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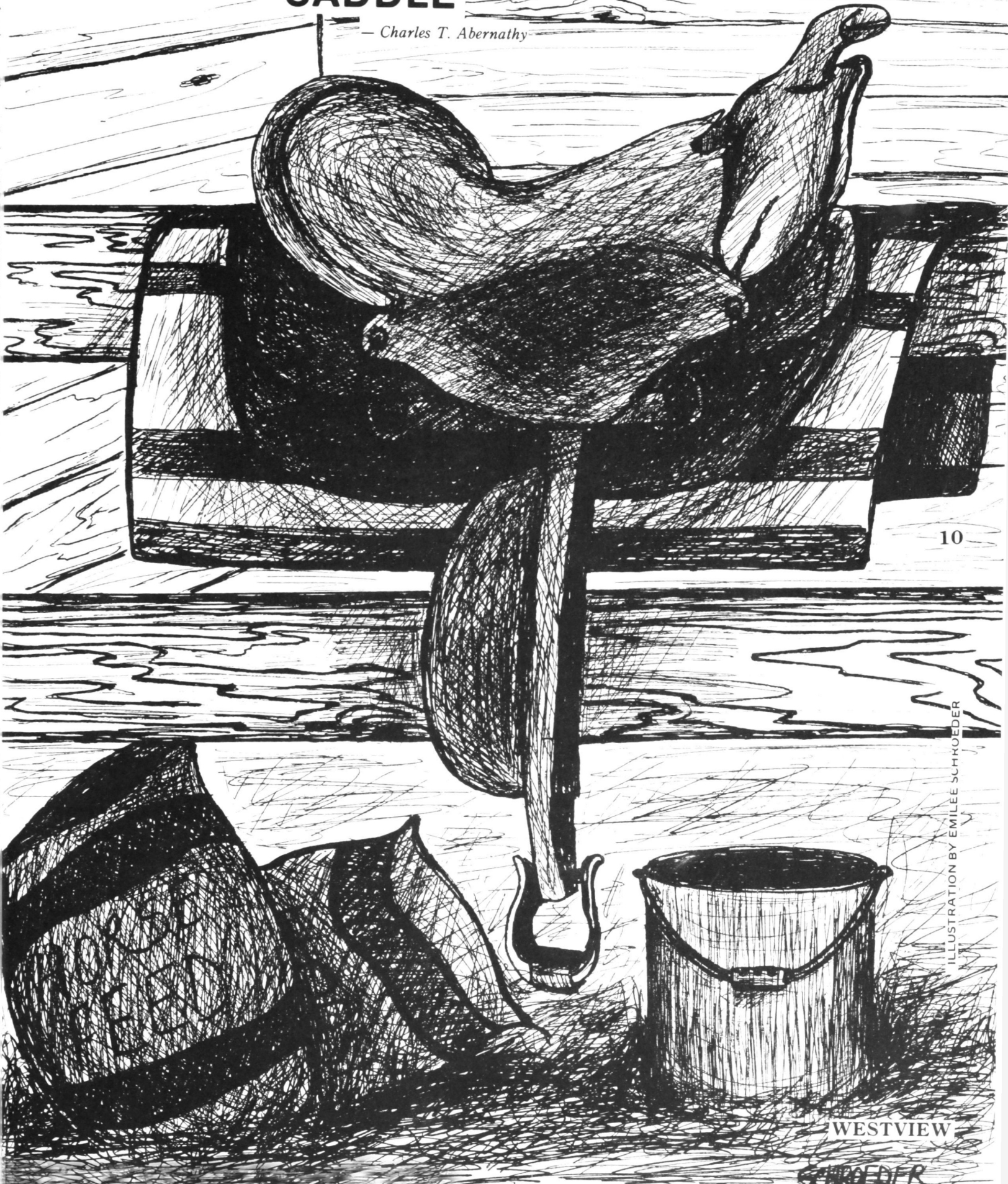
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THE OLD SADDLE

MEMORIES

— Charles T. Abernathy



MEMORIES

Isn't it fun remembering those thrilling flights of imagination that brightened our childhood days? Wouldn't it be enjoyable to have a bridge that we as adults could cross and glimpse once again those golden moments of childhood imagination?

There's an old saddle hanging in our tack shed that is my bridge. This is the saddle that carried me to my highest flights of childhood imagination. And it was that old saddle which reintroduced me to the same excitement as an adult. The old saddle has a story to tell, narrated by the men who used it. That story makes a glimpse at childhood excitement possible once again for me.

Like most kids, I daydreamed a lot and had quite an imagination. My imagination was always at its best when we'd ride for pleasure or be horseback doing the chores. Instead of being a plain country boy driving the cows to the lot, I'd be whichever Hollywood cowboy that struck my fancy. I'd be Buck Jones, perhaps, on a trail drive to Dodge City; and those weren't motley white-face I was driving, podnah, they were Texas Longhorns.

Of course, every Hollywood cowboy worth his salt had a fancy saddle, so mine had to be fancy too. It took a lot of liberal imagination to fancy up our saddle to Hollywood standards. It was sweat-stained, scarred, work-worn and patched. There wasn't a trace of silver like Gene Autry had on his saddle, nor was there much tooled leather like Roy Rogers had.

The old saddle stimulated many hours of lively daydreams. Those daydreams were so vivid, in fact, they caused us to miss the real story of the old saddle. We missed our first clue by not listening to the "saddling phrase" so often repeated by the old-timer who owned the saddle.

We were too little to saddle up for ourselves back in the days when the old saddle was the only one we owned. It became a ritual for Grand-dad to carry his saddle out of the barn and get the little buckskin mare ready for us to ride. The ritual was a combination of the even flow of long practiced motion of an old hand swinging a saddle onto a horse's back and the slowly drawled "saddling phrase." As he swung the saddle over the horse he'd say, "This is a real working saddle, boys, the sweat goes in from both sides."

Being young and excited most of the time, we missed a lot of the meaning that phrase had in it. Then too, the Old Timer could nearly hypnotize us with his skill with a horse and saddle. Every move he made with leather on a horse was as practiced and artistic as a ballet. His gnarled rope-calloused hands moved in perfect co-ordination as he hung a stirrup on the polished horn, flipped the cinch strap through the ring, gave it a tug and buckled it into the same hole every time. He'd lead the mare a few steps, then mount with a swing that put him squarely and gracefully in the saddle. From that moment until he dismounted it was impossible to distinguish man from horse. They became as one the instant the Old Timer hit the saddle.

Under those circumstances it's easy to see how we missed the real story of the old saddle. As time passed, though, the meaning of

Grand-dad's saddling phrase slowly unfolded as he narrated the history of the old saddle. Down through the years since the old saddle has been retired, the Old Timer has remembered out loud the experiences that made it a "working saddle, boys, with sweat on both sides."

Grand-dad said, "I was working for the XIT Ranch in 1908 when I bought the saddle, a Coughshall brand, hand made in Miles City, Montana. It'd take a lot of explaining to tell how a thirty dollar a month West Texas cowhand came to own a hand made Montana saddle. And it'll take a lot more yarn-spinning to tell where that saddle has been since then, and what it's done. So I suppose the best place to start this story is with the XIT Ranch itself.

The XIT Ranch was made up of the three million acre block of land that the State of Texas called the Capitol Reservation Lands. This land had been set aside by the Texas Legislature in the 1870's to be traded to anyone who would build them a State Capitol Building. A group of eastern financiers formed a syndicate and traded the State of Texas a Capitol Building for the land in the 1880's. The syndicate then started the XIT Ranch with that three million acres of Texas Panhandle rangeland, and several thousand head of South Texas Longhorns.

Soon after the title to the land changed hands the syndicate put out a lot of effort just to establish the property boundaries. When the survey was finalized the ranchland had the following description: Syndicate lands lay along the Texas-New Mexico border for roughly 200 miles north and south. The ranch bordered New Mexico at the west boundaries of Dallam, Hartley, Oldham, Deaf Smith, Parmer and a small portion of Baily County, Texas. The eastern boundary wandered through Hockley, Lamb and Castro counties to the south, then through the four northernmost counties already mentioned. The tenth Texas county that contained XIT land was a small corner of Cochran county. The northern boundary of the ranch ran roughly along the state lines separating the Texas and Oklahoma panhandles.

This great expanse of land took in a lot of varied Panhandle geography. Starting at the north boundary near Buffalo Springs rolling plains marched southward to the breaks of the Canadian River. The Canadian cut the ranch from east to west, and presented the stockmen with some peculiar problems all it's own. Rolling plains went south from the Canadian to the Caprock which marked the breaks of the Llano Estacado, or Staked Plains. This topography extended southward and included the bluffs at the south boundary called Las Casitas Amarillas, or Yellow Houses.

I was fresh from the Indian Territory, not yet twenty years old, and very much impressed with the High Plains country. Of course, by the time I came to the XIT the Longhorns had long been replaced with more modern beef breeds. But there were still bands of Antelope and an occasional Loafer Wolf on the XIT.

The country and the wildlife on the vast expanse of the XIT were only a part of the

excitement. There was a pride in being a part of the ranch that included ten counties in Texas. That feeling of pride started at the headquarters in Channing, worked it's way through divisions named Rito Blanco, Buffalo Springs, Middle Water, Ojo Bravo, Spring Lake, Escarbada, Bovina, and finally worked it's way right on down to the individual cowhands.

Remember now, that this ranch was as big as some states back east, and bigger than most European countries. It employed the latest techniques in beef production on an immense scale and was the major economic contributor for a large chunk of the Southwest. So there was a great deal of "Chamber of Commerce" pride in the XIT that filtered right on down to me, a former sodbuster from the Territory.

To illustrate that feeling of pride, imagine how I'd feel at age nineteen when ladies at dances or on the street would ask, "Who's that fellow wearing the big hat?", and someone would answer, "Why that's Charley Elston, he rides the rough string for the XIT's." That made me feel pretty big, yes sir, and proud to be a part of the XIT."

Listening to Grand-dad tell his experiences on the XIT, we could almost feel the frosty High Plains sunup when the cowhands would rise from their bedrolls on the ground. We could almost smell the breakfast frying and the coffee boiling on the potrack by the chuckwagon; could almost hear the wiry little cowponies greet the sun with spirited snorts and whinnies. We could almost feel the bone-wearying fatigue from long hours in the saddle in boiling heat and freezing cold; could almost hear the slow plod of tired horses as they carried the cowhands back to the chuckwagon at the end of the day. Slowly we began to understand why the Old Timer was proud to be an XIT hand and could truthfully say, "It's a real working saddle, boys, and the sweat goes in from both sides."

We heard stories of nights when our old saddle sat aboard an XIT cow-pony tied to a hitchrail in Old Tascosa while Grand-dad played cards. We heard how our saddle had been used to break horses for the XIT; and a special story of one of those broncs that bucked two silver dollars out of Grand-dad's pocket and was promptly named Two-Dollars.

We heard Grand-dad recall the long distances that separated one part of the ranch from another. Distances on the XIT were long, and to a cowhand on horseback it looked like miles and miles of nothing but miles and miles. Good horses were not only necessary for the work, but also made the difference to the cowhands of dying young or living to a ripe old age. So the recollections of an old cowhand of his XIT experiences soon turned to the subject of horses.

We thrilled to the story of how the cowhands came to call a little horse "Two-Dollars" after they picked up two silver dollars he had bucked out of Grand-dad's pocket. We listened to stories of working cowponies with such names as Fiddler, Bay Fiddler, Croppie and Comanche Bill. We heard many times about the stamina those wiry little ponies exhibited as they carried men and saddles over the long

distances on the XIT.

The story that always stirred the most excitement and raised our eyebrows the highest was the one about a Loafer wolf and a cow-pony named Rubberneck. This tale combined the color of the country and the excitement of the cowboy life wrapped up in a chase across the XIT.

The wolf race took place west of Old Tascosa on an interesting part of the XIT range. Between the Alamositas division headquarters which lay just north of the breaks of the Staked Plains, and the Rito Blanco division headquarters north of the Canadian River lay some very interesting country. The breaks of the Canadian's north bank separated the river and the caprock which marked the beginning of a long stretch of rolling prairie. The north boundary of that prairie was the breaks of the Punta de Agua river, a tributary of the Canadian.

This story stirred our imagination because it portrayed a particular excitement found almost exclusively in the life of the American Cowboy. The country was wide and beautiful; the daily work was hard and dangerous. A man's livelihood and even his life depended on his skill as a horseman. Sometimes an incident could combine those ingredients of beautiful country, hard work, danger and horsemanship in such a way that the end result was fun and a stirring glimpse of independence.

Grand-dad related, "There were several of us camped on the Canadian just west of Tascosa. Our camp was what we called a "pot-rack" outfit, which was just a chuckwagon. We cooked, ate and slept on the ground. Our job was to move the stock out of the rough country along the Canadian river breaks north toward the Rito Blanco headquarters where the country wasn't so rough. We would ride along the edge of the breaks early in the morning and catch the cattle out in the open heading back into the rough country.

Some of the stock preferred the breaks and had been there so long they were downright wild. We'd actually have to rope and tie some of those old mossbacks and then drive a bunch of cows around them before we let them up. If we untied them without a bunch of other cows around them they'd run straight back into the breaks. Those mossbacks would graze out onto the flats at night and the only time we could catch them in the open was at daylight when they'd head back toward the breaks.

Loafer Wolves also liked to live in the breaks and feed out on the flats at night. There were quite a few Loafers on the XIT then, and they posed a definite threat to the herds, especially calves and poor cows. Because of that threat there was a good bounty on wolves. The bounty at that time for a wolf's scalp was as much as a month's wages for a cowhand. The company policy stated that a cowhand's priorities were to eliminate to the best of his ability any threat to the livestock. So we took that to mean we could chase Loafer Wolves at any time with the company's full blessing.

Early one morning we had all spread out along the edge of the breaks to turn the cattle. I was riding a little XIT pony named Rubberneck. Each hand got to pick his own string of

horses from the remuda, with first pick going to the older hands. I had four or five good horses in my string but old Rubberneck was always my first choice. He was the best horse for the early morning job of running and roping the mossbacks. Rubberneck had the same heart you see in a good coursing hound and it was obvious he enjoyed a good chase. He would keep his eyes pinned on whatever was running ahead of him, turning his head with every move like cutting horses are trained to do now. That's why we came to name him Rubberneck.

Just about daylight I saw a Loafer heading across the flats toward the breaks. The wolves would feed at night and lay up in the daytime to sleep off a big feed of XIT beef. Sometimes they were easy to catch after a big gorge the night before. Two of us had easily roped one down on the Alamositas after he'd fed too heavily the night before. But I could tell that the wolf heading toward the breaks in front of Rubberneck and I this morning was not going to be so easily caught. He was lean and lively as he broke into a lope when he saw us coming between him and the rough country.

Rubberneck picked up the chase instantly, blocking the wolf's dash to safety. I gave him full rein, talked to him a little, and he turned the wolf back out onto the flat heading north toward open country at a dead run. The caprock and the breaks were behind us as we headed toward the ten mile stretch of open country that ended at the breaks of the Punta de Agua.

A wolf can outrun a horse for several miles, but they can be caught. There's a right way to catch a wolf from horseback, and a way to kill a horse chasing one. Rubberneck had the desire and ability to catch that wolf in a relatively short distance. But I knew he'd kill himself doing it, and there was no need to do that. We had ten miles of open country ahead of us to run that wolf, and we were going to do it right.

Rubberneck lined out behind the wolf in a gallop that was leaving a trail of dust hanging in the morning air. I eased him back to a long lope, talked to him some and watched him pin his eyes on that wolf like a bird-dog on quail. He had an intensity for this chase written all over him, and would obviously run himself to death to catch his quarry. I knew it was going to be a hard morning's work to keep him down to the five or ten miles of high lope that would tire the wolf.

The wolf did his part to set the stage for a good morning's drama. He was the epitome of the wild freedom of this High Plains setting as he covered the ground easily with long graceful strides. Powerful shoulders sloped back to slim hindquarters. Muscles grown to their prime bunched and rippled causing rays of West Texas sunrise to glisten and shine on thick fur. Long white teeth gleamed in the wolf's massive jaws as he glanced back at us occasionally. No fear showed in any of his actions. He was running, but obviously felt he was master of the situation just as he was master of this wild country that was his home.

On and on we went, covering fast disappearing ground in a high easy lope. Three miles

passed, then five. We were slowly gaining on the wolf, and the horse never lessened his bird-dog intensity. The distance closed as the wolf began to tire on a long slope of rising ground. We would be within roping distance when we reached the top of that rise, so I took down my lariat and began to build a loop.

Rubberneck knew well the meaning of the sound of rope swinging in the air. Excitement of the chase radiated from him as we began to close on the wolf. We topped the rise and saw the wolf take on a renewed burst of speed as the breaks of the Punta de Agua suddenly came into view.

Feeling the powerful surge as Rubberneck broke into a run close behind the wolf I swung the loop for the only throw I'd have. The wolf was only one or two long strides from freedom when the loop snaked over his neck. He twisted and leaped as the rope circled him. Rubberneck dug his heels into the ground as I jerked the slack, tightening the loop firmly on the wolf.

Standing on the caprock of the Punta de Agua breaks in the middle of a West Texas High Plains grandeur I felt a sadness for the passing of the wolf. The echo of the heavy blast from the Colt's rolled into the vastness of the breaks as I watched the sun glisten from the wind ruffled fur. The powerful creature that ruled this land lay dead at my feet there on the rise overlooking his wild domain.

Hearing the horse's movement behind me, I turned and the feeling of awe and sadness for the wolf passed from me. Seeing Rubberneck's expression as he slowly moved to my side washed all regret from my mind. We stood side by side for a long moment, savoring our triumph as we stared at our conquered adversary. Feeling an elation I'd never before experienced, I hugged that horse's lathered neck. He pawed a time or two and said he liked this too by giving his head a couple of spirited bounces in spite of his exhaustion."

Through the years as we heard the true story of our old saddle unfold we came to understand Grand-dad's "saddling phrase" more fully. We realized that there was a real excitement in the story of the saddle which lent in time a sense of perspective to our flights of childhood imagination. This experience has provided us with a bridge between the real and the imagined excitement. It's left us something of real value, a legacy wrapped up in a phrase and an old saddle.

