

[Elbert Croslin]

Life History 108 C.12-2/11/41-Texas

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Phipps, Woody

Rangelore

Tarrant Co., Dist. #7 Elbert Croslin, 51, born on his father's stock farm in Lamar co., Tex. Croslin was taught to ride a horse at an early age but was never employed on a ranch. Instead, he was a nester and a rodeo performer, and met several famous rodeo performers. His rodeo career ended in 1910, and he now resides in the Stratford Hotel, Houston Tex. His story:

“Well, I've been about everything else in my life but a cow poke. I rode freight trains into New Mexico when that was still a pretty wild place, met Billy the Kid, outrode most of the cow pokes I ever rode with sin the rodeos I rode in, settled a claim and proved it up, run drug stores and sold moonshine. I could tell you a wilder tale about running rot-gut liquor than I could about riding hosses and wet-nursing cows but that's what you want so here goes nothing.

“First, I was born on my dad's stock farm in Lamar county, Texas, on June the 21st, 1885. If somebody'd rushed the stork up about three days, all the niggers all over the country could celebrate on my birthday. Well, about the farm. Dad didn't have but a few head of cows and a couple of hosses. Just enough to get under the rope as a stock farm.

“While I wasn't doing something on dad's place, I was riding anything that'd hold me up from a hoss to the old billy goat we had. I would have rode the tim cat but he couldn't hold me up. I never got a whipping in my life that wasn't for riding one of dad's yearling. I

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mightn't have been so hot for riding them but all the kids around about rode them and we had riding matches to see which one was the best rider. Now, you can well believe that we had some [?]ing around there. Sometimes we'd find an extra tough yearling [?] owner wouldn't let us ride him so we'd do it at night when 2 they were asleep. Old Hugo Alread still carries some bird shot in his setter where one of them got wise and opened up on us. Hugo lives in Bonham, Texas, now. He always got the worst of anything. If we were caught swiping a few watermelons, he'd get caught. He was just that kind of a guy.

"I spoke of rodeos awhile ago. We didn't have rodeos when I was a kid. Nearly all the riding was done at the county fairs, picnics, and First Mondays. First Monday is the first Monday in a month and was a tradesday at Bonham. People would come from all over to sell or trade anything they thought they could make a little on. Some people made a living going from one town to another and trading on the day set aside for tradesday. It wasn't nothing unusual for a small carnival to be there and have crooked games for suckers. You could always see gamblers at them. The gamblers actually lived off the suckers they'd meet on these days. Nearly every tradesday, some fellow would have a mule or a hoss he didn't believe anybody could ride and he'd charge you so much to ride it. If you made the ride, you won the prize he offered. If you lost, you lost the money you put up. Then, sometimes a fellow would show up with a mule or a hoss to sell, and for excitement, the bystanders would make up a purse for some fellow if he rode the critter. Then, the way they'd make their money back would be to bet on the outcome of the ride.

"My first money made for riding a hoss was at a First Monday in Bonham. My dad had brought me in with him, then left me to watch the team and wagon. I happened to be standing close to where some men wanted to make up a purse and have some one ride a hoss. One of them said to me, 'Sonny, can you ride?'. 3 "I answered, 'I can ride anything I've seen yet'.

"I must have rung the bell for them because that suited them to a T. They made up a purse of \$25.00, then showed it to me. Some way or other, one of the fellows says, 'Kid, that

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hoss is a cinch for a cigar store Indian, let alone a good rider. You wont have to worry. Just pile in the saddle 'til we tell you to get off and you've made the easiest money you'll probably ever make'.

“One of the other fellows says, 'Better be careful, kid. He might be telling you this to make you too sure of yourself. Best thing to do is get in the saddle prepared for some pure dynamite. Then, if he takes you to town, you'll be prepared and if he don't, you won't be tumbled.' Way I figure it now is that the first fellow had some money on me to lose and the last had some to win. I knew I'd better win if I wanted that money and I wanted it. Why, I was just a kid and \$25.00 was important dough in those days. I could buy a good suit at the store then for \$5.00, and a week's supply of candy for a dime so you see how I wanted the money.

“I'll never forget that ride as long as I live because I was so anxious to ride, and it was my first. The hoss's name was, 'Old Blue'. A couple of the fellows got to me a good saddle, the rest of the stuff was on the hoss. They then helped me to get on him good, then when they turned me loose, one of them said, 'Kid, you're on your own'.

“I was in the saddle a full ten minutes. If you know anything atall about time in a saddle, that's as long as two month's in any man's life. That hoss took me every direction you can look, then threw in a couple for good measure. What a ride! He even pitched out toward a ditch and fell in it! I was on my P's and Q's 4 and saw the ditch thing might happen si I was prepared to quit the saddle at the right time. If the hoss had caught one of my feet under him, I'd have been crippled for life and I knew that. It so happened that he fell in a way that I could ease my right foot out to get up in the ditch, then when he did make it, I was in the saddle as he came up. Not only in the saddle but fanning the hoss with my big hat like a real rodeo performer. Man! Man! That was the stuff.

“That ride made me around Bonham. I could have any gal that I cared for, and I was going with them then even if I was kind of rushing my time up a little. That \$25.00 prize still

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makes me feel good when I think about it. I didn't have a cent of it a week later but I had a good time for sure. I bought me a suit, a new stetson hat, riding boots, and a big yeller handkerchief. Man! Man! Was I the cock of the walk. I always was kind of a hand to brag on anything and this gave me something to brag about. Of course, it was a good ride and the men bragged on me too. This cost me many a fall after that because they'd bring some real broncos in, knowing they'd get some money bet when the regulars around there found out I was going to ride.

"I took so many falls that it hurt my pride quite a bit. It hurt me so bad that I didn't even want to stay around so I caught some freight trains and went to New Mexico. While I was in Portales, I was interested in a poker game. I was what you call, 'Sweating the game'. This is a practice all gamblers disapprove of strongly. If I had been raised in that country, I'd have been leery of the game in the first place because each player had a six shooter on the table in front of him. This first took my eye, then the high stakes they 5 were playing for and the gold coins stacked in front of each player kind of run my eyes out on a stem. I'd seen money like that in banks before but not out in public. I was thinking to myself that they'd ought to be scared of a holdup even if they did have a gun on the table in front of them.

"I happened to know a little about playing poker and the man I was sweating made a play that I thought was very foolish. I felt so keenly that I made my presence known by grunting. He jumped around so quick that I never realized he was moving 'til he was facing me, and Lawd! Lawd!, he had his six shooter pointed at my biscuits. He saw that I was just a kid and picked me up, carried me to the door, and threw me out on the board walk without ever saying a word. Then, he turned around and the swinging doors shut him off from my sight.

"I walked around town, and the more I thought about the matter, the more I got madder. I thought I was some pumpkins and I also thought that since they didn't know me, I could get away with tough stuff and they'd just think I was sure tough. Fact of the matter is, I

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really did think I was tough and I actually packed a small caliber pistol. I wasn't fool enough to pack it around with me but kept it up in my hotel room. Well, I finally made up my mind to get that pistol and go kill the man.

“By the time I'd gone to my room, got the pistol and come down to the hotel lobby, word had gotten around town what had happened and the hotel man came to tell me that I'd better get out of town. The first he saw of me was when I came from the stair well with the pistol in my hand. His face got white as paper, then when I got to him, he snatched the pistol out of my hand and said, 'Kid, you wouldn't have a chance with that man! Why, he's Billy the Kid! One of the 6 best and fastest pistol toters the world have ever seen'. I finally ended up by catching the first freight out of town and back toward home without my pistol.

“After I got back home, I had quite a few tales to tell about the cow punchers and did I tell about Billy the Kid. Of course, it goes without saying that I never told what really happened between him and me. The tale I told had a different ending. In fact, I told it so many times that I got a little twisted up and the old timers got to where they didn't even believe that I ever got out there. I didn't care because I had the young ones all bulled up and that was what I really wanted to do.

“I finally ran out of something to tell the folks about and decided to go back and settle on a piece of property. I told every body good bye for a few months, then lit out again. I landed in Portales in February 1906. After I prospected around a little, I got an asthmatic old fellow to go out with me and survey me quarter section of land. The piece I decided on was about 40 miles South of Portales, at Tivan, which was about halfway between Portales and Roswell, New Mexico. It's been so long ago that I don't recall just what all I had to do to hold the land but I didn't do any more than I had to do. I think you had to sleep so many months on the place, plow up so much, and build so much. Just as soon as I proved my place up, I lit out for back home.

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“Oh yes. Let me tell you about the way the surveyor laid the place off. He went to what he figured was the corner of the place, sighted a place off a ways, then druga sled in a straight line toward the place he had sighted. That way, you had a property line and a road too. Lots cheaper than the roads they build today. 7 “I didn't take a train back the way I did before. I had a chance to go as far as Stinking Springs with a trail herd so I took it up for another chance to see Billy the Kid again. Stinking Springs was his hangout. I was disappointed though, because a fellow by the name of Pat Carrett had already killed him somewhere. I think that's the way it was. Anyway, I never saw him. I went back to Portales and caught me a train back to Bonham, Texas. Of course, I had to change trains but I was used to it by this time.

“This time when I got back, I saw a chance to get some money to help me fix my place up out in New Mexico. One of the gals I'd been bulling along had lost her mother and she' stood to get some money out of the estate. Don't make no mistake now. I liked her well enough to want to marry her without the money but the money didn't hurt none. She was seventeen years old when she got her pile, and I went down to the bank and drew it out. \$540.00! Most money I ever had.

“Well, we hung around and made a few meals off the folks 'til two months to the day after we married on October the 7th, 1907, we went to McAlester, Oklahoma. While in McAlester, I saw Belle Starr, the woman outlaw, come riding through town with her gang. All of them had plenty of hard ware on them, and were riding the finest hoss flesh I'd ever seen. They were really fixed up to do business.

“I bought me a brand spang new Stud ebaker wagon with iron axles, red and yellow wheels, brakes, and all the trimmings. I had to buy me enough canvas a covered wagon out of it but that was what we needed so we did it. When we came back through Bonham and by our folks, we picked up all the stuff we could get that would do us 8 any good, then lit outlike the old pioneers did. To show you how we fixed ourselves up, we even took six

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hens along that some Aunt of my wife's gave us. We had a wood stove, boxes of rations, and all.

“Until we got to Altus Oklahoma, we had the worst matched team I've ever seen. A little old mule teamed with a big fine hoss. The big hoss was always pulling the load, and the mule was almost excess if it wasn't for the fact that we needed two hosses anyway. While we were in the wagon yard at Altus, a hoss trader came up with a small hoss and said, 'Bud, let me put this hoss in here just to show you how fine he'll look with your mule. He's more the mule's size and wont cost you a penny because I'll trade even.'

“He began to undoing the harness on the hoss and fixing to put the little hoss in. I immediately saw what he meant to do. If he'd got the big hoss out and the little one in, he'd claim I'd traded already. He figured to put the Indian sign on me and bluff me right on out. All I could see was that long trip ahead of me so I hollered out, 'Get away from that hoss, mister!' He kept on and didn't pay no attention to me so I jumped up into the wagon, and got my '45 out, pointed it right at him, then said, 'Now you'll put that hoss right back like you found him or I'll blow a hole in you big enough to walk him through you'. Evidently he understood what I meant because he did as I told him and got away from there. I then looked around and bought me a hoss that fitted in with the big one.

“They had wagon yards out on the plains and in the mountains in those days like they have tourist camps these days. One of the busiest wagon yards without a town to support it was Lucky Springs, located on the Prairie Dog fork of the Red River, and in Hall county. This place was just like I've seen in several picture shows. They had a big stockade around it, and stalls to drive your whole outfit into. You could rent rooms if you was so a mind to because they had some log cabins built over the stalls all around, the supports for the cabin being the separations for the stalls below. In one corner of the wagon yard would be the combination saloon, storehouse, postoffice (if they had one there), and office for the yard.

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“There would be women to dance with, an old time piano, a bar with some boot heeled cow pokes standing with a foot on the rail, and everything was just like I've seen it pictured. I got a few drinks in me at the Lucky Strike, and was still befuddled when we drove out the next morning. After we'd gotten out a fewmiles on the trail, we stopped to make a meal. Boy, what a tough break! I found that I'd left a five gallon can of lard, and had forgotten to bring any water with us. No lard! We were pretty discouraged but decided to go on 'til we got to water and then we'd make some coffee. A few miles farther and we came to a wind mill where a rancher got water for a trough he had there. We made our coffee with water that had had moss in it but it tasted good to us.

“Our first meal after leaving the Lucky Strike was after we met and bummed a nester going East. He'd come from North of my place and had been chased out by the cowmen after they'd killed the rest of his family. Wife was pretty pink around the gills after hearing that but I told her that he was just telling us that because he was afraid of competition. He was afraid that I'd grow something he was growing and might knock him out of some money some way or other.

“We made it on then 'til we reached the Eastern edge of the 10 Palo Duro canyon. I guess I saw the most cattle on the loose right there that I've ever seen in my life. All the critters carried the old JA ranch brand. I never say the headquarters buildings for the reason that I wa in a hurry to get to our place as soon as I could and was going fast as I could. I did see some of the cow pokes and one of them stopped me to buy some smoking from me. He told me that all the boys had orders to stay with the herd 'til they got further orders because some fancy free boys were wet roping every thing in sight. He said that it must have been wrong dope because nobody had sighted anybody in the wrong. Just travelers like ourselves going through the country.

“As we went along in the Palo Duro, I kept the wife worried all the time about the dangers of land slides burying us alive. We came out at Canyon City, then headed Southwest to Portales. After a long string of wagon yards were passed, we finally arrived at our home

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and abode. What an abode! There were cracks in it at places that you could throw a cat through. There were so many things to do to the place and all, that it was a month before it was livable. It was a regular log cabin with abode for the chink filler, and an adobe chimney. To make adobe, you mix clay and straw together, then stack it like kids making a mud pie, or an artist making a clay doll.

"I had arranged credit for seed and all at Portales so all I had to was work the land. I set in and worked for awhile, then had to go to fencing the place on account of the critters from the B Bar ranch to the North of me coming in and stomping down my work. I sure had lots of trouble with those critters because it was a penitentiary offense to kill one.

"One night while we were asleep, I heard some of the critters 11 in my garden plot by the house. I jumped out of bed, grabbed my gun and shot out toward the garden to scare them off. I heard wife scream out that she'd heard one of them fall. I didn't believe it but I went out to see so that she wouldn't be worried about it, and sure enough, I'd shot one in the head better then I could have done it on purpose.

"Now, I'd done it! Committed a penitentiary offense. I didn't have a pick or anything but I knew that I'd better get that critter out of sight so I buried it with a grubbing hoe. I just finished covering her when dawn came the next morning. We worried all that day, figuring that Ed Hall, who owned the B Bar, would find it out the first thing. Nothing happened that day but the wolves scented the critter and tried to dig her up. They did that for a long time 'til the ground sunk in enough to keep them from scenting her. I'd have to go out there every day and recover the place where they'd dug the night before.

"If that same thing were to happen to me now, I'd just out her up and bury her remains after I'd taken all the meat I wanted but We were young then, and in a strange country. Things happened every day to scare us. For instance, a mule backed up to the house and scratched his back while we were asleep, and knocked all the pretties off the wife's dresser that I'd made for her. That scared us. Then, one night, we heard a scratching on

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the roof on one windy night. It seemed like the scratching would begin at the top, then go down to the eaves, then return and begin at the top. Now, what would you have done? We just covered our heads up and hoped that what ever it was, would go away. Next morning, I found out that the hens had been blown off their roosts and were trying to 12 roost on top of the house.

“Well, the farming proposition turned out not to be so hot. We spent all the wife's money in trying to keep on, the trail drives going North would cross our property and tear down what ever happened to be in their way. Some times a herd would be half a day in passing. What could I do? I couldn't go out there and say, 'Now don't you cross my place'. All the cow pokes were bigger than me, could shoot faster and straighter than I could, and I knew it. Besides that, I could just happen around when a trail drive was crossing my place and one of them would take a pot shot at some thing close by me. They never missed anything they shot at, and sometimes it came so close that I almost had to feel to see if it wasn't me that was shot and didn't realize it. I ran out of grub, then I learned to catch rabbits without shooting them. I took a wire, bent the end in a kind of a crook, then put the wire down in a hole where I knew a rabbit was. If I felt him, he wouldn't make any racket but I learned to know when it was a rabbit. If it was, I turned the wire and it would catch his skin, I'd draw it toward me after he squealed because when it was in him tight enough to make him squeal, you stood for a meal because he couldn't get away from you.

“We left there like the other nesters left. When they came in, they all left a string of tin cans at each camp fire, when they left, they left a string of rabbit hides around their camp fires. On our way back, we went in more of a straight line then when we went out. We passed over one spot that is today, Lubbock, Texas. When we got along about to Quitaque, I heard of a rodeo that would be held at Quanah, Texas. Well, skinny rations had been the style for quite a while now, so we sure headed for Quanah.

“When we got there, I entered into the hoss riding contest part of the rodeo. Among the riders there was a fellow I'd never heard of before. His name was Booger Red. The hoss

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I was billed to ride was named for the famous woman outlaw, 'Belle Starr'. Red wasn't even billed to ride any certain thing. I sort of wondered about that but came to find out later that he always rode the worst critters at any rodeo and nobody could always tell just what would turn out to be the roughest.

“When I came out of the chutes on Belle, I was riding her for all I was worth because it meant bread and butter to me. I knew I had a woman that would like mighty well to eat again, so I gave the very best show I could possibly put on. Belle put me into every kind of place except on the ground. She twisted and cavorted around, went up and down, sideways and every which-way. I stayed right with her though, and slapped her with my stetson to make her pitch harder. After the time had gone by, the whistle was blown and I came off that hoss like I was shot from a pistol. I just gave in, I guess. Anyway, I won my choice of a fine saddle or a \$100.00 bill. I took the bill.

“In order to make a better showing than I did, Red rode his hoss with nothing but a surcingle. That's a leather strap that goes around a critter's belly. The kind used in a rodeo have an iron ring at the top, or on the critter's back, so riders could hold on when they rode in that manner. That was certainly one of the most outstanding rides I've ever witnessed. I wouldn't have even cared if they had given him the prize instead of to me but 14 that's where I slipped up. He did win a better prize than I did because he took first place and got \$150.00, with a saddle too.

“One of the fellows that came around and complimented my ride was Quanah Parker, the famous Indian chief. He invited me out to visit his place and the next day. Since we had a couple of days before another rodeo was scheduled to take place at Altus, Oklahoma, I took him up. Wife and I went out to his place, and it was on the shore of a lake there. I don't recall just how many tents there were there but you can well believe that there was as many a one. We also saw his wives even if he didn't introduce us around to them. They stayed off to one side and one of the cow pokes with us knew them so he told us about them.

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“The hoss I was billed to ride at Altus was named, 'Dynamite Dust'. He was named right for sure because he was worse than Belle ever was. Belle though, had given me a little practice and I'd rode a couple of frosty broncs between Belle and Dynamite, so I was in good form. I put on the same kind of a ride that I did before, and what's more, I won the same kind of money.

“Red was billed as he was before, and nobody knew just what he'd ride 'til he came out of the chutes, riding a bull with a surcingle. That bull must have been rode before or something because he was the maddest and most active bull I've ever seen. I imagine that bull must have broken every bone Red had because he sure did cavort around the arena. The arena had an iron rail fence before the grandstand so the customers could crowd down to the ringside if they wanted to, and this bull jumped that rail with Red on him. He scattered the customers in short order but he still didn't stop and 15 kept on pitching 'til he reached one of the ends of the grandstand that was boarded up to keep the paying customers from the outsiders. Instead of dodging the wall, or stopping, that bull just bucked right on through it and knocked down a section about ten feet long. Red stayed with 'til they got out side, then reached up and caught onto a two by four plank that was fixed onto the wall, and drew him self up off the bull. Of course, this board wasn't there just for riders to use but was a part of the building. Red said that it came in mighty handy because he didn't want to ride anything out of sight of the customers as that wouldn't be fair to them.

“That was the last riding I ever did. We only had one more thing happen to us while we were still in the covered wagon. Night caught us a few miles from Montague, and we decided to make it on the spot. During the night, there came up such a bad Norther and wind storm that I got afraid that the wagon was going to blow over, That's mighty handy thing to know to do because we sure had some wind that night and would have been blown over if it hadn't of been for those wheels.being grounded.like that.

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“The rest of my life has been spent running moonshine, drug stores where my stores where my customers could buy their liquor, and driving taxi cabs. Of course, it goes without saying, I wish now that I hadn't misspent my life like I did but I thought I was doing right well when I was one of the king-pin bootleggers in Dallas. I did make a lot of money but it's all gone now, my family don't have any confidence in me, and all my old friends would have cut my throat at any time. I know all that now, so I'm on the up and up.