

[Ben Mayes]

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For Special Volume

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RANGE LORE

"I am a Tom Green County Cowboy," says Ben Mayes, one of San Angelo's old timers, "and I rode the range for 24 years.

"I left home In 1879 - a boy of only sixteen. My first job was to go off on a hog drive with a Methodist preacher. A boy friend and myself were to help him drive the hogs to the Concho River to fatten, on the shares. When we got here he put us to picking up pecans to pay the grocery bill. We didn't have much clothing to start with and by this time it was pretty well gone. The preacher caught us playin' cards one night just for pastime and told us we would have to go, that no card players could roost around him. We asked him what about that \$15.00 per month, he had promised to pay us.

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He says, 'You know I ain't got no money.' He wouldn't even let us have any of the grub we had paid for pickin' up pecans.

We pulled out for home and finally made our way back but we were so anxious to be real cowboys we soon started out again in the wild and wooly west, lookin' for ranch work. My first job was on the Martin ranch at \$10.00 per month and board.

Twenty dollars was tops and branded a fellow as a first class cowboy, which was a high honor in those days. I herded four hundred head of cattle for three months there and Martin sold out. I got another job near by on the Brooks ranch at \$15.00 per month. The

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\$5.00 raise made me feel lots more like a real cowboy. This lasted only one month but by this time I had gotten hold of enough money for a first class cowboy outfit. As far as my rig was concerned you would have thought I was one of Santa Anna's men with my fine silver mounted Mexican saddle with big long toe fenders on the stirrups, a pair of leather leggin's, six shooter and big dirk knives a belt full of cartridges and a big Mexican hat. I hadn't had the experience though which a fellow must have to be a cowboy. I started out for Fort Chadbourne and I thought if the world was as big the other way as it was the way I'd come it was a whopper. I soon realized that to be a real cowboy there was lots to learn. A fellow had to know how to cut a cow out of the herd without roping her or running the herd off either and it wasn't no little job learning to ride them broncos either. When they would get their heads down between their fore legs and bawl like a wild bull I would claw leather pretty darn fast and I got lots 3 of hard falls before I learned, but I got so I would try any of them, mustangs and all. They were the hardest, as they would get up in the air with a hump in their back like a mad cat.

"Well the next job I got was on the T. A. Lambert ranch at \$20.00 per month. I was a real cowboy now and he turned the whole works over to me as he was to be gone about four months. He says, 'Now, Ben, I'm fixin' things for you at Swartz's in San Angelo, so's you can get what you want.' Well, I went into town in a few days and when I walked into Swartz's store he met me a grinnin' and said, 'Well, kid, if you want a thousand dollars just say the word.' You don't know how that would make a kid feel who never had more than \$40.00 in his life. My [hat?] got a little small I will admit, but I managed to hold-down to setting up the drinks a few times and betting a few quarters at monte. Before that winter was over though I felt like I was earning all I was getting as the coldest weather was when we had the hardest work to do. Some of those coldest mornings made \$20.00 per month look pretty small. We had to be out before day and gone by the time we could see how to saddle our horses. The big job in the winter was to keep the [cattle?] thrown north. They always tried to drift south in the coldest times. They would come by in a trot, bawling, and headed [south?]. We [would?] chase in after the lead ones and try to bring them back but

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they would come from the Panhandle of Texas and everywhere north of us and lots of times they would get by us 4 and go on to Devil's River Country and we would have to go after them the next spring. It would take us two months sometimes to get them buck. We would go after them in heel-fly time, sometimes, and find them jammed in the creek for three miles just as thick as could be. We would cut off a bunch about 10:00 o'clock and cut out the [range?] cattle and the ones that belonged there and start our herd back. As many as twelve or fifteen men would drive all night and 'til 10:00 o'clock next day when we would reach Dove Creek with five or six thousand head. Sometimes It mould take three weeks to get them thinned down where we could handle them at all.

“Our camping outfit consisted of light bed roll, frying pan and tin can for coffee making. We would make up our bread in the flour sack and either cook it in the frying pan or wrap it around a forked stick and hold it over the fire. Of course we had plenty of wild meat and it was fine, roasted over the fire.

“On cold nights two boys would take turns sleeping and keeping fires. The one who was sleeping would have to turn over pretty often to warm the other side.

“This outfit grew until they claimed 50,000 head of cattle and 150 saddle horses. In the year 1882 we branded and [tallied out?] 30,000 claves. In two years I had gone from \$10.00 per month to \$35.00. I was now a real cowboy.

“Many an old boy lost his job because he couldn't top the outlaw horses. Plenty of them gave me something to do to keep my seat but I learned to ride them all. A fellow had to ride 'em or quit. The worst one I ever tried was an old 5 outlaw horse that had caused many a poor boy to lose his job. He wasn't fit for a thing in the world but to pitch and when he bucked himself down you just as well to have had a stick horse as for the good he was to anyone. The old fool would just shut his old wall eyes and buck right into Hades if he could have gotten there. The boss says, 'Ben, you try him a round.' 'Well,' I says, 'you fellows see that he doesn't go over into the river.' We were camped right on the bank and

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there were some holes there without any bottom. 'I'll try him a fall or two,' I says, as I hit the saddle; the old devil just stuck his head between his fore-legs and got his back nearly up to the moon and made right at the deepest hole of water. The boys were laughing so they didn't do a thing, so off into that water we both went. The boys said they could just see my head a floatin' 'round on top of the water after we came up. I was trained to stick and I stuck and when I came to my senses enough to think of anything besides drowning I slid off and swam to the bank and the old horse did too, and when I was out one boy says, 'Ben, we're sorry we didn't cut him off but I was a waitin' for John and John said the same thing.' I said, 'Yes you nearly got me drowned, standing there a laughin', one a waitin' for the other, you bloomin' idiots.' I started throwin', rocks at them and they ran as fast as they could, to be so limber from laughin'.

“One boy tried to ride the old horse and he went knockin' pots and pans right an' left, and carryin' part of the tent 6 with him.

“I had a lot of tough times with bad cattle. Many times we would have to ride out and doctor the cattle for screw worms. One day I had the devil with everything I roped. We'd just have days like that. One little old three year old bull in my herd would fight his shadow. When I roped him and got him stopped he made fight at me. He would take after me and run me 'til I could gain enough on him to turn and throw my rope on him and just bust the ground with him. He'd get up and come right back at me but I kept out of his way. After I had thrown him a half a dozen times I jumped down to get on him and he got a loose and made for me again. I ran for my horse but he was so close on my heels I couldn't mount, so as he ran into my horse and horned him a little I gained enough on him to go up a small mesquite tree, but I could only get just high enough to keep him from horning me. He would stick his foaming nose against me and bawl and bellow like any wild beast. After he pawed and bellowed around there awhile he walked off far enough for me to get down and get on my horse again. I tried him once more and this time he broke my rope. I was so mad by this time I just says, 'Go to the devil, I hope the screw worms eat you up.' That was one time I was up a tree and thought I was lucky to be. That was something we hardly

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ever did though - let one go. If I could ever get one roped and go to the ground with him by the foot I could handle the worst of them.

"I had a good friend from England here trying to learn 7 to be a cowboy. He was among the noblemen there and of course was having a hard time trying to learn our cowboy ways or as we saw it, mixing his curious ways with ours. Everytime he would try to help me rope a big bull he would say, 'Ben, I better quit this business before I get killed.' I'd encourage him though and he'd keep trying. I had a little old pony I called Mexican. He was quick as lightin'. The Englishman wanted to ride him to a round-up. I said, Earnest, he's pretty quick.' but he wanted to try him to see how ridin' cow-horses went, so when we got all the cattle rounded up by the fence a little old yearling taken out down the fence and Mex, true to his training, right after him. The yearling whirled all of a sudden and so did Mex, and Earnest went right on over his head, grabbing at anything he could catch. He was hangin' 'round Mexican's neck when I stopped him. 'You're right.' says he, 'he's just a little too quick for me.'

"Earnest said his first introduction to Texas life was when he stopped at a hotel and left his muddy shoes on the outside of his door that night expecting to find them cleaned next morning. He was about half mad as he checked out and asked the clerk why his shoes were not cleaned. The clerk spit out his tobacco and scratched his head in amazement and said, 'Brother, you're shore lucky to have any shoes this morning.' He finally made a pretty good cow hand and we have had lots of fun since, talkin' over old times and what a time he had learnin' our Texas ways.

"When a tenderfoot would come into camp we would give him 8 the initiation in more ways than one. If he would be tired and drop off to sleep one of the boys would get a saddle on his back and come a buckin' through the camp and the new boy would think a bronco was on him for sure. Then anyone broke a rule he got the leggin's or a souse in the river. Once we put the leggin's on a lord from Ireland. He said in the old country everyone tipped their hats to him three times, so you may know he hit it hard here, but he was a pretty

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good sport and soon found out that lords or dukes or big cow-man all looked alike in a cow camp.

“On big roundups every fellow would get his cattle together and there would be eight or ten wagons from different outfits with their bosses and men. After the range men cut out all the strays and beeves the brandin' would start. He had plenty of red beans, black coffee and beef. When a stampede occurred, which was likely at anytime or for very small reasons, the boss would send all inexperienced men to the wagon, as good judgment had to be used by the most experienced men to keep the herd from just runnin' wild. Singin' to the cattle at night, ridin' in turns usually kept them quiet better than anything else. Every boy was called by his given name or the outfit he worked for, such as the V. O. or the Bar. L. etc.

“We had lots of fun at the dances when we could get enough girls together to have one. Our outfits would have disgraced us at anybody's back door now-a-days. Our jeans breeches came 'bout half way between our feet and knees and our brogan shoes were mended with rawhide. There were only a few coats 9 in the bunch and all the fellers wanted to look good to the girls, so we would take turns wearin' the coats when we danced. We got to go to one so seldom most of the boys felt out of place and bashful around the girls. He would look first at the ceiling and then at the floor and put his hands behind him and in front of him and when he'd finally think of something to say the girl would look at him like she thought he was out of his head or something. He would be so plagued, he just wanted to tell her to go to Helena, Montana. (In other words, go to hell).

“Sometimes some of the boys would get a little too much tanglefoot and say he was a wolf and it was his night to howl - that that he was off of Bitter Creek and the further up the creek you went the tougher they got, and he came off of the head of it. He had an old guy in camps once that we called Old Thing. Nothing else suited him, and he was never known by any other name. He was noted for his laziness and everybody had a hard time tryin' to get him to move in any direction. One day my boss says, 'Ben, take Old Thing out

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and try to hold that small herd today, but you will have to watch him or he will go to sleep on you.' Sure enough about the time the sun began to get up good and warm Old Thing flopped down asleep, I reckon to try and [dream?] of something better than herdin' cattle. Then I knew he was good asleep I rounded up a small bunch of cattle and got them pretty close to him, then I shook my old slicker at them and they ran all over him. You ought a seen Old Thing a coming up from there. He never went to sleep on 10 the job with me any more, I told him he snored 'til he stampeded the cattle. He sure pulled a good one on one of the other fellows. He was scheduled to help John, a friend of mine, hold a herd one cold morning. John woke up and it was raining and sleeting but he went to look for Old Thing and he had managed to get the cook's warm bed, so when John woke him he said, 'John, I'm awful sick.' John tried in vain to get him out but no such luck. Finally John says, 'If you eat a bite of breakfast, I'm goin' to take you out here and stick your ole bald head down into the biggest and muddiest prairie dog hole I can find.' Sure enough when Old Thing got to the table he loaded his plate and started to work. About that time John happened up and says, 'What did I tell you, Old Thing?' and Old Thing says, 'Now John, I feel a little better now.' But John yanked him up and took him out to a big muddy prairie dog hole and poked him in. His old bald head looked like an old mulley cow that had been a buttin' a muddy bank, when he came out of there. He never did cure him from bein' lazy, though.

“The old boys are all pretty well scattered now, but when only a few of us get together we sure enjoy talkin' over the old times.”