

[J. H. Smith]

Range-lore

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Maverick, Texas

RANGE-LORE

J. H. Smith was born at Milford, Ellis county, Texas, March 4, 1855. He moved to Runnels County in 1874, and later in Clay, Kimble and Coleman Counties, working on different ranches in those counties.

“Mr. Smith says: “My father had a few cattle, and I learned about them while I was growing up.

“We had to learn how to take care of ourselves in them days. and do many things that called for courage and skill. When I was fifteen years old, my brother, a year or two older, took typhoid fever. The doctor told my father he'd have to travel, move him to a higher climate or he would die. So father rigged up on old buggy, put in some bedding, grub, a few clothes, a little medicine and a gun and brother and I 2 started out. I was going to cut across country toward New Mexico. We meant to camp at Ft. Worth the first night, but missed our route. We came in sight of a house about dark and found the family living there frightened and grief-stricken. The Indians had visited them the night before and stolen all their horses and killed one of their boys. I didn't sleep much that night for fear that the Indians might come back.

“The people begged us to wait a day or two before moving on, but we left early the next morning. After a day or two my brother began to improve, and in two or three weeks he

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was well, and so we returned home, without encountering or ever seeing an Indian on our whole trip.

“I worked on a ranch at Trickham, Coleman County, when first coming to the West. I made a trip from Trickham to Ballinger when there were only two houses on the route. They belonged to Rich Coffey and Nat Guest. I never saw the like of wild game there was out here then, and we still had to look out for Indians some after I came west.

“We followed the old Ben Ficklin trail when we moved to Runnels County. We got quite a little Indian scare before we got there. We intended going around Santa Anna Mountain, but when we got there we saw a fire beside the road that the Indians couldn't have abandoned more than an hour before. We turned another way and drove until we got in the mud so badly we had to make camp for the night. After we crossed the creek next morning we saw five moccasin tracks. They had crossed our trail again. I felt we had just narrowly escaped an encounter with the Redskins.

“I worked for a time on the Harris McNelly ranch south of the San Saba river and near Richland Springs. There was one of the prettiest springs I ever saw bubbling up right from under the corner of the ranch house. I learned to ride broncs, rope and brand with the best of 'em while there.

“I lived in what was known as North Texas for nine years, working on the Block ranch in Clay County, and also for a while in Jack County.

“The cattle owners had lots of things to contend with then, not only cold weather and drouths but some times fatal cattle diseases. While I was with the Block outfit, somebody brought in some diseased cattle one winter from another state and gave it to all the cattle in that locality. Cattle died by the thousands. They claimed they lost sixty per cent of their herds from that one disease.

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“There was quite a bit of trouble during the wire cutting period. Three men were killed in a half mile of my place. On the Block ranch which was a large one, they built a scaffold and put a dummy up, waving its hands. It meant for were cutters to keep away or suffer the consequences. 4 “The big ranches often took advantage in fencing the free range. The little men needed the free range and felt resentful toward the more prosperous cowmen who could afford to buy and fence it.

“A big general round-up was a pretty sight to see in open range days. All the different outfits would meet and gather cattle, sometimes from two or three different counties. Every rancher would cut his cattle and take them home or drive them to market.

“The worst stampede I ever saw happened at the head of Lompassas [Lompasas?] river. We had about a thousand steers. Three of us was holding the herd one night during a cold drizzly rain from the northwest. The cattle had become restless and drifted toward camp. The cook went to get some wood and disturbed the cattle. They began to stir more than ever. One of the men was on a frisky horse. He became frightened of the cook, too, and started running. Away went our herd. We started riding to try to turn them. They ran on to a gulley. The other fellow's horse hit it first as he had managed to get in front of the herd. When his horse fell it threw him on the other side of the gulley. A few of the cattle fell into the gulley, too, but the herd turned. I managed to keep up with them, and got them started to milling. When daylight came, I found myself several miles from camp, cold, hungry and tired. We lost two steers that had fallen into the gulley, 5 but I guess we were lucky not to have lost more.

RANGELORE:- J. H. Smith, Robert Lee, Texas. Interviewed July 6, 1938.