Pioneer Stories

The Cowboy . . . 1870 into 1880s
Story of "Gene" Williams

The Cowboy, that romantic creature of the West, is passing; has already passed from the scene of his early activities in Weld county, but before he gets entirely out of sight it may be well to get a snapshot of him in his real character without the glamour of romance or the erroneous Eastern impression of him as a Western "roughneck".

Fortunately Greeley has him in the flesh in the person of one of her most dignified and respected citizens, Mr. Eugene Williams, who for years served the county as deputy marshal. Mr.. Williams has had the forethought to draw his own pen-pictures, for which the boys of this and coming generations will rise up and call him blessed. He has preserved the story of his Cowboy days in neatly typed script, written while all the incidents were still fresh in his mind; though, for the matter of that, Mrs. Williams says that should he live to the age of a hundred years that story will still be as fresh as when the scenes were enacted, though he may forget much that happened last week. He may publish a book of his own some day, but pending that time here is enough of it to make all who read it want more. As it deals with the early life of Greeley's deputy marshal perhaps he will not mind if this story speaks of him as "Gene"; Anyway, to tell the truth, that is what everybody calls him, even to this day.

THE YOUNGEST COWBOY.

Between the years of 1860 and 1876 the stock business was practically the only one carried on along the South Platte River in Weld county. The latter part of that period and passing on into the 1880s saw its decline as a dominant industry, but in the earlier period it held full sway, and it was within that time that Gene became a cowboy.

In the spring of 1871 Gene's father and J. W. Macrum went into the business, locating about thirty miles east of Greeley and using "70" as the brand for their cattle. It was then that Mr. Williams put nine year old Gene on a pony and initiated him into the "romantic" life of the cowboy. For fifteen years Gene rode the range and in that time came to know that the life was not all romance and adventure, but that plus the dash and adventure of the cowboy's life, and the lure of the great outdoors there was also work, hard work, discomfort, sometimes danger and always responsibility.

All the region that is now Weld county and beyond in all directions was open range in the 1860s. With the generally accepted belief that this country would never be fit for agriculture the cattlemen had come in and taken possession. Each had from a few hundred to many thousand cattle feeding upon the prairies. Each ranger had his own headquarters known as the "home range", but the cattle mingled together on the common feeding ground, often wandering many miles away from the home range. And since all cattle looked more or less alike, it was necessary to have a system whereby each owner could identify his own. Branding was the system adopted. Each owner selected a figure or other character which he had cast in iron and registered with the proper authorities, and which served to protect his property rights as a copyright or patent does others. This iron was heated hot enough to burn the flesh and pressed against some selected spot on the body of the animal until it burned deep enough to prevent the hair from growing over the spot. Usually a brand lasted a lifetime, but sometimes not; so another mark was used that nothing could obliterate—the ear-mark. This was the cutting off or notching of an ear, the registration stating whether left or right, or how notched. The brand adopted by Gene's father and his partner was the figure "70" on the left hip.

So that each ranger might know how many cattle he owned it was necessary to make about three round-ups in a year, the main one being known as the "Spring round-up"; the next came later in the year and was for the calves while still young enough

to be identified by the mothers, and another still later in the year for the singling out of beef cattle.

There was a perfect system for the working out of the round-up, all owners co-operating together. At an appointed time each owner sent his outfit consisting of men, horses and supply wagons to a central meeting place. There were generally from fifteen to twenty wagons and from a hundred to a hundred and fifty men. Julesburg was the central meeting place. There a round-up boss was selected who gave each man his orders for the day, directing them all to ride in groups of three or four or more in all directions, spreading out fan shape to a radius of from five to fifteen miles. Keeping to the north side of the river all groups brought in all cattle found, the collected herd sometimes aggregating 10,000 or more; but to expedite the handling of the big herd they generally divided it into herds of about 2,000 each.

Around each herd of cattle some of the cowboys on horseback circled constantly to hold them together, while others rode into the herd cutting out all bearing certain brands; these smaller groups being held by still other cowboys circling around them. These smaller groups bearing a certain brand were called "cavvies". The reading of the brands was a branch of the business requiring the services of experts who were generally the older men of the outfit who had gained proficiency through much experience.

The next move was to drive the "cavvies" to the general assembling place where all the young were branded. All animals old enough to have a brand yet showing none were called "Mavericks", divided up among the rangers and branded accordingly. If night came on before the branding could be done the night was divided into watches of from two to four hours each and a sufficient number of cowboys left in charge. Usually the first guard stayed on until ten, then were relieved and went into camp for the night; the second guard was relieved at midnight and the third at two o'clock, the last staying out until early breakfast time when the daymen came on.

Camp was moved every day from ten to twelve miles up the river, each ranger's lot leaving the general herd when nearest the home range. Finally after all branding and counting was done the cattle were released to wander back again to the hills and plains, and the cowboys went home to clean up and rest.

Moving camp was sometimes an event of great hardship and discomfort. Often there would be many wagons, hundreds of horses and men and thousands of cattle moving through clouds of dust so thick that it was with much difficulty that either men or animals could breathe. Sometimes a team hauling a mess wagon and crazed with thirst would get a scent of water at a distance, break all bounds and run at top speed, strewing over the prairie rolls of bedding, pots and pans and whatever of provisions could be jarred loose, in utter disregard of the desperate tugging at the lines of a mere man on the driver's seat of the wagon. Often the wagon would be overturned and it was a lucky driver who was thrown so clear of the wreckage that he could see the maddened animals and the upturned wagon disappearing in the dense cloud of dust that swallowed them up. When this happened other mess wagons still right side up would divide the "grub" with the unfortunates whose provisions lay scattered over the prairie.

Even at the best there was nothing of the glamour of song or story in the moving of a large herd of cattle along a trail. In spite of the best efforts of the best skilled cowboys they would string out, the stronger far in the lead leaving the cows and young calves back in the "drag end" and moving slowly. Unless there were riders enough to keep within a few hundred feet of each other the cattle would scatter which made more wheeling and fast riding necessary and raised still greater clouds of dust which, when alkili, as it generally was, filled eyes, nostrils and mouths, inflaming and blinding the eyes of both men and animals and creating a thirst that was indescribable; and when the herd was moving toward water and the wind veered around so as to bring the odor to them the cowboys had just as well ride to safety and watch the stampede go by. After

that they could follow the herd to the watering place where other troubles were sure to await them. There the advance guards of other herds had also gathered and the work of separation was all to do over again.

Gene remembers well one incident connected with a big herd movement that may sound funny to others now, since to the peculiar nature of the man-animal there is nothing so humorous as injury or suffering, but to Gene at the time it lacked all the essential elements of mirth or humor. He was riding near the lead and as the herd was moving on quietly he dropped back to speak to the boy behind him, when the leader of the herd, with characteristic perversity, took that moment to stray from the narrow path seeking refreshments. Gene had to ride fast and hard to get the leader and his followers back onto the trail, and when making a sudden dash his horse plunged into an unseen hole in the ground and pitched Gene over his head into the very middle of a rich, ripe cactus bed. Gene thinks he must have rolled over several times, for he is sure there was not a spot the size of a pinhead on his whole anatomy without its cactus needle. The other boys picked until they got him into condition to ride back to camp; but it was more than a week before he could again take the saddle or eat his meals in the ordinary posture.

THE COWBOY'S BEDROOM AND DINING ROOM

In the earliest days both bedroom and dining room had for their ceiling the blue dome of heaven; but later the big cattlemen provided each cowboy with a dog tent for a bedroom, and still later larger tents that would shelter a dozen or more together. The dining room got under shelter in a big way long before the bedroom did. The boys could sleep under snow, Gene declares, without discomfort if only they had a warm and sheltered place to eat their meals. The first round-up coming so early in the spring snow storms were not infrequent and the boys were often snowed under in their beds, but breakfast was served in a warm and sheltered dining room. There was always

a cook who served the meals, but every boy had to make his own bed; and this is how he did it:

First he spread on the ground a heavy canvas something like a tarpaulin, so treated as to resist moisture and more than twice the size of the beds; on this he spread his blankets and pillow then pulled up the canvas and tucked it securely under both sides of the bed. He retired by creeping in from the head of the bed and, in stormy weather, usually pulling the canvas up over his head; and Gene says that through rain or snow his slumbers were peaceful and undisturbed.

But he tells of a time when one of the boys was lost on a stormy night. All others reported at breakfast, but none had seen the missing boy. A heavy snow had fallen during the night but there were no tracks to show that he had left camp, nor any traces of a struggle with any kind of a night prowler. But the snow could have covered up all traces of a struggle, or tracks to show whither he had been carried. A posse was hurriedly organized and was just on the point of starting in search of the mysteriously missing boy when a mound of snow near the camp began to move and as the astonished posse stopped to watch, it broke apart and through the opening came a head and with it a voice making a surprised but quite obvious observation about the weather. Gene says the exact words must be used else the point is lost. The cowboy said—"Oh, hell; it's been snowin'."

SOME BRIGHT SPOTS

But there were bright spots also in the cowboy's life. Let Gene tell this one in his own words:

"The last four years I spent in the saddle I was one of three sent down to follow the round-up on the Arkansas River. Bob Kendal, Jule Weatherby and I represented the whole of the Platte River country. Bob worked for Bruce Johnson whose brand was "22", Jule for Judd Brush of the "J.B." brand and I for the "131" outfit which was owned by the East Hampton Live Stock Co. and managed by J. O. Gale of Greeley.

"Jule would come up from the "J.B." ranch which was

about ten miles east of where Sterling now is, to the "131" ranch about three miles west of Sterling, and we would go together up to the "22" ranch which was about fifteen miles farther up the river, and there we would stop for the night. The next morning the three of us would start south, each with six or eight horses, one carrying bed and "warbag", containing extra clothing, tobacco, etc. We would then go to the "OO" ranch—the Two-Circle Bar—which was near the station of Agate on the K. P. Railroad. This ranch was owned by Henry Gebhart who, with his family, lived on the ranch. Here we would stay from one to two weeks, feeding our horses grain twice a day and getting them into good condition for the summer's work.

"While at the ranch we had nothing to do but eat and sleep and feed our horses. Mrs. Gebhart kept a French girl, Gussie, who did the cooking and I will never forget the splendid meals she served us. We slept in the granary and loafed there most of the time, playing cards, reading or sleeping. After breakfast we would go out and feed our horses and then go back to the granary. At about 9:30 or 10 o'clock Mrs. Gebhart would call us to come and have lunch. At noon we were called to dinner, at about 3 in the afternoon another lunch and at 7 we had supper. The lunches were better than any meals to which we were accustomed and the regular meals were wonderful." (end of quotation.)

This, of course, put boys as well as horses in fine condition to begin the summer's strenuous work. They would start from where Big Sandy Creek empties into the Arkansas River, work up the Big Sandy through Kit Carson, Hugo and River Bend into the Bijou Basin in Elbert county, covering the country between the South Platte and the Arkansas rivers and from the mountains to some miles into Kansas. Gene tells of finding a dead Indian in a cave one day and of believing him to be the one that one of the boys shot at a few nights before. They took off his buckskin leggins, cut them into strips and used them to decorate their horses' bridles and their own hats.

THE THRILL OF THE BUFFALO HERD

Gene tells also of a thrilling and dangerous experience when he found himself one day in the middle of a big buffalo herd. He knew his only hope lay in riding faster than the buffalo could run, working his way as he rode to the outer edge of the herd. If his horse, only half broken and now thoroughly excited, should step into one of the many holes in the ground that could not possibly be seen—well, he was not sure where he might wake up; but quite surely Weld county must have lost her future Deputy Marshall. But his horse did not step into a hole, and Gene made it to the outer edge all right and mopped his perspiring brow as he watched the vanishing herd sweep on and away.

HIS ESCAPE FROM INDIANS

This story goes back again to an earlier day. Gene is not ashamed to tell that he once ran from the Indians; says he ran *fast*, too, and has always been glad he outran them. He was twelve years old, and was out looking for his father's horses. From the top of a hill at a distance of two or three miles he saw what he knew to be a bunch of Indians on horseback, and he knew they saw him. He was about fifteen miles from camp. He did not believe the Indians to be especially hostile but thought it never quite safe to meet a body of them alone on the prairie He at once lost interest in his search for the horses and headed for camp. But he knew he must not appear to be frightened or even to know the Indians were there. If he started to run the Indians would do the same and their fleet footed ponies would be more than a match for his larger and slower horse. So with palpitating heart but with iron self control he jogged along leisurely until he saw they were making a maneuver to cut across his path and intercept him, then he threw discretion to the winds, gave his horse free rein and an urge for speed and the race was on. And it was a race never to be forgotten, but finally the Indians gave up the chase and turned back. Maybe they had had all the fun they wanted, but Gene does not know to this day

whether that was all there was to it or not. At any rate he rode safely into camp and was neither laughed at nor blamed by his elders for not bringing in the horses. It was some adventure for a twelve year old boy.

THE HORSE RACE

Among the many reminiscences of the early days is one that Gene can call up now with a smile, but he always cautions his hearers not to mention it if they should happen to meet any of the other boys on the street. It is still a tender subject, even after half a century.

It happened at Lodge Pole Creek near Sidney, Nebraska. The boys not on herd came into town and at the livery stable met a long, lank, lean old negro on about the scrubbiest looking little old pony they had ever seen. Maybe the negro read from the looks they cast upon his pony that they were underrating him, so he promptly offered to bet $100 that his pony could outrun anything in the stable. The offer promised entertainment, a purse was soon made up, and preliminaries arranged. The toughest mustang in the outfit was selected, which happened to be Gene's own, and Gene, being the smallest of the cowboys was chosen to ride him. The record of Gene's pony on herd gave the boys full confidence. A crowd gathered as by magic. all Sidney and Lodge Pole seeming to be on hand. Betting was lively, but the boys covered every bet until there was not enough money left in the crowd to pay for one supper.

The moment arrived; Gene and his mustang stood ready on the track, when from nowhere seemed to appear the negro's pony, but instead of the long,lank negro with feet almost dragging on the ground there sat, perched upon the back of the pony the littlest piccaninny ever seen outside of a mammy's cradle. And the little villian had a wicked little twinkle in his eye as he rolled it around, taking in the situation. The cowboys took it in, too; Gene would have made three of the piccanniny. It wasn't fair, of course; but the bet had not stipulated the size of the rider, and there was now no time for discussion. Gene cast a questioning glance into the faces of his friends but they

gave back no answer. There was nothing else for it; Gene rode up alongside the piccanniny and the signal was given. What happened next was even worse than could have been expected. The pony and the picanniny sprang into the air and their feet touched the ground no more until about half the race track was measured, leaving Gene trotting along behind, doing his best to keep the two in sight. Of course the crowd roared and shouted and shrieked and roared again until it seemed to the dejected cowboys as they rode off toward the mess wagon that the very heavens gave back the echo.

No, better not say anything about it if you meet any of the boys on the street.

THE BIG STORM AND A CURIOUS PHENOMENON

One more story from the wealth of stories that will be in Gene's book: this time about a terrific snow storm and the remarkable fireworks that went with it.

It was in the early 1880s and toward the last of the open range in this region of the West. Homesteaders and colonists were arriving in ever increasing numbers and crowding the cowboy and his herd ever northward and westward; watering places were being fenced in and prairie acres cultivated. Gene was employed by Lusk, McQuillet & Macrum as one of the men to go north with the herd. It was late in the season for a roundup but it had to be done; the cattle could not go through another winter on the diminishing feed to be found. So the boys got together about 2,500 cattle at Big Crow Springs late one evening ready for the start in early morning, arranging themselves in relays to guard the cattle through the night.

It was the custom for all the boys to ride around the herd until the cattle would be in a compact group and begin to lie down; but this time they were restless and uneasy and would not lie down; no one guard could hold them and it was soon apparent that all would have to stay on duty. Soon the cattle began to bawl and from that passed into an ungovernable panic. And then the storm broke. It was a blizzard, the like of which Gene says he never saw before and hopes never to see again. The night settled down into the blackest of darkness; a terrific wind drove in cutting blasts and the only way the boys could locate the cattle at all was by the balls of electric fire that hung on their horns. Gene says this phenomenon was not uncommon in summer but never before had it appeared in falling snow. Now the balls of bright electric fire danced from the horns of the cattle and the ears of the horses. It would have been a most interesting display of fireworks could it have been witnessed by a sheltered and comfortable Fourth of July audience, but to the cowboys trying to hold the panic stricken animals it meant nothing but terror and hardship.

The storm raged on through the night and late into the following day, and when strength and endurance had reached their limits the cowboys withdrew, leaving the still frantic animals to seek shelter as best they could. After the storm finally abated and the cattle grew quiet the cowboys again rounded up the herd and started on the last long trek for the north country. That ended the life of the cowboy for Gene. Soon after that he settled down to the less adventurous but much more comfortable life of the Weld county citizen, became Deputy Marshall, married Alice Billings and "lived happy ever after."

And now Gene and Alice, otherwise Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Williams, still live at the pleasant family home on Tenth Avenue, Greeley, where, the rapids passed, life flowes on like a river.