

[Robt. W. Keen]

1

Folk Stuff - Rangelore

Gauthier, Sheldon F.

Rangelore

Tarrant Co., Dist. 7 [33?]

Page #1

FEC [?] versions of the hoss sketch

Robt, W. Keen, 73, was born on his father's farm in Dallas Co., Tex. His father was a preacher and resided at Spring Creek, where the city of Garland is now located. He learned to ride his father's horses at an early age while doing the chores. He accustomed wild horses to the saddle at 13. His 20 year's range career commenced at 14, when he was employed by the Dave Kretrell ranch. His story:

"I was born on June 10th, 1864, on a farm which was my father's home and was in Dallas County. It was located at Spring Creek, near where the town of Garland is now. Father's chief work was sky piloting but he run a farm and owned a good many hosses in addition. I had a hankering to do any job that had a hoss connected with it but was not so pert on other work. As a kid coming up, I was naturally allowed to do work with a hoss, such as riding to the store, going for the mail, getting the milk cows, and other work that falls to a kid.

"Father always had plenty of hosses and was changing his herd often. It was claimed that for a sky pilot, he was a keen hoss trader. I often calculated on how he could mix

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preaching and hoss trading. Among the hosses that he would get were a good number that had snake blood in them, and some that never had a tree on his back.

“Because of my father's activities, I had a chance to get plenty of play by riding pitchers. I hankered for the work and tackled everything that came my way. I was lucky in not getting any bones busted in the many spills I received. I must have been especially created for the hoss because when I reached 13 years, I was able to bust hosses and did that for the neighbors, and did a fair job.

2

“When I was 14, Dave Kretrell, who's brand was 'Dash L', (-L) needed an extra hand to work in a drive of a herd to the Staked Plains. We had a small ranch near our farm called the 'Motley Ranch', that he used for keeping critters that he bought until he had enough to drive to his 'Dash L'. When I heard about Kretrell needing a hand, I got all hot up about jining the outfit. Kretrell would not take me on without father putting his go sign. Father was not keen on letting me go to the Plains because at that time, the Skillet was not reckoned as a fit place for a stripling to pasture in. Father didn't want to refuse me because as he chinned to me afterwards. He said, 'I calculated you would run off anyway to satisfy your hankering.'

“He spoke to Kretrell about the matter and Kretrell said, 'Let the buckaroo come on and I'll tell him he can join my outfit on one condition, and that is if he can ride. To prove it, he will have to ride that hoss, 'Snip'. It is hell on four feet with a stranger. He will put the kid [into?] a spill pronto, and that will settle the matterf for us, [and?] kill some of the kid's hankering'.

“Father said at the chuck table that night, 'Well, Robert, if you're still set on joining the Kretrell outfit, you can go over in the morning and go to work if he wants to put you on'.

“I was on the Motley Ranch at the rise of sun the next morning. Kretrell put the proposition up to me by saying, 'I can't use a hand that can't ride. If you can ride that hoss Snip, I'll take you on. Now, I am warning you the hoss has a tolerable lot of snake blood'. I had

Library of Congress

busted some tough critters and was swelled up about my ability so I did not back up a bit but [hankered?] to get going.

3

“We put the tree on Snip and I put a rolled blanket in front behind the saddle seat. That acts as a brace and helps you to stay on the leather. I mounted when everything was all ready and discovered pronto, that the ram rod had told the truth. That hoss was hell on four feet. He [hawgrolled?], crawfished, sunperched, and gave me several other movements for spare. I stayed with the critter. After a couple of minutes, I sloshed off my hat and started to fan the baby over the head. The critter soon reckoned that I was able to take his gait and settled down. You know, a hoss can sense when he has a rider in the tree that can stay.

“I drove it around for a few minutes when the hoss settled down, then hit the ground. Kretrell was busting his guts with laughter and said, 'Hell Kid. You are hired here and now'. That was the start of my range life.

“I went on the drive with 2,000 head of critters to Kretrell's ranch on the Staked Plains. We drifted those cattle through Parker and Young Counties 'til we hit the Brazos River, then followed it until we hit Knox County. We drifted Northwest from there to Floyd County, where the headquarters were. The dugout, which was all the headquarters consisted of, was located where Floydads is now located.

“When we arrived, that was the start of a two year stretch for me, during which I never saw a house or a woman. During the latter part of the period, the first white woman was born on the plains. It was the daughter of Dan Chipply. At that time, the shelter, if any, was dugouts. That was what Kretrell used for his headquarters, his office, and his sleeping quarters.

4

Library of Congress

“The Kretrell Ranch was like many others of those days. There was no bunk house for the waddies, nor cook shack. We lived and slept in the open the year round, night and day. We squatted around the chuck wagon to eat our chuck, and our location was [wherever?] we drifted the critters for grazing. Our belly cheater, 'Grease Pot', as we called him, was good and could make whistle berries taste like something mother cooked special. He was a pippin at making sinkers and gun wadding. Our chuck run strong to beef and sinkers[,] Vegetables were a scarce article. What we had, in the vegetable line, came in cans and the arrivals were far between. Of course, we had plenty of beef and that was the fattest yearlings that furnished the meat. He never looked at the brand of the critter we killed. We also had wild game such as deer, antelope, and buffalo, also fowl that we found in Blanco Canyon. We had plenty of syrup and coffee. With thousands of cows around us, we had no milk or butter. We used what was called 'Texas Butter' in the place of butter, which was bacon grease, or sop which was gravy. That was what we lived on and meat was the main chuck.

“Because of the condition of the atmosphere on the Staked Plains, meat would not spoil. It cured it'self by drying and would take on a better taste and get more tender. After it was cured, it became hard and it was necessary to soak it in water before it could be cooked. The cooky cut the beef into strips and made jerk. We waddies used it for chuck when we were out on a long drag and could not get to the chuck wagon at chuck time. I have often thought of how I could whittle off chunks of jerk with my knife and chew it to fill my flue while I was out looking for strays on a long drag.

5

“I recall one time when we killed a buffalo and kept some of the meat for four months. It was really better at the end of that time.

“The cooking was done over a camp fire which was dug in the ground, and an iron grate placed over the hole. Dried buffalo chips, or rather buffalo dung, was the fuel used. Over

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such fire, the belly cheater did the cooking and I'll say right here that I would enjoy another broiled steak with sinkers and son-of-a-gun stew.

"I never slept in a house or a bed during the spell I was with the Dash L. There were 30 of us waddies and we slept and lived the same way. We just rolled up in a navajo blanket if it was cold, and used our saddle for a pillow. When it rained, we used our slickers for a cover over the blanket. I have often been asked about catching a cold from sleeping in the open as we did. Well, for some reason, colds were the least troubles we had. I do not recall having one cold while sleeping out and always felt good. The only time we were disturbed in our slumber was when it rained. A rain was a rare thing on the plains.

"Some folks wonder how it was there was such good grazing on the plains with such little rain. I want to explain how that is. It is a flat country and what water falls, stays there. A few feet under the soil is a layer of rock which holds the water. Two inches of rain there will furnish as much moisture for the grass as four inches in the general run of other countries.

"The cooky had the most trouble when it rained. He would have to deal with wet chips sometimes and then is when he did some 6 plain and fancy cussing. Of course, he always kept the coonie filled for a wet spell but once in a while, he would run out in the Spring of the year, and we would have to live on jerk.

"I reckon you don't know what a coonie is so here goes to prattle on that. It is made from a cowhide which is stretched under the chuck wagon. This forms a pocket which is used to carry things.

"For the most part, the work was pleasant but not so as to blow your horn about at times. [?] we run the cattle on the open range and had rustlers along with Indians to watch for, there had to be some night riding done as well as day riding. [When?] a Norther or a bad storm hit, all hands were called out to hold the herd. Six riders rode the line each day and night with usual weather. The Indians were for the most part, after 'Wohaw'. That is the Indian word for beef. They would suddenly run into the herd and yell and whoop to put the

Library of Congress

critters stomping, then withdraw and wait for the strays to show up, which they would take for their eating purpose. We had considerable of that to deal with.

“Kretrell spent a large part of his time watching for the Indians, and he was good at it, too. He would let us know ahead of time, when to expect a visit. Kretrell was quarter Indian and I guess that was the reason that he could tell before hand when to expect a call. He knew their nature. He would ride over the range, looking for them with a spy glass. He could tell by their actions when he spotted a bunch, just what they intended doing. Tom Varnell was also a good hand at reckoning the visit of the vermin.

“The worst Indian mess that I had to deal with was about six months after I joined the outfit. The ram rod came dragging in 7 like a nigger going to vote, and giving riding orders. He told us all to get plenty of lead in our belts and the heavy artillery out because we were due for a call by the vermin.

“I was about 15 years old and never thought much about the Indian end of the work. When the ram rod said, 'We are in for a good fight', that put me to thinking. I was no coward but there was a hankering for good old Spring Creek, Dallas County. I done what the others did, and got shaped for the raid. The old rawhides were anxious for the raid, or 'Put in their appearance', as they said, so we could have a spell of fun. [With?] that acting on their part, I took courage and got to hankering for a show too.

“It was an hour by sun when Kretrell gave the order. We all stayed bunched, excepting the line riders. We kept moving slowly from one point to another all that night and it began to appear like our fun was not coming off. The moon was bright so we could see. We spied them about four A.M., coming on a dead run and making for the herd. We took after them and headed them off. We began to throw the lead into them as soon as we got into shooting range and they turned to make a drag away from there. It was in the open, and the Indian never wanted to fight unless he could be under cover, if possible. Kretrell ordered us to run them to hell. We kept after the bunch and it was a running fight with both

Library of Congress

parties throwing lead. We waddies had the best of it because we were shooting ahead of us and they had to turn on their mounts and shoot to the rear. They headed for the Blanco canyon and scattered when they reached it. We had put three off their hosses by that time, and the boss ordered us to turn back. The Indians could hide in the 8 canyon and shoot us from ambush.

“They didn't make a hit with us waddies. We took them by surprise and got the three before they could scatter. Tom Varnell and some of the boys cut the three Indian's wigwam off-hair and wore it on their saddles for a decoration.

“We couldn't always get the Indians. They would get away most of the time. As a rule, they would put the herd into a stomp and then drive away to wait for strays. It required all the hands when the cattle went into a stomp so we would have to let the Indians go.

“The Blanco canyon was a large place and one of the few places in the country that good water could be found. Water was one of our troubles. There is plenty of water in the Skillet country but most of it is gyp. I have gone a whole day at a time without a drink while on a long drag hunting strays, or changing the herd to a new grazing ground.

“Stampedes was something that always made a waddy drop his ears. Riding to put the herd to milling and stop running is no Sunday School doings. I have seen critters put to running by Indians, or by some strange animal running among the critters, by a storm, and sometimes by their own orneriness.

“The hardest stomp that I ever worked in started from no other cause than the meanness of the critters. We were driving 2,000 head of the Kretrell cattle from the Motley Ranch to the Skillet Range and had arrived at Keechie Valley. The herd had worked up to that point like milk cows. About an hour by sun that evening, we allowed the critters to graze in some good grass and remain there 9 until they bedded down and got as quiet as a bunch of roosting chickens.

Library of Congress

“All the waddies were rolled up in their blankets and doing a good shuteye job. Of course, the line riders were out and it happened to be my trick on the line. About midnight, the critters started to raise and the whole herd was on the stomp in five minutes. We calculated that not a thing had happened that should cause them to run. Whatever it was, put the herd full length into a scare because they kept us going all the rest of the night and 'til noon the next day. When we did get them critters settled down, it was because they had run themselves down. They had scattered out for a distance of 25 miles. It took us two days to get them bunched again.

“We lost one waddy, another had his arm broke, and one hoss broke his leg. We hunted for Jack Owens. That was the boy that didn't show up, and it was the second day of the hunt that we found him. The waddy had taken a spill while riding in the dark and in falling, his head hit a rock. It appeared that he never [moved?] after he hit the rock. We did not know where he was from, or where to find his folks so we buried him there in the Keechie Valley.

“The rustlers were as hard on the cowmen as the Indians or the stampedes. Them fellows did not rustle cows for beef to eat as the Indians did but for the money the critters would bring. The way the cowmen in Blanco Valley did when they found brand blotters with a bunch of critters, was to administer the naturalizing process

“I saw many hanging from tree limbs, and where there were no tree limbs handy, as it was in most of the skillet country, the 10 short method was used. We used to call it the, 'Short Course In Citizenship'. The largest number that I have ever seen who took the short course at one time, were seven man piled up in one ditch. That was near the Blanco Canyon. Each one had a '45' hole in him.

“I worked a 10 year stretch for the Dash L, then quit and jiggled over to the 'TN' outfit in Hale County. Bob Nelson was the owner. He did not run as many cattle as Kretrell. It was

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near a grease pot outfit but we had a bunkhouse and ate our chuck while squatted at a table. The work was of the same nature and had the same troubles.

“I hated to leave the Dash L for one more than any other, and that was leaving that hoss Snip. He was old for a hoss when I left. About 14, but he was a good hoss. From the day I got on with the Dash L outfit by riding him, he was my hoss in my remuda. [Outside?] of being a little tetchy every morning when I mounted him, it was the best working hoss I ever rode, and I rode many in my time. He was a good saddle and [?] knowing hoss. When once he was put after a critter being cut out of the herd, he stayed right with the [critter?] until it was placed where the cattle were being bunched. [hen?] it came to roping, he just knew what to do under all conditions. He would spot the moment the rope left my hands. If I lost the loop, he would lay his ears back and dig out for the critter to put me in a position to smear him again without a word from me. That hoss had a rep around the Blanco Valley Section for being the top hoss.

“Tom Varnell was the best shot and roper in that section. That boy could make a rope land where he wanted it about a critter. Leg, head, or tail. About his shooting, well, he just couldn't miss and he was fast. He would often practice and have shooting 11 matches. I have seen Tom shooting at a mark from a 50 yard distance and put six shots in a spot the size of a silver dollar, and do it in less than five seconds. He could sure fan that hammer.

“Riding was my game. I improved after joining the Dash L, and became the top rider of the outfit. I was calculated to be the best in Blanco Valley. I soon got so I could bust the wildest of hosses, using a slick saddle.

“While talking about top riders. I do not want to forget Dave Kretrell as a top hand. He could locate and get more Indians and rustlers than any man I know of. He was like a bloodhound after a runaway nigger.

“After staying with the Nelson outfit for five years, I jiggled to many places as a top hoss buster. The game was getting a little rough for my age when I got to be 34, so I quit and

Library of Congress

went back to Dallas County where I spent my time farming. I never did quit hankering for the range. There is something about riding the range and dealing with the danger of a stampede, riding the line at night and expecting to see a bunch of Indians that called for a fight, and chasing rustlers. All that gets into a fellow's blood. I had more fun in the riding, roping, shooting, and other matches that the waddies would hold among themselves, than anything else I ever tried for sport.

"I am getting old now and could not meet the requirements but I have often thought of what I have gone through with on the range, and would like to do it over. After a day's work, the boys would sit around and entertain each other with [long?] talk sometimes that brought out the lying ability of the waddy. They would tell of riding and roping jobs that they had done, or seen others do.

12

"It has been so long since I heard them that the tales have passed out of my mind. I remember one that [cruel?] Face, that is the only name that I have ever heard him called by, told about a hoss. He says, 'I was working down in the Nueces Country and was needing a hoss for my remuda. I smeared one out of the remuda and had a hard time busting the critter but finally, the critter turned gentle, and from that time on, that hoss picked up the cow work pronto. The hoss got to the point where it worked critters alone. If it was calves being cut out, I would turn Bill alone after the first one and he would keep bringing me calves until I stopped him. He would do that with cows too.

"I had trained Bill to come to me when I whistled, and he never failed me. Well, sir. One time we drove into town and I dropped the lines in front of a bar. I went into the joint and found it full of greasers. They were all drunk and one of them demanded that I buy the drinks, which I refused. Pronto, a number of them got the draw on me and had me under the drop. I whistled, not thinking about Bill but because I was in a tight spot. You know how a fellow will do. I had no more then let the sound out when Bill came through that door, a-rearing and a-pawing. He took them by surprise and laid them low in a jiffy. The hoss then

Library of Congress

turned to me, took my belt in his mouth, and carried me outside. There he set me down and stood waiting for me to mount, which I did. He knew we had no pumpkins to roll there just then.