

[Them Petrified Buzzards]

Tales- Tall Tales Bowman Bottom Shelf

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK 8 Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Earl Bowman

ADDRESS 86 W. 12th Street, NYC

DATE December 15, 1938

SUBJECT "THEM PETRIFIED BUZZARDS" — Uncle Steve Robertson Story

1. Date and time of interview December 12, 1938
2. Place of interview
3. Name and address of informant Harry Reece (Daca) 63 Washington South, NYC
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. See previous interview 11/29/38: "Harry Reece (Daca) — His Story"
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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"My Uncle Steve Robertson was a native of the State of Missouri or Arkansas; he was not certain which, because he said he was born so close to the line that sometimes he thought it was on one side and sometimes on the other.

"He also said that one reason he didn't remember which State it was, was because he started "Out West" when he was so young that it really didn't matter whether he was born in Missouri or Arkansas; he was satisfied just to be born, and was willing to let it go at that.

"Anyway, my Uncle Steve Robertson was a great pioneer in his day, before any government irrigation projects were built in the West, and he knew all about shooting bear and deer and fighting Indians, and settling in out-of-the-way places where people had to depend mostly 2 on themselves and each other and there were not any electric lights or telephones or radios or WPA's or PWA's or AAA's or things like that to distract their attentions, and postoffices were quite far apart indeed. So, people depended to a large extent upon themselves and not to any great extent to or on anything else.

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“My Uncle Steve's idea of ‘Out West’ was anywhere west of the east line of the Indian Territory (Uncle Steve never did get around to calling it ‘[Oklahoma?],’ because he said that that did not seem natural!) - he also thought that ‘Out West’ was bounded on the south by the Big Bend country of the Rio Grande and on the north by the last peak of the Bitterroot Mountains in Idaho and which leaned over into Canada. So, Uncle Steve had quite a large idea of what ‘Out West’ really was, and he also had quite a lot of experience with it...

“Naturally, also, my Uncle Steve Robertson accumulated a vast knowledge of and quite a few strange experiences during the many years he was a great ‘pioneer of the far ‘out west’ and which, I am sorry to say, quite a lot of people in New York, and especially around the Washington Square district, do not yet realize ever existed - or for that matter may still exist to some extent.

“Also, my Uncle Steve used to say that the one damned thing he could not endure was... ‘a danged double talkin’ liar... one of them ‘rubber-tongued’ persons who could stretch the truth till she would crack, and keep on stretchin’ it, and still expect people to believe it..’

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“My Uncle Steve always began his ‘tall tales,’ (for I am afraid that they were ‘tall’ tales, and some of them very tall indeed!) with the preliminary statement that he ‘just couldn’t stand any damn person that ‘zagerates!’

“When we were on a fishing trip one time he told me about how the petrified forests of Arizona happened to be petrified — and also about ‘the petrified buzzards’... It was a hot and dry season and I had mentioned it because the water in the creek where we were fishing was almost all dried up, and that was Uncle Steve's excuse to tell me about a really hot and dry season he once experienced in Arizona...

“‘It was back in... now danged if I remember jest which year it was back in,’ Uncle Steve said, ‘but anyhow it was the year that old Geronimo was loaded on the train at Bowie,

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Arizona, when the government sent him to Florida to keep him from butchering people in Arizona. Well, that was the year that it was in, and it shore-as-hell was a hot and dry year in Arizona....

“Bob White an' me had a little cow outfit in partnership down close to the Mexican line, and we was gettin' along pretty well. We'd took up some land... about two sections... and dug some wells and built some ditches so we could irrigate a little ground around the place. We had windmills to pump water out of the wells into a pond and the dtiches, and our nine or ten hundred head of cattle had pretty good feed on the range. And outside of havin' to shoot a few 4 Apaches now and then, before the government got rid of them, we was doin' fairly well and was contented enough, I reckon...

“At first, 'Mam' White, that was Bob's wife, was a little lonesome because there wasn't no frogs to croak down by th' pond or along th' ditches at night. She said she plumb missed frogs a-croakin' an' if there was jest some frogs she could hear croak of a' evenin' she'd be about as happy as she used to be back in Slippery Elm County, Arkansas, where she was born, and her pa and ma still lived. Well, Bob was always sentimental and he fixed it for Mam. He sent back to Arkansas and had a few settin's of frog eggs sent out to her. So, Mam set 'em an' they hatched out jest fine, and before long, when the sun went down behind old Apache Peak of an' evenin', frogs was croakin' all over th' place and Mam was plumb happy.

“Like I said, everything was goin' smooth an' pleasant and we was prosperous till it began to get hot and dry one summer... hotter an' dryer, I-Gawd, than anybody'd ever knowed it to be in that part of Arizona before, an' the first thing me realized them damn pumps wasn't suckin' nothing out of them wells but hot air, and th' alfalfa was withered and Mam's marigolds she'd planted by the side of the house was all dead and dried up, too.

“And in addition to that, them nine or ten hundred head of cattle Bob an' me had out there on th' range was staggerin' around, so cussed thirsty an' dried out, that when they'd

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walk their livers and hearts and lungs or whatever was loose inside of them would rattle 5 against their hides like seeds shakin' around in a ripe gourd. Yeah, that's jest th' way they'd sound! And when one of them got tired walkin' around, hearin' hissself or herself as the case might be, rattlin' like a gourd that ain't got nothin' in it but some seeds, and finally laid down, well, danged if he or she or it didn't jest naturally [petrify?]. . . plumb solid...

“that's when them poor buzzards got a awful shock.

“they'd be wheelin' around, jest wheelin' around watchin' for a cow or a steer brute to topple over, and as soon as they'd see one topple, down they'd swoop thinkin' they'd make a meal on it, and when they'd try to take a bite out of that petrified carcass they'd bust their poor bills off, and there they was... plumb helpless, so they'd topple over, too - and in a minute they'd be petrified themselves!

“Well, the rest of them damn buzzards that hadn't come down and was still wheelin' 'round up there in the hell-blisterin' heat and dryness, would wonder what th' hell had happened to their brother buzzards, layin' down there all petrified beside them petrified cattle; they'd be scairt to come down, and jest keep on wheelin' and wheelin' and gettin' more and more bewildered till damned if they wouldn't petrify themselves up there in the sky without ever knowin' it - and that's the way it was... Thousands and thousands, hell, millions of buzzards jest wheelin' and wheelin' around 'way up in that hot, sizzlin' Arizona atmosphere — and all so damned petrified they couldn't do nothin' but keep on wheelin' and wheelin' without ever 6 makin' a sound or flappin' a doggone wing— Gawd, it was a gruesome sight!

“Yeah, them damned buzzards — all petrified and everything jest wheelin' and wheelin' around up there in th' sky, was a terrible thing to look at, but, I-Gawd, bad off as they was they didn't suffer as much as them poor wild hydrophobia cats that got so dry that they couldn't even foam at th' mouth when they'd have hydrophobia fits... That was one of the pitifullest sights I ever seen. A poor hydrophobia-cat tryin' to foam at th' mouth when he's

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havin' a fit, and not be able to do nothin' only spit out a little stream of dry, kind of chalky dust, instead of good rich foam like he'd naturally do! It sure as hell was pitiful to look at...

“But them hydrophobia-cats wasn't no worse off than all them poor ants jest crawlin' around on the sand under th' blazin' sun, without a drop to drink, jest swelterin' and dryin' up till eventually they'd be in such agony they'd double over an' bite themselves on their own belly-band, an' commit suicide an' perish in misery... Gawd, I'll bet ten billion ants... damn nice big red Arizona ants committed suicide on our ranch alone! It's a awful thing to see a poor damn ant so thirsty an' hot an' dried out that it doubles over an' gnaws its own belly-band in two... It sure is.

“still, I reckon th' worst sufferin' was done by them miserable danged frogs; all them frogs Mam had hatched out from them 7 settin's of frog eggs Bob had had sent out from Arkansas... They got so dry, they jest kind of shriveled up and all wrinkled sort-of-like, well, like a prune that has been layin' out in th' sun too long. That's jest th' way their hides looked — jest shriveled up an' wrinkled like a prune, or worse. But th' worst of it was when they didn't have no water to waller in any more, and sort of soak 'em up; I-Gawd, when the sun would go down behind old Apache Peak an' them poor frogs would open their mouths and try to croak, like Mam loved to hear 'em do of an evenin', all th' poor damn things could do was jest sort of whistle.... It was terrible, th' most agonizin' and heart-wrenchin' thing anybody can imagine. Yes, sir, I-Gawd, if you ever saw a poor shriveled frog tryin' to croak, and not be able to get anything out but jest a measly little damn whistle, it's th, saddest thing you ever saw!

“It sure was distressin'.... Them poor frogs gaspin' out little dinky whistles instead of good solid croaks, was what settled it. When it got that dry, Mam, Bob's wife, couldn't stand it no longer. She'd listen to them frogs tryin' to croak — and jest break down with grief. She jest couldn't stand it. So, finally, after all then buzzards was petrified and most of them ants had committed suicide and them hydrophobia cats 'most plumb forgot how to foam at the mouth, and at last them helpless cussed frogs was whistlin' 'stead of croakin', Mam said

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to me an' Bob one day: - 'We're goin' to move out of this cussed place, Bob White and Steve Robertson. When it gets so danged dry that even a buzzard petrifies and even 8 a frog can't croak, I-Gawd, it's time to go somewhere else....' That's what Mam said. And Bob an' me always did believe in lettin' the women folks have their way, so, I-Gawd, we moved. An' damned if I know whether it ever did rain an' bust th' dry spell, or not. Maybe it did an' maybe it didn't. But while we was present it was one hell of a dry spell - and I imagine if anybody went down there to that part of Arizona they could still see some of them petrified trees layin' around on the ground ('cause - while I didn't mention it before - even most of th' damn trees got to be petrified, too, before things was done with) - an' I also imagine that anybody would probably see some of them poor petrified buzzards still wheelin' an' wheelin' and wheelin' around and around, 'way up there in the air... never makin' a sound an' never flappin' a wing... Jest petrified as hell, an' unable to do anything about it!.....” “My Uncle Steve Robertson was a very great pioneer in his day, and no doubt had many wonderful and thrilling experiences in the very far “Out West, and - as I said before - he was one of those sturdy old ex-Rebel soldiers who could not ‘endure a danged liar an' depised any ornery man that ‘xagerates.’ Perhaps that is why I loved him; he was my favorite Uncle... the one with whom I liked best to go fishing, or on camping-out trips...”