

COWBOY DAZE

A "Remember When" Tale by Damon Pierce

The year was 1950 and I was sixteen years old. It was a clear June day when I left Scottsbluff in my newly-acquired \$200.00 1934 Ford and headed East to Lisco. I headed North out of Lisco to locate the cattle ranch whose Foreman offered me a job for the summer. My uncle, Godfrey, had recommended me to the Foreman. After spending several summers on Uncle Godfrey's ranch North of Lewellen I guess he felt I had acquired sufficient cow and horse handling sense to be worthy of a recommendation. The job paid wages of \$100.00 per month and included room and board.

After traveling North about fifteen miles, I finally came to the ranch. It was one of four ranches on a very large spread of several sections in the sand hills. It was reported to be approximately equal in size to the King Ranch in Texas. Each one of the four ranches had a Foreman and several cowhands to tend to the many Hereford cattle.

I located the Foreman who was a big, tough-looking, rough-talking cowboy. He immediately exclaimed how young I looked and how small I was. It was obvious he questioned if I would be able to do the work of a real cowhand. I was shown the bunkhouse where I would spend the summer with six other cowhands, all much older than me. The next day, I was assigned a string of seven saddle horses. I soon found out that most of the seven had been "green broke" and had characteristics that had caused them not to be chosen by the other cowhands. It was clear the other cowhands were anxious to see how I would handle this bunch of rejected trouble makers. Thanks to my summers in the Sand Hills, under Uncle Godfrey's watchful eye, I was able to keep and ride all of this string. There were, however, three in this bunch that turned out to be good cow ponies.

During the summer on the ranch, the days were long and the work was fairly hard. Most days were spent moving cattle, repairing fences, checking and repairing windmills, branding cattle and breaking horses. On days when we would be out on horseback all day, the Foreman's wife would take salt pork out of a large wooden barrel she kept in the kitchen behind the big kitchen range, and place the salted pork with a

little mustard between two large slices of homemade bread. She would wrap the sandwich in newspaper and you would tie it behind you on the saddle. This sandwich, and a drink of water from a nearby windmill, was lunch! It was amazing how good this tasted after several hours in the saddle working cattle.

The work on the ranch was usually a 6-day week. However, the Foreman requested a few of us to be available one Sunday to gather and move several yearlings to another location. The Foreman and four others, including myself, went on this rather long ride to a location on the ranch I had never been before. The area was quite hilly and the yearlings were well scattered. It was a hot day and it took a bit of time to gather the yearlings together. The horses were all lathered and tired. The Foreman seemed very excited and was shouting at all of us. I asked Bob, one of the cowhands helping with the roundup, why the Foreman was so upset and why we were doing this on a Sunday. Bob quickly responded "If you want to get along with the Foreman you work hard, do a good job and do not ask the reasons for this being done."

Bob was one of the older cowhands and had worked on the ranch for a few years. He was also one of the few who wintered on the ranch, working year round. We finally got the herd together and headed them East for quite a long distance. We finally drove the herd through a gate into a pasture with a ranch house in the distance. After we drove all the herd through the gate, we closed the gate and rode on to the ranch house where they were expecting us for dinner. I noticed this ranch was not too far from the game refuge and the main road that runs North from Oshkosh. After a great dinner prepared by the rancher's wife, we mounted our now rested horses and made the long ride back to the ranch.

The Foreman seemed in much better spirits and was laughing and joking on the way home. The Foreman suggested we have a race when we were approximately one quarter mile from the ranch house. We each bet \$2.00 and winner would take all. I was riding a pretty bay mare named Judy. She was trim and the fastest one in my string. I was sure the \$10.00 pot was mine. It was a great race, I was in second or third place during most of the race. However the Foreman was no fool. He was riding a beautiful, long-legged jet black gelding named Champ, with four white stockings and a long mane and tail. The Foreman and I

were side by side most of the race. When we were within less than one eighth mile from the ranch, the Foreman let the black have his head and he beat me to the finish by several lengths.

Several years later, I read an account in a newspaper of this Foreman being arrested and spending a few years in prison for cattle rustling. It seems he was cutting out yearlings from his employer's cows and driving them to a ranch that was near the main road on the game refuge. The cattle were then corralled, loaded at night on a cattle hauling tractor trailer that had arrived, and were trucked off to the buyer.