

Chapter V



1886-1888

**CATTLE BUSINESS IN THE STRIP
DAILY LIFE IN THE STRIP
HERRON'S MARRIAGE
RODEO • BLIZZARD OF '88**

In order to tell all this law business, and about the court trials, I have had to run ahead of my story. But I would like to tell more about the people of that area and about the range cattle business there, and the reasons for its downfall, for I have not seen much written about that country.

Through those thirteen years I was in the Strip, from 1880 to 1893, the cattlemen generally enjoyed success if you will except two periods of storms, the storms of 1885-86 and the Blizzard of '88 when they lost many cattle. The land was free, there was good grass most years, and we had a well-watered range. Cattle prices were up and the grangers were raising good crops of corn, castor beans, and sorghum by 1885-86. We had a dry year in 1887, and there was a money panic, but our people were not greatly affected, for we had little money anyway. The killing of cattle by grangers eventually led to cattlemen killing families. That ended the indiscriminate and unauthorized slaughter of beef cattle on the range. In 1888-89 we had good years, but in 1890-91 the grass was short. Many cattle were sold to the settlers on long terms, as low as \$9 a head, and this often included cows with calves at their side.

None of the big cattle companies had bought land in the early years, for no land there could be bought or sold legally. Neither did they pay taxes on it, nor on the cattle they held there in the Strip. Their only expenses were for horses and equipment, for food for their men, and for their wages, about \$30 a month for good hands. A company that held 40,000-50,000 head of cattle would employ thirty to forty

cowboys in busy seasons. Some of those big companies made money so fast in the earlier years that they began to get the idea that they owned the land and everything on it, and that their cowboys had the job of holding the property for them.

One of the sillier rules that was passed by The Association forbade grangers, who might own a few head of cattle on the range, from working with the wagons of Association members. This created ill-feeling between the two groups.¹ There was one granger family located on the Cimarron that had brought in about 400 head of Arkansas cattle. These cattle were soon scattered all over the range. The family had two half-grown boys, fourteen and sixteen years of age. The younger of the two came to the Healy ranch and told me his father had sent him to work on the roundup. He asked if he could eat at our wagon. He stayed overnight with us and I learned that his brother had been allowed to work with the M Bar wagon by John Over, their ranch manager, who, though an Association member, was no stickler for all of their foolish rules and regulations.

The M Bar range adjoined Healy Brothers on the east. George Healy was a charter member of The Association, and he was all wrapped up in its affairs. But George was a good man, a fair man at heart, and he understood that we should maintain good relationships with the settlers for our own good. When John Over and I had put our own personal cattle on the Healy range and the M Bar range, George made no objection, and he told us that it would not bother their operations. So I was relieved when I asked George whether the boy should go with our wagon or not and he nodded his head.

That fall when we shipped the beef herd I went along with them, for I had two carloads of my own grassed-out steers on that train. Healy Brothers, John Over, and I all shipped to the same Commission House at Kansas City—Offett, Elmore & Cooper Company. I knew Frank Cooper, one of the executives, pretty well and he told me there were 400 head of big steers in the Texas Panhandle that I could buy worth the money. He even made me a loan, and I got possession of those steers.

That winter, when we returned from market, I spent quite a bit of my time watching over these cattle on the range, and visiting in the

town of Benton. It was beginning to be a lively little town. There were two saloons, one owned by Tom Parker, a friend of mine. George Healy always ordered his whiskey through him. John Dix operated a still near there, and since George wouldn't drink white whiskey because of its moonshine appearance, Tom thoughtfully boiled dried peaches, and strained off the juice and mixed it with the white liquor to produce a beautiful amber-colored and fancy-flavored drink with a sweet, cordial taste. Tom Parker didn't drink, but his brother Bill drank enough for both of them. Bill, George Healy, and I frequently tipped the jug together, and we were often joined by "Irish" McGovern, Jack Rhodes, Al Dixon, and other cowboys of that area who were all good friends, we didn't get hog-drunk, and none of us were alcoholics, just a bunch of young men out to enjoy life and have a good time.

In Benton, E.L. Gay was editor of the *Benton County Banner*, our first and only newspaper.^{1a} He was a good man, intelligent and a fine writer, and he worked hard to make our town a leader in the area. My pal John (Irish) McGovern ran the livery stable for a while, when he tried to quit punching cows. He was the best bronc rider in the neighborhood, though to look him over you wouldn't guess he could ride out alone and bring in the milk cows. But he was all for fun. Old James (Medicine) Steadman, the father of Ben and Stella, was a town character who had earned his nickname when he prescribed some physic pills for a sick Indian a wandering tribe had left in Benton. Before leaving, the Indian's friends administered the entire package of pills Steadman had sold them, and the brave nearly died. After three days sitting in the sod john, back of Tom Parker's saloon, the brave left, following the trail of his friends. "White man heap run'em, stink'em, kill'em sick Injun," he told Tom, who had let him sleep in the saloon's bullpen. "Me go die with good Injun friends."

Belle Perkins was our first school ma'am, and she was highly respected by all in Benton. She was paid \$1 a month per child, and taught a four-month term in the little sod schoolhouse. She had students who were grown men and women. At that time Healy Brothers had a middle-aged cowboy named Jack Larsman—some called him Landsman—who came from Texas. He was a lanky bronc rider who often rode the rough strings. Jack started riding into Benton

and back to the ranch daily to learn to read and write. It was such a long ride that Healy couldn't get any work out of Jack, so he told him to stay in town during the school term and just return Saturdays and Sundays to the ranch for work. George even paid his board and room in town while he was learning, for George admired education and was himself reading law books to become a lawyer. So Jack stayed at the Benton Hotel and attended school with the children.

This arrangement worked fine. In just a term or two Jack learned to "read and write and cipher to the rule of three," as he once told me. But he was no good as a cowboy after that, for he wanted then to teach school. He left there not long afterward, and someone said he taught a school at the head of Palo Duro. But I never learned what happened to him.

Mr. and Mrs. Ansel Groves operated the Benton Hotel, and they had three charming daughters, Alice, Della, and Bertha. I had made the acquaintance of Miss Alice Groves during the trial of Broadhearst, for I stayed at the hotel, and now that I had some jingle in my pockets and good prospects ahead I began to think about marriage. So I paid much attention to Alice during that period and in the course of my courtship I made George Healy acquainted with Lydia Savage, the pretty daughter of Judge John Savage. When George and I had both been successful in persuading the girls to say Yes, we decided a double wedding would be the thing and set the date. For some reason or other George and Lydia decided to wait, but Alice and I went ahead with our plans and engaged a minister from Meade, Kansas, to come down to the Strip and tie the knot. I believe this must have been one of the first, if not the first wedding, in No Man's Land, in 1886.

A wedding in those days was an important event, and we invited practically everyone in the Strip and from north Texas to attend. And most of them came! Following the ceremony, we had a dance every night and a feast every day for three days and nights. The Groves family kept the tables loaded with food; the men visited at the saloons at regular intervals to brighten themselves up. I saw to it that there was plenty of free liquor and beer to drink.

One old boy, Thunder Thompson, would often ride into Benton, get soused, and pay Mr. Gay for a subscription to his newspaper. Gay

said Thunder did this so often that within a year he had his subscription paid up to the year 1996. Thunder failed to attend my wedding and I later asked him why. He told me, “That man Gay already has nineteen papers coming to my ranch every week, and damned if I want twenty!”

How different those dances were compared to these of today! The boys in those days enjoyed a drink just as they do now. But we never would have thought of taking the ladies into a bar or saloon with us, and they would have slapped the face of any boy suggesting such a thing. We bought cloves, and chewed parched coffee, to keep the girls—and particularly their Ma-mas—from knowing we had taken a drink! Yet if any cowboy or granger had tried to raise a disturbance in the room where we were dancing, we would have hog-tied him like a choused up steer to keep him silent.

Our wedding was a wonderful, a beautiful, and an unforgettable experience for both Alice and me. We had never known such attention before, and were flattered by it and our hearts warmed by these friendships so openly expressed during this time. It was also the only occasion at which I ever saw the mothers of babes give their children laudanum to make them sleep, then coffee, a few hours later to awaken them! Later, about 1890, George Healy and Lydia married, and we repeated the performance, but not on quite such a grand scale.

My wife proved to be all that any man can expect in a woman. She was a slim, lovely brunette with deep brown eyes and a creamy complexion, with soft skin and a most loving disposition. I had never courted a girl before, and had not Alice’s parents, with great understanding of my shyness, made many meetings possible for the two of us and encouraged me in every way to come and visit their daughter, I would never have won her attention, for I was but one of the many swains attracted to her.

The Groves family was from Indiana, and they were fine people. They not only cared for their own, but had taken a small orphan boy to raise. His name was Elery Cooper, and he later was a printer and also taught school on the Coldwater, where he had to whip several of the toughest young fighters in the neighborhood to maintain control over his schoolroom. Elery wouldn’t tolerate any foolishness where he taught. Once he had trouble with two male parents who upheld their

sons in their orneriness. Elery just took off his coat and vest, laid them on a desk and told the two fathers, "If I have to discipline fathers, too, we may as well begin right here. Which of you two wants to be first?" That ended the matter, for neither parent wanted to test Elery's mettle that day. Elery later started up the *Santa Rosa Star*, and newspaper in Santa Rosa, New Mexico, when the Rock Island Railroad built down through there in 1903. He earned a reputation there of being a "fighting editor."

In the first few weeks following our marriage, I divided my time between the Healy ranch, where I worked, and the Benton Hotel, where Alice and I first stayed, for we had not yet decided where we would live. During these weeks George Healy and I had some heart-to-heart talks about the cattle business, and especially about my way of looking at it.

At that time in the cow country there was a custom which we cowboys called "playing even." It was a range rule that was fair enough for all owners concerned, and it helped keep down trouble over cattle. It worked this way: If you were a range foreman, as I was for the Healy spread, or were a ranch manager for a cattle company, and happened to get more mavericks—unbranded cattle—than really belonged to your outfit, you were considered to be just working honestly for your company, not stealing. That is, you were "playing even," as we called it. For the next time it was the natural run-of-luck that some other company would get and take the advantage. Seldom, if ever, would a range foreman or manger ever be questioned by officers of any other ranch or company for having extra calves or other cattle in his gather.

Likewise, if you sent one of your boys out to cut out a fat beef for the ranch table, that boy would never bring up, rope, or butcher an animal bearing his own ranch brand. He would look first for a maverick, and then probably settle for a beef wearing a neighboring ranch brand. Now that, too, was not considered stealing, or dishonest, for everyone did it. If you didn't do it, you would not be "playing even" for your employer, for you would be eating your own beef while everyone else was eating it, too. In those days if you wanted your own beef to eat, you took dinner at a neighbor's!

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