

[Gaston Fergenson]

1

Tales - [?] Narrative

Gauthier. Sheldon F.

Rangelore.

Tarrant co.,Dist.,#7 [8?]

Page #1

FC 240

Gaston Fergenson, 77, living at 406 Florence St., Fort Worth, Texas, was born in Hamilton co., June 18, 1861. His father, Gaston Fergenson, Sr., died when Gaston was two years old. He went to work between the age of six and seven, on a cattle ranch located in Tom Green co., and owned by Saul [?]. He remained as an employee of the Barns Ranch for more than 25 years. He lived in the open and dugouts during his early life. He has seen Indian raids, fence war, conflict between sheepmen and cattlemen, and have seen vigilante committees dealing with cattle rustlers. He was at San Angelo, when a gun battle was fought with cowboys on one side and gamblers on the other.

His story of range life follows:

"I hit this ball of mud down in Halilton co., near the town of Hamilton. It was June 18, 1861, when I was born. I always celebrate my birthday for two day, which carries me over with the colored folks celerbrating emancipation day.

Library of Congress

“My father, Gaston Fergenson, was a rancher and farmer. He farmed just enough land to raise what we needed for the family's [?] in the home. Cattle was our cash crop.

“My father died when I was two years old. That was during the Civil War. By the time the war ended, I was four years old and then old enough to reckon what was going on.

“I recall that mother, as almost all the folks were, was having a hard time to keep both ends meeting. We didn't go hungry, because the range contained thousands of cattle, and this state of affairs allowed us all the beef meat we needed to fill our innards. Then, besides the beef, the bottoms contained thousands of wild turkeys, wild hogs and deer. The uplands contained sagehens. The covies numbered in the hundreds, and buffalo by the thousands. C12 - Texas 2 “Our farm provided vegetables and grain. So, from the land we get our supply of meal and flour. It was impossible to starve us folks, but money was scarce as teeth in a hen's mouth. There was lots of things mother wanted to do and buy, which took money. For instance, she wanted to give us children a chance to get some schooling. But, these things which called for cash we had to go without, and be satisfied with wishing for them.

“When I was still a towhead, it behooved me to hit out for myself. I was not quite seven years old when I started hunting for a job.

“Now, the kids, in my section [?] the country, in the days when I was a lad, could not help but know cow work. We had seen particularly nothing else done but cow work. We learned to ride a hoss about the first [?] after getting out of three cornered pants.

“I don't recall the month, but it was in the early Spring, before I was seven years old, that I pulled stakes and dragged out to Tom Green co., and lit on Saul Barns's outfit. I have often wondered how come Saul's foreman, Will Porter, to give me a job, but he did give me work. I nested with with the outfit for many years, with never a day during the time was I without the hossy stinck about me.

Library of Congress

“As I have said, I could ride a hoss and throw a rope. I knew what should be done, but of course, could not compete with the old cowhides. I was paid \$10 per month wages, and I felt I was getting a corner on the money. Fact is, it was the first money 3 I had ever put my hands on and it felt mighty big. When I look back on getting a job, I reckon Saul Barns and Will Porter, the top-screw, sort of took me to raise.

“My first work was riding the range, going among the critters looking for injured animals. The cattle were longhorns, and often the critters would hook a horn into each other and cut a gash. Also, critters would be received by them running into briars. At times a critter would break off a horn in a fight. These cuts and injuries had to be attended to. If allowed to go without doctoring, screw-worms would get into the cuts and the parasits would cause feaver fever, which would finally cause the critter's death.

“I would leave the camp after Nigger Tom, the cooky, fed us our morning chuck. With a smak in my saddle bag, I would be out all day working among the critters. I would return about sunset.

“Cattle ranged over a large piece of the territory, and to cover my section of the range I had a heap of riding to do. The number of cattle which carried Saul's Staple Five brand run around 20,000 or more, and he had a large number of hosses too. The brand was made thus: and the ranch was called the Staple Five by the waddies. Saul Barns was offered \$300,000 for his brand at one time which he refused.

“Besides myself, there were four others riding the range. Each of us took care of a designated section. When a critter was espied needing attention, the animal would be thrown and doctored. 4 “We flopped a critter by putting a rope on one of its front feet. By throwing the rope on a front foot the animal would be tripped easily. Putting the rope on an animals front foot is not as hard as it appears to be. It is just a mater of throwing the rope at the proper time, so as the loop lights where it comes down, and the animal steps into

Library of Congress

the loop. Soon as the animal takes up the slack, its foot is pulled out from under it, and the critter takes [a?] spill.

“When the animal hits the ground [??] always will follow a few seconds, while the critter is getting air back into its bellows, / when it will lie still. During this spell I had to put a tie on its hind legs, and this rope was tied to its front legs. The four legs were pulled together and in this position / that it [tied?] this way, the critter is helpless and one can do anything with it. When flipping a critter for the purpose of doctoring it, one had to leave the saddle quickly and get the job done before the critter got its wind back and went to kicking.

“When the job was finished, I untied the animal and then beat it for my hoss. When the longhorn got to its feet, it was ready to fight anything on the ground in the vicinity. If the [?] on his hoss, riding away, the critter would look around a bit. If it didn't see anything to tackle it would stalk away.

“Generally, about 50 waddies were employed on the Staple Five outfit. A number of waddies looked after the hosses, and did the wrangling. The rest of the outfit [?] their time with various 5 jobs. One bunch were kept busy watching for straying critters, and drifting them back to the range. Others were kept more or less busy separating critters for market. During a spell of bad weather we all were kept busy holding the herd from drifting [?] of the storm, and during a storm, it always was more or less of a tough job to hold the herd and we did not always do so.

I have seen heaps of stampedes, and some mighty tough ones. Many times I have been riding my mount with lightening flashing and thunder roaring. With the sound of hoofs hitting the ground and horns clashing, from several thousand frightened longhorns, it would sound as though hell had turned all its imps loose.

“I have shot down many leading [?] in [?] attempt to check the running critters, so we could get the herd to [?]. I have seen lightning dancing from tip tottip of the critter's horns as

Library of Congress

though there were a thousand imps laying with balls of fire. Now, with darkness added to the situation, you can figure the sand needed in a waddy's gizzard to stay put on the job.

“A stampede would always end up with more or less strays which we could not find following the stampede. These starys would turn up some where during the course of the general roundup.

“During the general roundup, which took about three months each Spring and Fall, our whole outfit would have plenty of work to do. The system followed in doing the roundup work in the Tom Green territory was for the many outfits to bunch their crews. One fellow would be picked out to act as the top-screw. We would assign 6 to 15 waddies to make up what was called the swing crews, and would make up several of these crews. [We?] would designate the section for each outfit to cover. The swing would start out after chuck time, in the morning, and [?] their section for critters, and drive them into camp.

“Beginning at about 2 [?]. M. the swing outfits would start to return with cattle and would continue till dark. These critters [?] were held into a herd until worked. What I mean is that the critters were held in a herd [?] all the unbranded critters were branded.

“When the swing outfit returned, their work was ended for the day. They would turn their hosses over to the wranglers and rested till the next morning. The waddies, no doubt, could stand further work, but the mounts were in need of rest. After being used in a swing drive the hosses were allowed to rest for a day or more, before being used again. Each morning when starting out the swing outfits took fresh mounts.

“From the start in the early morning till the swing trip for the day was ended, the swing hosses were called on to cover the ground.

“There was some sport connected with the swing work. The waddies all tried to be first in going and returning. When the cooky called out, 'come and get it you skunks,' the waddies rolled out of their blankets and saddled their mounts. Then the waddies would wash and

Library of Congress

line their flue. Soon as the waddies finished the job of lining their flue, the top-screw would yell, 'ride you rawhides.' All of 7 the waddies would make [a run?] for their [?] and [?] out at top speed. Each of the men tried to stay at the lead, and that resulted in a race. So, we watched a race each morning.

“Most of the waddies never used their stirrups for mounting in starting on their swing. They would take a running jump of about 15 feet. Arriving at the rear of their hoss, they would jump and place their hands on the hoss's hips and spring onto the animal's back.

“We on the Staple Five outfit often practiced mounting by a running jump. A party of us would line our hosses in a row, and we would stand in a line back of the hosses about 20 feet. We would all be off at a signal, and see which one could make the mount the quickest.

“Each outfit had their branding crew working in the roundup. While line riders held the critters together, the various cutting and branding crews hunted for unbranded critters, especially calves. The crews were supposed to brand only calves running with cows carrying their outfit brand. There were many calves which were not with any cow when roped. These calves were branded with the iron of the first outfit which roped it. The outfit which had the best cutting and branding crew was the one which received the best calf crop.

“In addition to branding the calves, the cattle were separated and the various outfits would be drifted their critters to their home range. After the roundup was over, all the ranchers would have the critters carrying their brand at home, and then again a few 8 would stry now and then. By the time the next roundup was on there would be a lot of strays mixed with each herd. Occasionally, we found strays which belonged as far as [100?] miles away.

Library of Congress

“During the roundup we lived with the chuck wagon and slept rolled up in our blankets. If it rained we placed our slicker over the blanket. Usually, during the Spring roundup there was lots of rain.

“While in camp we, also, did our sleeping outside on the ground, but [?] dugout to crawl into during a spell of rain. In addition we built a [?] shade. To build this pole shade, we dug a trench and placed the poles on end in the trench, then [?] dirt around the ends. We covered the top with poles [?] pieces, and when the sun was hot we could sit in our pole shade when not working.

“The [??] dugout and pole shade was our home. Then [?] our meals [??] squat on our haunches. I ate my meals [????] so long, that I felt plumb out of place and fretful seated at a table when eating.

“We had [??] enforce table manners. This rule was that [????] or telling smutty stories would be [?]. This rule received fairly good attention, because the punishment for violating it was a dose of leggens. To administer the punishment, a number of the waddies would hold the violator with his buttock in the air, and a leggen would be applied.

“Our chuck was not the fancy stuff, [??] was plenty of plain victuals served. Mainely, of beef, beans, sourdough 9 [?], canned vegetables and black coffee.

“I think of Saul Barns often and his treatment of us waddies. [?] day, when he appeared with a sack of money to pay off the hands, he would cuss and swear and say, 'damn you fellows, I have to give you all my money. I am plumb broke. You fellows have the money. I am going to turn this outfit over to you hands and take a job so I can have a little money for myself.’ We would hear such [?] each pay day, but Barns never quit his part of the business. [??] hand, if the cooky would forget to order some item of food or [there seemed to be not?] enough of some item cooked for a meal, he would cuss a blue streak.

Library of Congress

"When we [????????] we had to do [????] few [?????], and we had the [??] kinds of fowl [and beast?]. I have seen so many turkeys [?] in a cluster [????] they [blotted?] [out?] the sun.

"I must [????] a hunting trip I took. We were sitting around the camp late of an evening and I said, 'Boys, how would you all like a little deer meat?' They all agreed it would tickle their gozzel. So, I took my rifle and away I went to the cedar [brake?].

"I had not been in the brake 10 minutes when I espied a deer. I raised my gun to shoot and at the same moment I heard, 'huff, huff.' I knew the sound well. It was the grunt of [husk?] hogs. I looked in the direction from [where?] the sound came and [?] out of [?] animals headed towards me. Some of the old hobs hogs have tusk about 10 [six inches long, and the animals are vicious. These beast can and will use their tusk to cut, rip and tear anything. With their tusk, [?????] open quickly or cut a [?????].

"Well, when [??] those hogs I ran to a tree and climbed it. In my haste, I dropped my gun at the base of the tree, so that it would not slow up [?] climbing. These hogs gathered around the tree, and with their bristles standing straight up, squealing and grunting, they were hacking away at the tree.

"This particular tree was not a very big one, and by the [?????] finish at the ends of hog tusks shortly. If I had my gun I could have killed the beast, but the need for it never entered my mind when I started to climb the tree.

Paragraph [illegible?]

"I [?????] would carry at the camp, because the [????????] showed up which made me believe the boys couldn't [?] me. After my voice became so hoarse that it was useless for me to yell, I just settled down to my fate.

Library of Congress

"It was not long till a [?] of shots hit into the hogs 11 [?] a number of beast fell dead, while the rest ran away.

"The boys heard me when I let out the first bellow, but sneaked up to where they could see what my predecament was, and there they sat enjoying the sight of me perched on a limb and yelling at the top of my voice.

"The deal was not closed with the conclusion of this scene. The waddies told everybody they met [????] I didn't know the difference between a [?] hog and a deer. That I went hunting for deer and trailed a [?] of musk hogs, and when I caught up with the animals, I let [??????] long spell thereafter. I took a lot [?????] [??].

I recall [?] may as well tell on myself. [Rest of parapgraph mostly illegible]

12

"I got on to a trick which enabled me to best a furious steer with out shooting it. Some of us waddies would enjoy ourselves by riding steers. We would ride our mount to the side of a steer and leap on its back. It took a top rider to stay with the critters and not all waddies would engage in the sport.

"I learned that if the rider poured the guthooks to the steer, its mind would be taken of ox fighting and be centered on getting away. When one [?] began to raking the critters ribs with the guthooks, the critter would throw its tail in the air, start bawling' [and start?] running and pitching. When one had ridden as far as he whised to, sometimes the rider would cut short on the distance by the steer's action, then he would leave the steer. The critter would run a couple hunderd yards after getting rid of the rider and then turn around. It would stop running and stand there snorting and shaking its head.

Library of Congress

“After I had learned this trick, when a steer made for me I would leap on its back, if it got where I could make the leap. When I gave it the guthook treatment, I have never had a steer/ fail to forget about fighting and center on its own hide saving.

“We enjoyed ourselves with riding, shooting, roping and other contest during off hours which we had occasionally.

“Our good times were far between. Generally, after pay days a few of us at a time would get off for a day in town. After the general roundup, there was always a few days given to all that could be allowed away from camp, and a good time would be had by all the boys. 13 “In the '70s and '80s San Angelo provided all the different kinds of amusement a fellow might wish for. The joints ran from the ordinary saloon to gambling, quean joints and dance halls. Some of the boys would amuse themselves till their money was gone, while others would stay one or two days and then drag back to camp.

“A bunch of boys in town generally had the town to themselves. But, the boys would not harm anyone, providing they were not stomped on. Of course, they were a little rough, but everything was done in fun.

“I saw a right pert fight in San Angelo, between a crowd of cowhands and a bunch of gamblers.

“A gambler attempted to cheat a waddy and got caught in the act. When the waddy demanded his money the gambler refused to turn it over. The waddy drew his gun and so did the gambler. Shots were exchanged and the waddy was wounded. Other waddies took up the fight for their pal and other gamblers took up the fight for their pal, and a battle took place.

The cowhands went gunning for gamblers. There was lots of shooting. Several men were wounded. One waddy and two gamblers were killed. The fight ended when there were no more gamblers in sight to shot at. All the gamblers went into hiding. The cowhands

Library of Congress

rode from one place to another and would ride into the joints. They shot at every gambler in sight and put the lights out with bullets. When the waddies quit the town, it was well cleaned.

The San Anglo waddy-gambler fight was one of the worst battles I ever saw in a town, but gun battles were not unusual those days. 14 “When sheepmen came into the Tom Green co., range section there took place some fierce fighting.

“The cattle objected to the sheep, because the animals spoiled the range for cattle. The cattlemen notified the sheepmen to take their folcks some where else, but the sheepmen held their ground. When the cattlemen became aware of the fact the sheepmen were not going to leave, they resorted to making life miserable for the sheepmen.

“Waddies were as much against the sheepmen as were the ranch owners, because they preceived their job playing out. So, when the top-screw told the waddies to put the sheep off of the range, the order tickled the waddies gizzard.

“A party of waddies would ride into a flock of sheep, shooting large numbers of the critters. At first there was only one or two herders at a sheep camp. Thus, the sheep herders were helpless to defend their flock. It was not long till the sheepmen put several herders at a camp with orders to protect the sheep. These herders were armed with rifles and set out to obey orders. These orders led to shooting. A number of waddies were wounded and some killed while making raids on a flock of sheep. The cowman have their waddies orders to shoot back and the fight was on. This led to many being killed and wounded on each side. The sheepmen would lie in hiding and shoot cowmen and the cowmen shot herders on sight.

“The cowmen had the sheepmen bested in numbers. Therefore, it was a losing fight for the sheepmen. In our territory, the 15 sheepmen pulled out, after a number of them were found hanged to a tree. In some sections of the range officers took charge to protect the

Library of Congress

sheepmen. But, there was more or less fighting until fencing/ land took place and the country filled up more or less with settlers.

“The next situation which brought on fierce fighting was the wire fence. It was in the early '80s the suitable wire for fencing was put on the market. In Tom Green co., it was the drift fence which caused the worse fighting and put the small and large ranchers to fighting each other.

“The large ranchers joined together and built a fence about 150 miles long, N. and W. to hold their cattle from drifting S. of the Concho River. This fence held the cattle from drifting below it, but also, held the cattle below it. The cattle S. of the fence were prevented from grazing W. of the river. The small ranchers S. of the river did not have the same idea about the [?] proper location of the fence. They held that the fence cheated them out of range rights.

“The difference in/ idea as to the proper location and extent of the fence led to the objectors cutting the fence and letting cattle through. To meet the fence cutting, the large outfits put watchers to look out for the fence cutters and this led to shootings.

“I watched for fence cutters for a time, but it was along towards the end of the trouble and I never got mixed in any shooting scraps. The small outfits finally realized the advantage of drift fences, and they joined in building some. After the small 16 outfits became reconciled to the drift fence, the rustlers occasionally would cut the fence to drift stolen cattle through.

“Now, the rustler trouble I must not overlook telling about this trouble, and for a time there was lots of it.

“When cattle prices were up during the early '70s and the '80s, rustlers appeared in large numbers at [?] many section of the range country. [?] to the range country had more trouble than others. Rustling became so bad in some localities that the ranchers had to

Library of Congress

take matters in their own hands. This was so in Tom Green co., and led to many killings and many men were hanged by vigilante committees.

“The Garrison rope party was the wildest of such parties which took place in Tom Green co.

This man Garrison was the top hoss and cattle rustler of the section and the head of a ring of thieves. I guess he was about as big a rustler as there was in the state during his days. He seemed to be charmed, because try as hard as the ranchers did, Garrison could not be stopped. It seemed that positive evidence could not be secured against him. At least the law courts could not pin anything on him.

“The vigilantes got after the man and found 1800 head of cattle and hosses which came into his position which had been rustled.

“The vigilantes set a date to go after Garrison and civilize him, but the law seemed to get busy at the same time. When the vigilantes went to get Garrison they found that he had been arrestes and was 17 and placed in jail. The [?] of the day Garrison was placed in jail, [?] 300 ranchers and cowhands called on the sheriff and demanded Garrison. The sheriff refused to open the jail, so the the cowhands went to work. With crowbars, other iron bars, sledge hammers and what not, the gang wrecked the jail. They pried off all the bars and broke down the doors, and took Garrison out of the building.

“The cattlemen [??] the sheriff and compelled him to march with the crowd. They took Garrison to the cemetery and there with little ceremony, except to allow Garrison to make a last statement, he was civilized. He begged and pleaded to be allowed a trial by the courts, and to have his fate put in the hands of a jury. When he realized his rattling was not getting him off, he wilted and had to to be held up.

Library of Congress

“A noose was placed around his neck, and a rope looped over a blackjack tree' limb, and he was pulled up three or four feet from the ground. The crowd waited until they reckoned Garrison was civilized and then said to the sheriff, 'you can have your man now.’”

“The principal reason the ranchers were so bent on civilizing Garrison, was because he was the leader of the rustlers. They feared that if they allowed the man to be tried by the court, the man would be turned loose. Garrison's connections were with many folks and a jury was certain to contain more or less of his friends. Another thing which influenced the crowd to hang the man was that folks were more or less afraid to testify against him, because they feared to be shot by a member of Garrison's [?]. 18 “The hanging of Garrison checked the rustling in our section. The theives became fazed about rustling in our territory when they thought about Garrison's ending.

“During the early day we had the Indian troubles too. The Indians raided settlements which were located in the river [bottoms?], and would steal hosses out of the cow camp's remuda, which compelled us to [?] a close watch over our hosses. Many women and children were carried off.

“My brother's wife, Bell [?], and her young sister were carried off by raiding Indians. The Indians came while the men folks were away. They wrecked the house and took what they wanted. Bell's sister put up a fight and started hollering, when about a mile away from home. Bell tried to stop her from resisting, but the young girl would not listen to her sister's reasoning, and the Indians [tom-hawked?] the child before Bell's eyes.

“My brother arrived at Bell's home a couple hours after the raid, which took place during the fore part of the day, and he started to trail the Indians alone.

“The raiders traveled better than 50 miles before they stopped to camp for the night. My brother located the camp and decided to try to recapture Bell alone. He figured out a scheme and put it into execution.

Library of Congress

"He tied his rifle onto his saddle and dropped his reins so his horse was standing with the gun pointing towards the camp. He fastened a tie to the trigger of the gun and stood at the end of the rope 19 about 50 feet to the right of the horse. He calculated that the Indians would [?] to the opposite direction from where the shot came, and when [??], he intended to run in and grab Bell, if they left her behind. [?] reckoned correctly, because when he pulled the trigger with the rope and the shot sounded, the 10 Indians lit out [??], and left Bell lying on the ground. Brother ran in and [??] Bell instantly following the shot, and took the woman to his mount. He placed her on the horse and rode away. Brother acted [??], that before the Indians realized what was the deal, brother was on his way.

"I am often asked the question, 'who was the best rider, roper, shot and other to [?] among the [?] you have met up with?' That question is hard to answer. I [??], an old Staple Five hand, [??] rider I have ever seen ride 'em. He was our top wrangler, and he could stick on a horse as [?] as a leech. [??] could come out from under Jim [?]. Our top-screw, [??], was the best roper of our outfit, and I can truly say [??] best shot too. This is the reason I can give him the honor. He and I were riding on [?] trail through some cottonwood trees, in the Concho River bottom. I was in the lead and he was following about [?] yards behind me. Suddenly, I heard a shot and at the same instant, a limp panther dropped on my horse's haunch. I yelled:

"What in hell is taking place?"

"Gas," sez he. "You better keep your eye peeled while 20 passing under trees. I lapped the panther leaping on you out of that cottonwood tree."

"I just naturally must say this shot Bill [?] made was the best shot, by far, [?] I ever have seen.

"I worked with the Staple Five outfit till the '90s. At this time the ranges were [?] fenced, the [?] filling up with settlers and the [?????].

Library of Congress

"[?] was [?] the moving of his critters to Mexico. [???] was all put across the Rio Grande, I quit, because I did not hanker to live in Mexico.

"When I quit the Barns's outfit, I then farmed for several years. In the recent years I have been peddleing vegetable for a living.