fellows and me with him. We picked our way back to the outside and he stationed us around the entrance, telling us to wait until he had called, halt! and if he didn't surrender then, to shoot his horse from under him and he was sure that would make him give up. We had about an hour to wait before we saw him come riding up with a sack of meat and two buffalo hides on his horse. 'Halt! Halt! Halt!' shouted our captain, and with the first sound, Wilson's

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buffalo gun went to his shoulder as he pulled the trigger. He would have killed one or all of us if a bullet had not hung in the gun. As he did that we shot his horse from under him, but instead of giving up he fell down behind his horse and pulled his two six shooters, firing as we shot him. 6 “The other three boys were told to take their prisoners to jail while we got some conveyance to carry Wilson's body back to Erath County for our reward. We got a wagon and some harness and used our own horses alternately on the long trip back. We put the body in the wagon bed and piled mesquite bushes over him and started about sundown that day. We traveled all that night, all next day and part of the next night before we got to Coleman; there were no roads nor bridges and not many trails, we just had to take a course through the woods and do the best we could. One man was sent on ahead on horseback to select the best crossings on streams and he would often have to go up and down a stream for hours before a place could be found for a wagon to cross. Just before we got to town we had to cross a little draw and the moon was just bright enough for the Indians to be out. We were leading our spare horses and pack mule and when two big rusty Indians sprang from the bushes with knives in hand to cut the horses loose we let 'em have it. This brought several arrows from the bushes all around us but no one was hurt by them and all the Indians ran except the dead one.

“We went on into Coleman about 10:30 p.m., exchanged our wagon for a hack, which was a much lighter vehicle, got a few hours sleep, some black coffee and bacon and started on before daylight for Erath County. We reached 7 Stephenville, turned the body over to the authorities and received our reward. The state had offered \$500.00 while the citizens had donated \$500.00 and a section of land. This was rightfully divided and one of our boys, Gus Young who fell heir to the land, still lives on it and has done well.

“On another occasion we were stationed at Double Mountain Fork above Fort Griffin. On moonlight nights our captain would send us out in every direction to scout around for Indians. One night when we had gone fifteen or twenty miles from camp, we struck a trail and thought at first that it was a mustang trail but as we followed it we came upon a smouldering campfire and the remains of a buffalo. Part of the hind quarter had been cut

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away and roasted. We proceeded further and came upon a row of Indians going down the path single file. We opened fire as we were accustomed to doing and killed two of the Indians. They returned our fire as they ran. We chased them right on into a white camp and found to our dismay that we had been chasing Government Indians who had been sent out with United State Officers from Fort Sill to show them how to hunt buffalo. We came pretty close to serious trouble and did have to go into court over killing the Indians, but it was settled in our favor. On one of our skirmishes the captain sent two of us boys out around Paint Rock. About half way between Paint Rock and Salt Gap we saw a man coming riding along meeting us. When he got within about forty yards of us he opened fire with a winchester and we of course returned the fire at once. He fell from his horse, ran to the side of the road, jerked off his boots and died almost immediately. We went on into town and got the officers who returned with us and identified him as one of the Taylor boys and told us that he must have mistaken us for the Suttons, explaining that an old family feud between the Taylors and Suttons had grown to shooting on sight and that my partner really resembled one of the Suttons very much. This Taylor boy had always said he would never die with his boots on, was why he jerked them off.

“We went on many bear, deer, and antelope hunts. We enjoyed them all and always brought back the game.

“Once, a new fellow by the name of Wylie joined our force and was showing off his skill by doing what he called the John Wesley Hardin stunt, which was to cock his gun as it left his hip and shoot as he came up with it. Somehow the gun hung and he shot a hole clean through his hip. It was only a flesh wound and soon healed but we guyed him about his Hardin stunt until we nearly ran him out of camp.

“I shall never forget the first time I ever saw San Angelo. There were six-hundred negro soldiers stationed at the post then and I thought it was the blackest town I ever saw, with nothing but saloons, gambling houses, and dance halls.

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"We had been Indian scouting on the plains for a 9 month and Captain Sparks decided to go into Angelo. We got into the Sarg. Nasworthy Saloon and all got to drinking and gambling. Our boys seemed to lose heavier than usual but we considered it all in a day's fun and made the dances that night. In one place we were dancing around and a negro soldier danced right into one of our boys. We looked around and saw a whole bunch of negroes dancing all around us. There were about thirty of us rangers. We grabbed bottles, chairs, guns, anything at hand, and started knocking out negroes. This broke up the negro part of the dance, but the few who got away went to the fort and reported to Colonel Grierson, who was at our camp by daylight next morning, demanding Captain Sparks to apologize to his negroes. This so infuriated Sparks that he replied, 'To Hell with your damn black skunks, I can take my thirty rangers and whip every damn negro in your whole fort'. The next night a bunch of buffalo hunters came into town, shaved and cleaned up and made the dances. The negroes, backed by Grierson, were laying for our bunch. When the buffalo hunters appeared on the dance floor the negroes turned loose on them and killed several before they discovered it was not our men. Colonel Grierson reported our Captain to Captain Steed at Austin and he was discharged. I have heard that he died seeking to get even with Grierson.

"In our ranger company we had many good shots but Booger Red was the best rider I ever saw. It seemed the 10 horse never grew that he couldn't ride. I have seen him ride 'em when I could hear his neck a poppin' every jump and often wondered how he came off alive but he always did. I had an old stool dust horse I always wanted him to try. He was the meanest horse I ever saw. I finally traded him to a boy who was famous for breaking wild horses. He thought he had him pretty well broke and traded him to the sheriff's brother at Cisco. He went on pretty well for awhile so the fellow broke him to work to the buggy. Just when he thought he was safe, he took his wife and little boy to church one Sunday and as they were returning that blamed horse threw one of his old time fits and kicked everything to pieces, threw the man and his wife out and kicked the little boy in the head and killed him. The man had his brother, the sheriff, to sell him to the highest bidder, who

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happened to be a bronc rider who took him to another part of the country and we never heard what became of him.

"I attended the first funeral ever held in Coleman, the one which started the present Coleman graveyard. A Doctor Shannon came to Coleman and established a small ranch on Home Creek near Santa Anna. His son was left in college to finish the term. When he was through school he came out to his father's new ranch and was delighted with the cattle and the whole business. His father had penned one of the biggest bulls to treat him for worms, so the boy went to the lot and admired the fine brute so 11 much he decided to get in the lot and pet him. He had not more than entered the pen when the bull made a fatal plunge at him, ripping open his abdomen and goring him to death. This was the first person ever buried in Coleman. The doctor sold out everything and returned to Chicago. Some fifteen or twenty years later he returned to Coleman, had the remains taken up and cremated.

"The second man to be buried there was murdered. His name was Polk and he was killed near Coleman as he was going up the trail, by curly headed Tom Smith who had differences with Polk, and when they met Smith dismounted and asked Polk to fight him. It is thought that Polk was unarmed when Smith shot him. I also attended this funeral.

"I knew a couple of Englishmen, Frank and Claude Anson here in Coleman in an early day. Their father was an Earl and owned a whole town in England. They told me that their father collected rents off of every house in that town and that it was a large town. He had given each son \$100,000.00 and they had bought ranches north of Coleman. Neither of them had any horse sense and so were not very successful. All the English people I ever met trying to ranch were the most ignorant people I ever saw. Four of them came to Abilene with some money to invest in ranches. One old cowboy took advantage of their ignorance and told them that for \$500.00 each he would give them a year's training as ranchmen. They bit 12 and he took their \$500.00 each and worked them nearly to death that year as common cowhands.

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"I knew Tom Ketchum when I saw him and while I was not too familiar with the details of his scrapes I have heard that he wasn't as bad as he was painted and that he was driven to some of the dark deeds which he was said to have committed.

"I attend the Rangers' Reunion in Dallas every year and am among the oldest. Last year I met one of the old boys of our company. I thought he had gone on but we were happy to meet and he gave me the words to a favorite old song, "The Key Hole in the Door". We used to sing it on the range and it was considered a little off color then, but not in these modern times.

"My love for the open range was what sent me out this far from town to build my home, and my exposure to cold and the lack of shelter on the range made me resolve to die in a good house, so I built this big house of my own native rock here at the foot of Robinson Park, where the chill of winter never hurts very much.

"I still have my old buffalo skinning knife and the tie pin I am wearing is made of an arrow head nearly as old as I am. One of the jewelers in Coleman mounted it for me in this beautiful gold mounting.

"My pipe I still light with this chandelier. Just strike this old piece of file against my flint and this 13 little tight roll of cotton which I carry in this cartridge hull is always dry and ready to light from the sparks, so I'm going down my last hill about as near like I would have it as most anyone I know. My wife is dead and my children all married; but my turkeys, chickens, cows, and sheep are good company and I'm not so lonely as one might think."