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THE F. S. "SPREAD" IN OKLAHOMA  
By L. W. Wilson, Field Worker.

At the close of the Civil War cattle was grazed through the Indian Territory from Texas to the markets in Kansas and other northern points, due to no railroad facilities or other means of marketing them.

Soon railroads were built, unassigned land was opened to white settlers, and this practice of marketing the cattle ceased but it paved the way for the establishment of many ranches within its own domain, stocked with cattle, from the ranges of Texas.

Among the many ranches thus established between 1875 to 1880 Mr. F.S. Severs began his activities in the Territory cattle industry very extensively.

The prairies in the Creek Nation were very thinly populated and he conceived the idea of securing a block of these lands and went about to lease the lands from the Creeks at a nominal sum of from 15 to 25 cents per acre until he secured a block of approximately 15 square miles, located 4 miles south and six miles west of the present town of Haskell, Oklahoma, or possibly better described, Bald Hill, Oklahoma was about the central part of his ranch.

Securing leases for the purpose of operating large ranches in those days was similar to a major oil company leasing a large block of land in a wild-cat territory, other than the rancher knew he had plenty of grass and water for his cattle, while the oil company takes a gambler's chance.

The Severs ranch became well known throughout the entire section as the "F. S. Ranch," because this was the brand he used in branding his cattle for identification of his ownership.

The rolling prairies, the towering hills, and the little silver-like streams that traverse this section made it not only a picturesque place; but the tall sage and blue stem grass made bountiful grazing lands for his herds. The timber along the streams afforded plenty of shade and the southern sunny slopes of the hills provided wind breaks and ideal grazing lands during the fall and winter months.

The ranch buildings consisted of the foreman's cottage, two bunk houses, a cook shack, stable and a few sheds and corrals.

The foreman's house was of log construction, two rooms with hall way between and large stone fire places in each room. The bunk houses, cook shack, and sheds were also of log construction and corrals were built of rails, split from logs, "A stake and rider fence."

The herdsmen, (Cow-Punchers) horse wranglers, cooks and other ranch hands occupied the bunk houses when not with the herds. The cow hands worked in shifts to a great extent on this ranch; all, however, were ready at any time to meet any emergency that might arise.

The number of herdsmen employed was in accordance with the number of cattle handled and as Mr. Severs handled from 15 to 25000 head yearly it required from fifteen to twenty-five cow punchers or an average of one man to every thousand head.

The S. F. Ranch raised their own cow-ponies and handled around 300 head at all times. It required from thirty to fifty cow-horses daily for the two shifts of cow-punchers, besides the teams being used around the ranch by the salt boys and otherwise. Each cow-puncher was assigned two horses, thus, allowing him to change horses every other day, as the work was too strenuous for the horse without rest.

The "F. S. Ranch" was stocked with Texas cattle; wild, half-wild and some of Mexican type and were of all colors; black, brown, brindle, spotted, fawn and white.

These cow punchers as a class were picturesque in their attire and appearance. There was the foreman, Red Neek Brown, incidentally who worked as a cow-hand before he was made the foreman. Red Neek wore the conventional cow-boy ten gallon hat, with large brim and tall crown, a large handkerchief around his neck, high heel boots and usually a light blue flannel shirt, and chaps covered his trousers.

This was not only a comfortable dress for him; but, Jake Simmons, Ed Hart, Shelton Smith and the Dalton Brothers (later outlaws) together with the rest of the cow-hands that would come and go on to other spreads (ranches) wore similar dress. The hats were used to protect them from the rays of the sun and proved beneficial in heading a cow or starting a bucking bronco. The handkerchiefs around their necks helped them to care for a wound not only of themselves but the doggies and horses. The high heel boots prevented their feet from slipping through the stirrups. The chaps protected their trousers and legs from the whipping of the high grass and the shirts not only protected them from the sun but from insect bites of all kinds.

Few of these cow-hands were educated and little refinement reigned among them. They were brave men and hated a coward and a thief. Even the Dalton boys were fine fellows and a better man never hit the spread than was Robt. Dalton. It was not on this ranch that they went crooked, but was during the days they were United States Marshals.

Cattle came by rail to Checotah, Indian Territory by train loads from different points in Texas. Surrounding the loading and unloading chutes a corral was built large enough to hold many thousand head.

Often times hundreds of these cattle died in route. The dead ones were dragged from the cars by the cow-hands and piled in large heaps and burned.

Before the cattle trains would arrive, the residents of the then little village of Checotah would be notified of the cow-punchers arrival long before they could see them, for the rumble of the hoofs of the horses rock the air in the distance, and upon their arrival they would mill through the village like the half wild herds over which they watched through the days and nights.

Every man knew his duty and did it well. As the train pulled in and the way-bills were turned over to the railroad agent by the conductor, the foreman, Red Neek Brown, accepted the cattle and work started in a big way. The train crew started spotting cars at the chutes and with cow whips and prods the cow punchers forced them down the chutes into the corral where water had been provided for them before arrival. Hours and hours passed before their trek to their new home of the F. S.

Often times calves were born enroute and the cow boys would handle them as though they were infants, trying to locate their mothers for them and if it was found their mothers had died they would try to induce some one in the village or community to take them free of charge.

The cow boys and their horses were cared for, while at Checotah. The boys took their meals at an eating place they called the "Greasy Spoon" and the horses were fed at a livery stable. Should they have to remain all night, they would take their saddle blankets and lie on the ground or sleep at the bunk house at the stable.

The chuck-wagon followed behind and leavin' the spread in time to set up camp, have food prepared, fresh horses corraled by tying ropes around from tree to tree, and a place for the cattle to bed for the night. The

cattle had to be moved slowly, allowing them to graze along for they were gaunt and thin and would require two days and a night to reach the F. S. from Checotah. We usually bedded down at about what is now the present town of Vainwright, Oklahoma up on Elk Creek.

It was in April, 1880, with raging storms day after day. The brutes were sullen and the boys, numbed with exhaustion from lack of sleep and hard work from the time they left Checotah, kept their ragged tempers in check and handled them gingerly.

"Careful, careful "Red Neek Brown." the foreman and trail boss kept warning. "Don't crowd 'em." "Don't Haze 'em, handle 'em with velvet. They'll spook if you bat an eye."

The dusty, gaunt faced riders milled the herds slowly, as though they were handling high explosives. Nerves on edge, they cursed the cattle with the silent, morose hatred of men driven to the breaking point.

It was a spoiled herd. They finally reached the chuck wagon and camp where they would bed down for the night. Ball lightning rolled down from the skies all day long and fire flickered on the sea of tossing horns at night. Torrential rains were followed by maddening hail storms. They had all seen a stampede and knew well the hard fight it would be to get them settled and knew too that these cattle were ready to explode into berserk, unreasoning panic, at the slightest provocation. Every cow-boy cautiously watched the lunched herd. They were ready to wheel their mounts to safety at the first indication of trouble. Red paused his horse with a sigh of hope. "Let em settle," he ordered, "An pray they'll stay there."

Red carefully studied the whole situation and waved Jake and the four Dalton Bros. toward the wagon for grub and rest. The cook had his stove set up far from the bed grounds. He left the rest as sentinels over the herd and warned them before heading back to the wagon himself. "Keep clear of them, some of you boys skeered the liver out of me this morning when you busted that bunch quitter that started to spook. You likely headed off another run, but if that herd had jumped you'd been rolled under. An' that aint the first time you've taken a long chance to bust up a stampede." The boys all chimed in, "I didn' figure it th t way Red," apologetically. "e'll be plumb careful. "Ed, you and Smith, I'll put you wrangling horses if you take any more chances."

When the boys he waved in had eaten, rested and the horse wrangler had the fresh horses saddled and ready they changes off with the others, until they could come in and eat, get some shut eye, fresh horses and relieve the others. The next morning at the break of day when the cattle started to mill and graze contentedly, for the rain had ceased and the clouds had rolled away, the sun came out and it was an ideal spring day and nature seemed to show herself with all her splendor. The cattle did not stampede, all due to careful handling for even the rattling of a wet slicker might have started an explosion.

That night they reached the S. F. and the cattle seemed to be none the worse account of the two days travel, but every one of the crew that brought them through was worn to a nub. Red Neek instructed to led them down and turn in and the boys with the herd at the ranch took them under their wings like a mother hen would mother her chickens.

The cook at the cook shack had their chuck ready for them, the wranglers hurried their horses to the barn, unsaddled and fed them. There was no prank playing that night, they tumbled into their bunks at the bunk house and slept too peacefully even to dream.

The next day all of the new herd was logged as to brands, for they bore brands that they received with red hot irons in Texas and many different brands were among them because they were bought from different ranches. When the log was completed, a copy of each was given to each cow-hand so that they could identify and know them.

Many thrills happened on the old F. S. and on the trail to and from the railroad station, not only many thrills, adventures, comedy, tragedy but romance, by one named Ed. Hart who became the last foreman on the F. S.

While each ranch had its range, they usually overlapped the borders of the neighboring range. One of the ranges was fenced and naturally different herds scattered and intermingled. The F. S., The Lazy ., The I. X. and other ranches all overlapped and each fall and spring they would have a round-up and the cattle driven to the range that did not belong to them.

On the round-up of the F. S. they would always take the chuck-wagon along and would be gone from headquarters some two or three weeks. They cooked and ate where night caught them and roll up in their blankets at night and sleep on the ground. Get up at the break of day, get the chuck, in the saddle and start riding again, continuing daily until they had rounded up every cow and calf. The mother cows with calves and all that were found with no brands were driven to the corral and branded. The calves were identified as belonging to the F. S. because they were following the mother cow bearing the F. S. brand. Yearlings with no brand belonged to the



ones picking them up on the round-up.

The cattle industry was a thriving business and it was the high ambition of every cow hand to own a spread for his own and Ed. Hart of the F. S. and one of the last foremen on this ranch became acquainted with the daughter of Bluford Miller who operated and owned the X. after the death of his grandfather Ider Fields who owned it before him. This I. ranch was located in the Concharty Mountains several miles north and west of the present town of Haskell, Oklahoma and many people of later days never knew of old grand-pappy Fields and always referred to it as the Bluford Miller.

well, Ed courted Miss Miller, Cupid shot its dart and it struck his heart, and he, with plenty of attention and admiration of Miss Miller knew he loved her and she knew she loved him and they were finally bound in the chains of matrimony and with the winning of the hand of Miss Miller, he also came into possession of what he had day-dreamed many a day as he was riding herd or at night gazing into the firmament counting the stars and every star a cow. He acquired the Bluford Miller spread.

With the coming of the Dawes Commission into the territory, enrolment made, lands allotted, fences built, population increasing and finally the territory coming into statehood the old F. S., like many other Oklahoma ranches passed out of existence, and fields of cotton and corn is planted where the cattle roamed and it's only a dream of the golden past to the old cowboys and ranch hands who still live to tell us of those days they hold so dear to their hearts.

Ed Hart is one of those who not only day-dreamed but whose dreams came true. He lives today at Okmulgee, Oklahoma to tell you how he climbed the ladder to success.

There, too, is Jake Simmons who lives at Muskell, Oklahoma rounding out his life (on a little ranch comparatively to that of the F. C.) with 1100 acres stocked with thorough bred, white-face cattle being much different from those wild and half wild cattle of his early days.

Yes, some live, but others have passed over the river to the great beyond to be bedded down. The lightning will flash and thunder will peal, there will be stampeding; with some when the day comes to meet their Maker in the last round-up.