IMPRESSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS OF THE JOURNAL MAN

11/24/24

By Fred Lockley

An old Texas Ranger is here introduced by Mr. Lockley, to tell of the life of that picturesque breed as they went ranging for Indians in the wilds of the Lone Star state. The story will be completed in this space tomorrow.

Several months ago I interviewed Captain Howard, in Portland. He was 97 years of age, and was the last surviving member of the California Rangers. A day or so ago I spent part of the afternoon with Jack Poil at his home in Eugene. He is one of the surviving members of the Texas Rangers. He is 97 years old, though he looks and acts more like a man of 67. I found him at work at his home when I called to interview him, but he decided the work could wait; so we sat down together, and he told me of an era that has gone never to return—the era of the scout, the trapper and the Indian fighter.

* * *

"I am a Southerner," he said, when I asked him where he was born. "I was born December 8, 1826, in Mississippi. My father's name was Nick Poil. He married Mary Ann Westbrook. I was the third of their four children. I left Mississippi the year the stars fell. I was going on 7 at the time. It looked as if it was raining stars. That was in 1833. I wasn't old enough to be scared. It looked pretty to me, but a lot of the grown folks thought the end of the world had come.

* * *

"My father was a Baptist preacher. That's how come we shifted around so much. Most preachers' families see a good deal of the world. We went to Rome, Ga., shortly after the stars fell. My mother died, and father married again. He married a woman who figured she knew all about raising children. I suppose it is hard on a woman to have to raise some other woman's children. Just seeing them around reminds her that she is her husband's second choice. It is hard on the children, too, for it is easier to whip some other woman's children than your own flesh and blood. Probably she didn't lick me any more than I deserved, and I have no doubt she did it for my own good; but my uncle John couldn't stand to have me slammed around so much, so he took me. He lived in Alabama. He was a sort of rover and adventurer. He wanted to see all there was to be seen. He always seemed to think there was something exciting going on somewhere else; so we were always hurrying on, only to find that the place we were looking for was somewhere else. We went to Illinois, New Orleans, Arkansas, Tennessee, then back to Alabama, then back to Arkansas, and from there to the Cherokee Nation.

* * *

"My Uncle John became acquainted with a man in the Cherokee Nation named Captain Arthur Snoddy, who worked for the government. His job was to keep whiskey and rum peddlers from bringing liquor into the Cherokee Nation, and also to prevent the smuggling in of steel arrow points, spearheads, lances, guns and powder to the Indians. Captain Snoddy soon gave me to a Cherokee Indian. With white folks one can be rich and have more than he needs, and a hundred can starve; but with Indians, as long as one has anything he shares it with the others; so I always had plenty to eat. By the time I was 18 I was as much at home on horseback as a white-haired grandmother is at home in her rocking chair by the fireplace. I picked up from the Indians a lot of things white people don't learn—things Indians have to know to be able to live; such as tracking, the habits of game, and a hundred other things of that kind.

* * *

"Captain Doty, the captain of a company of Texas Rangers, when I was 18, told me that I would do for a ranger, so I joined his company. They had to keep getting new men, for the rangers in those days didn't last very long. You had to be able to ride fast and far, to shoot accurately with a gun or pistol from horseback, and to die cheerfully, fighting against odds, to be a ranger. After a while a man gets used to things and they become matters of course. We were hired to kill Indians, horsethieves and 'bad men'; so we either did what we were hired to do or dropped out and got some other kind of a job. Captain Doty had 32 men in his company. Joe Guthrie was our interpreter. Once in a while we combined with another company, and then we mustered over 70 men, but that was only when we were after a big band of Apaches or Comanches.

* * *

I joined the Texas Rangers in 1844. Not many men are good at everything. I specialized at just one thing—shooting from horseback. It is nothing to brag about. It is like learning a language. If you have a gift that way and will work at it and practice it long enough you get to be good at it. I got to be so good at shooting from horseback that the men of my company would bet anything they had on me, and they usually won. After lots of practice you get so that when your horse is in a dead run you can pull your gun, shoot instantly, and know without aiming that your bullet will get an Indian back of the ear, through the heart or wherever you want to get him. In time you shoot by instinct, not by aim.

* * *

"In 1847-48 we escorted emigrants from Arkansas and Missouri who were going to Texas. In 1849 we escorted parties going to California. A few wagons would straggle along. Captain Doty would make them camp till enough wagons had collected, and then we would serve as escort through the Indian country. We usually organized the wagon trains at Concho. We escorted them to the Pecos river, and from there to Alamo by way of Alkali, Deadman's Hole, Knox's Water and Texas Hill. We were apt to have brushes with the Tontos, Comanches or Apaches anywhere in that district. Between whiles we outfitted at Fort Apache or Fort Comanche.

* * *

"When fighting Indians is your day-in and day-out job, you fight 'em when you have to, and leave 'em alone when you can. Some men are born daredevils. I was considered a daredevil, but I was young and foolish and had my reputation to make, so I guess I did at times flirt with death needlessly, and sometimes I got well paid for it. I got an arrow through my chest once. The point hit something hard inside of me near my backbone so I couldn't push it through. I had to break it off. Meanwhile, in the mixups my riding horse was killed, so I was afoot. I finally cleaned up the Indians—there were only a few of them. I had a gun and a pistol, and they were armed with bows and arrows. I don't know whether it was the pain or fighting so hard or losing blood or what it was, but pretty soon I couldn't walk nor even stand up; so I crawled to a nearby stream and lay in the water. The boys found me there and carried me to camp. Dr. Powell couldn't pull the arrow out. He finally got the arrowhead loose from what it was sticking in and pushed the point through my back near my backbone and pulled it on through. Well, sir, I was 17 days lying around camp doing nothing before I could sit in the saddle. On the seventeenth day we started out, but after riding 12 miles the place near my backbone where the arrow had been pulled out hurt so that we went into camp. We had with us a young chap named John Beardsley. He couldn't cook, and, being new at the game, he wasn't much force at camp work; so he volunteered to stay out with the horses. First thing we knew the Indians swooped down on us. In those days we always carried a short-handled shovel tied to the saddle to dig in with. Every man knew just what to do, so in no time we had dug a circle in the sand, throwing the sand in front of us about a foot high. Each man looked like a spoke of a wagon wheel. Our feet pointed to what would be the hub of the wheel, and our heads were where the tire of the wheel would be. We shot hard and fast, and in a few moments the Indians rode off carrying their dead with them. Two of the men in our circle had got theirs. Hardin and Robinson were dead, and Jim Button had an arrow through his neck. We went out to see how John Beardsley had made it. Poor chap! He had stuck at his post and done his best. We pulled 17 arrows out of him, and buried him where he fell."