

JONES; EMBLEY -D.

EIGHTH INTERVIEW

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Journalist, Effie S. Jackson,
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Interview with Eadsley D. Jones,
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Buffalo Wallows

The uplands west to Texas and north to Kansas, all of what is now northwestern Oklahoma, in my day were covered with buffalo wallows. My father had made a study of these wallows from the time he followed the buffalo herds in Kansas until their slow disappearance. I would often take trips with him in the '30's and '90's through what is now Harper and Beaver Counties, the present "dust bowl" area. In the light of the "dust bowl" problem I recall with interest physical features he stressed in his talks with me on those trips. My father believed that that region had once been a desert waste - a porous lava area - and that nature had slowly restored it over the centuries

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with what we call "buffalo grass." The buffalo in huge herds roaming these broad uplands deprived of rainfall part of the year made their own reservoirs, buffalo wallows. They rolled on the flat prairie until a depression was made; a buffalo rolls like a mule. Thousands of these wallows were made, some far apart and some in large groups. The dust from these depressions was picked up by the winds, then came the rain. Then the buffalo "puddled" it, tramping and rolling it deeper- buffalo "puddles" if you please. More dust was carried away by the wind and then we came to have large saucer-shaped shallow ponds; these ranged from 100 to 300 feet in diameter, not more than two feet deep in the center. Eventually the bottom of these wallows became covered with a short, straight stemmed grass, which was very compact and completed the buffalo made reservoir. My father explained to me that the impounding of water in these thousands of ponds or wallows on the plains kept moisture in the air during the torrid July and

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August. Not only that but the water was soft and clear, it was good to drink if you could beat the cows to it. The buffaloes were gone in my boyhood days - I never saw one. Of course, we had plenty of hides made into robes and the prairies were covered with buffalo bones, stiring skulls with their buffalo horns to mark the spot.

Even by the time I was twenty (1900) the buffalo wallows were disappearing. Along came man with his plow and his stakes, the wallows were especially attractive because of their fertility. Down went the stakes, holes two inches wide and six inches deep - thus punctured, the bed of wallows let its refreshing water seep into the porous earth below and the wallow soon became the part of a farm. Not content with thus absorbing the wallows, the farmer struck himself a worse blow. He began plowing up the broad acres covered with buffalo grass. This grass grew about four inches high - tangle fashion - heavy texture; did not

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cling close to the ground like bermuda; was of high protein value, moisture retaining. When frost struck it it would turn white and remain that way all winter but keep its nutritive value. Horses and cattle would fatten on it like they would on bran. This grass is peculiar in that when it is once plowed up it will not come back. It is almost impossible to plant in any form. Today when I read of the great "dust bowl" problem I think of my father's prophecy when he saw "vandals" as he called them destroy the buffalo wallows and in turn plow up the plains of buffalo grass. As he said, "Forgive them, they know not what they are doing to themselves and their posterity."

Cowboys and their Herds.

We could tell a day in advance when large herds were coming up the trail, by the dust; cattle grazed and fattened as they went slowly north. Most herds moved up the trail from May to August of each year, the herds had a tendency to spread fan-shaped for it was the purpose of the cowboys to tuck them in, keep the line as straight as possible.

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One thing I remember about these herds I have never seen since was the flocks of birds that accompanied them; hundreds of these dull lead colored birds about the size of blackbirds hovered over the herds. They ate around the cattle's feet, plenty of bugs and insects in the grass, and at night roosted on the horns of the cattle. We called them "cow-birds" for the want of a better name. I have never seen birds like them any place else and did not see them any more after the trail days of the herds were over along the trail. They did not follow domesticated cattle.

Something else of interest was the kind of milk given by cows on the trail. Of course, these cows were raised for beef purposes only and their milk had no nutritive value- this is the way it would look: take a bottle of our milk as we get it at the store today, let it set a day, then pour off the cream. Fill the bottle up with water and drop in a little laundry blueing and you have milk that

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would look like the kind given by a trail cow, such cattle were called beeves.

Stampedes could happen suddenly for almost no reason. A sudden clap of thunder could start one. I have seen several thousand head of cattle at night during an electrical storm. Long streaks of light would flash across the field of horns making a sound such as breaking of small sticks but the cattle didn't seem to mind it. It has been said that when a stampede took place the cowboys would race to the leaders and kill them but nothing of this kind happened, instead, the cowboys would ride to the front and maybe fire a few shots to make the cattle swing into a circle. To kill one would only add to the confusion because the scent of blood would often itself start a stampede.

The idea was to circle them down, just keep up the circling until they were worn out. This was the test of a good cow-pony, he knew more about how to do it than the cowboys. Even the unexpected flapping of a cowboy's slicker would sometimes start a stampede.

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Now about cowboys singing to their herds to keep them quiet - from my experience that is a sentimental story, the cowboy sang his songs around the camp fire when his day's work was done. It was his recreation, especially if there was some one around with an old fiddle. It was his tie to the past- sweetheart- mother - home. On the trail with their cattle herds they kept up a soft whistle; sort of a lullaby. They had one kind of whistle for cattle, another for horses. For the cattle lullaby whistle - strike an E flat quarter note, then drop an octave and give four slow quarter notes, keep up in a lingering melodious fashion. The whistle for herds of horses on the trail was much different - it was like the chirp of a bird, very sharp. Same note, E flat, but chirruped in rhythm with the trot of the horses. As far as the cowboy songs few songs of today called cowboy songs are at all like the songs they really sang. They did not have the twang-twang you hear today, the cow-

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boy did not yodel. The only songs of the present day that have the air and atmosphere of the old cowboy song are "Last Round-Up," "Home on the Range" and "Tumbling Seeds;" these are sung to the old tunes but are new words. Each cowboy made up his own words to these old tunes - just as the spirit moved him - glad, sad, indifferent.

The cowboys of those days were fine fellows, many of them had good education and were just seeking adventure. They were young, had a sense of honesty and gallantry: a woman was safe in their presence, they had a reverence for her. They usually had a three or four days' growth of beard for the alkalai dust was so hard on the face they could not shave often. Speaking of hair - no cowboy, no plainsman or any other self-respecting westerner ever let his hair grow long - it was considered a sign of weakness. My experience has been that it has been used in later days and even at the present time as a matter of showmanship.

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Another thing, a cowboy was good to his horse, it got a drink of water before the owner did. Nothing like the cruel and modern rodeo methods existed, no beating on the head of the horse, no hitting with a hat was allowed; no cowboy thought of doing so. My father would not allow a curb bit on any of his horses, no good stockman would and no cowboy was allowed to use sharp spurs, he used a rowel on his spur shaped like a disc and not pointed metal. There was a hobby among the cowboys to take a piece of Mexican money about the size of a fifty-cent piece and use it for a rowel, he treated his horse like a human being. The average cow-pony, after its training was a good herdman its self. Just lay the rein on the pony's neck and he'd lead or circle the herd as the need arose.

The cowboys always made it a point to try to reach Red Fork Ranch in the afternoon or early evening - to camp near there, replenish their supplies and come in contact with the life of the Ranch. Rub

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shoulders with government officers, soldiers, travelers and especially renew acquaintance with Short and "old Chape," their fiddler hosts. So as the cattle came north of the Cimarron they were turned to the east of the ranch into a sort of a fold where there were an abundance of ponds and fresh water springs. As each cowboy was released from duty he would ride to the ranch, dismount at a large watering trough and leave his horse there. Then in he would come for what was his greatest treat - you would never guess - pickles and stick candy. Contrast that with the modern beer and whiskey refreshment of some of our youth today.

Evenings at the Ranch were quiet and cheerful. There was always someone with a fiddle and the singing of old cowboy songs. Maybe some traveler on his way

would bring the news of the day, or some one would have a tale to tell. There was nothing of a "ruff-neck" character, often some missionary was present - then Father would get out the old family Bible and service would be held. There were old fashioned

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song books enough that all could join in. There was a feeling of religious devotion that seems missing today.

Types of People on the Trail.

The types of people up and down the Chisholm Trail in the '80's were interesting, even to a growing boy. I remember some of them distinctly; there were of course cattlemen, the owner of the great herds; cowboys, taking these herds through to northern markets; United States troopers, in groups of six or eight they patrolled the trail; Indians, usually Cheyennes and Arapahoes, in peaceful bands; sometimes a few fleeing outlaws; and the regular stage coach passengers, on a trip of adventure, maybe a writer, poet or painter. There were the freight-
era and in later days - the sheepmen.

To me the most picturesque were the freighters. These were in two classes - the "bull-whackers" and the "mule-skinners," the bull-whackers were mostly old timers in the west and in a class by themselves.

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Slow going by nature, they usually wore long whiskers and they were stocky, powerful men who wore durable clothes suitable to their way of living, heavy wool shirts, cheap felt black hats, baggy trousers tucked into their boots. They trudged along beside their animals and equipment, two to five yoke of oxen each, drawing two or three heavy wagons - up to 6000 pounds. Wagon bodies were provided with bows for canvas tops, these moved as "freight trains" of five or six groups making ten to twelve miles a day in good weather, half as far in bad. They were the only men in the country who walked every mile they traveled and they were looked upon with contempt by the cowboy - who never walked any further than he had to.

The "bull-whacker's" pride was his heavy, long-lashed whip called a "blacksnake," eighteen feet in length, which could be used in a deadly fashion. It could hit a mark at a distance, take off the tip of an ear or make a cut in tough hide. The crack of the whip sounded like a pistol shot and this was the only means

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these stolid people had of showing any prowess.

The "mule-skinners," the "express freighters" of the trail, were a hardy type made up of ex-stage drivers, stove up cow-punchers, former frontiersmen. They usually drove four to eight horses or mules to one or two covered wagons, the back wagon equipped with a short tongue. They carried from 1500 to 2500 pounds of freight and made from twenty-five to thirty miles a day. They carried staples from Caldwell, Kansas, to the commissaries and relay stations like Red Fork Ranch along the way, such articles as sugar, coffee, tobacco, stick candy, pickles, salt meat, yellow slickers and blankets. They often rode the "wheel horse," saddled, and drove from that position. A rope was attached to the saddle, from there to the top of a pole six feet high on the left-hand side of the wagon near the middle, this in turn connected with a brake lever. This was arranged so the freighter could apply the brake from his "wheel horse" position and control both wagons.

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The following story illustrates the problems that confronted the pioneer freighter. Fresh vegetables were a luxury at the ranch, so my father tried to keep something of the kind on hand. I remember how he tried to get a load of vegetables. When the freighter finally showed up at the ranch he had only two little knotty heads of cabbage. He got a bushel of corn from father - you see stage and freight horses had to have corn and oats. He called later to make his settlement, asked father how much the corn was and father said \$1.50. The freighter protested but Father told him it cost so much to get it hauled and the extra risk of having it stolen by the Indians made it high priced. Father then asked the freighter the price of the two knotty heads of cabbage, and the freighter explained that he had started with a wagon load of cabbages and that after a band of Indians raided it he had only the two heads left so he would have to charge \$1.50.

The class of people along the trail held in most contempt were the sheepmen. They were often compelled

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to take their herds as far from the trail as possible, it made a grazing problem, too, for cattle would not graze where sheep had been. The sheepmen realized their ostracism so they camped to themselves, appearing at the ranch only long enough to get their supplies, never joining in the social and religious gatherings. Even on the trail they walked alone, driving a burro loaded with camp gear and bedding. The sheepmen stumbled along beside the animal, head bent, not raising their eyes above the herd. They seemed to put themselves on a par with their sheep. The common saying in those days was, "What has less sense than a sheep?" - the dam fool who owns them."