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Richard W. Slatta

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“Just a Continual Rumble and Roar”: A Texas Cowboy Remembers an 1884 Cattle Drive

EDITED BY RICHARD W. SLATTA*

COWBOY TOM STEWART WROTE THIS LETTER IN 1934, FIFTY YEARS after he helped Isaac Hudson drive his herd of cattle from Grayson County to Jones County, Texas. Born in Alabama in 1854, Hudson came to Texas at age five. Hudson purchased two sections of land four miles south of Anson, the seat of Jones County, in 1884, starting the ranch that was the destination of the trail drive. Hudson ranched until his death in 1910. His son Frederick Edward Hudson, who lived and practiced medicine at Stamford, Texas, until his death in 1963, asked Stewart to write down his memories of the drive.

Although we have a wealth of cattle drive accounts, the Stewart letter stands out for several reasons. First, most accounts deal with the Chisholm Trail; Stewart recounts an east-west drive through Texas.¹ Second, this drive is smaller than most, with only four cowboys. It involves a modest ranching operation and herd, more typical than the big outfits and famous figures of Texas ranch life. Third, this is a candid, unvarnished account, a private letter not written for publication. Thus we do not have the stereotypical tall tales and exaggerations than mar many such accounts.

The author's original spelling and grammar have been preserved. Valerie Shelley, of Los Alamos, New Mexico, shared the letter with Richard W. Slatta, who provided the annotations for the letter. Her great uncle was Frederick Edward Hudson, the letter's recipient; her great-grandfather was rancher Isaac Hudson. Shelley and her husband, Ken, both work for Los Alamos National Laboratory.

* Richard W. Slatta is professor of history and interim director of the First Year Inquiry Program at North Carolina State University. He specializes in the history and culture of cowboys of the Americas. His books include *Cowboy: The Illustrated History* (2006), *The Mythical West* (2001), and *Cowboys of the Americas* (1991).

¹ See, for example, the accounts of trail drives in J. Marvin Hunter (ed.), *The Trail Drivers of Texas* (1924–25; reprint, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).

Both Val and Ken's families work ranches in New Mexico. As Val wrote to Slatta, "cowboys 'just loving the job' is surely right in line with my first-hand observations of my husband's family and my Dad's love of his job. Most years, it's a toss up whether they will make money or lose it. But still they love it. And they spend many a precious weekend in freezing cold or blazing heat out there working on the ranch. The Shelley ranch is too remote and rugged for motorized ranching, so it is all accomplished on horseback. (All on very ornery horses, I must add.)"² Val located Slatta after she and her daughter Summer read his book *Cowboy: The Illustrated History* (2006).

Hamleigh, Texas³ August 14, 1934

E. F. Hudson, M.D.⁴

Dear Sir an Friend,

After mutch delay, wil try to answer your letter dated 7, 26, 34. I had paper, pin, diary on table, ready to write you, when a Mr. Stricland, of Snyder came for me to paint his house. Couldn't mis the job, needed the money, hence the delay.⁵

As to the work for your father: I begun work for him in March, 1884 on his ranch, some 12-15 miles south of Sherman, Grayson Co., Tx. gathering and branding cattle, buying a few cows and calves, paying \$30-\$35 for some. We left there about the first of May (84).

Your father and mother gave us a dance the night before we left. I danced (or tried to) my first set that night, with a girl by name Jimmie Wheat. I had one awful time trying to get through that set. We danced the Double Ell. I mean the others did. I was sash shaying in all direction, most of the time hunting my partner. I don't think I would ever have found her but she would call me, come get me, then we would start all over. That almost killed me. In fact, I have never gotten over it yet. One of the sweetest girls I ever met and I was just the right age to fall for a prettie girl. I thought when a girl called you by your given name and smiled at you, and her eyes sort of sparkled, she was in love with you, and oh Doctor, how I have suffer B4 I learned better. Aw Shaw, I could write a 1000 acres of bunk but could never express my regrets of past and gone days.⁶

² Valerie Shelley to Richard W. Slatta, Feb. 3, 2010, e-mail.

³ Hermleigh is in Scurry County, Texas, on U.S. Route 84, ninety-six miles southeast of Lubbock. The town had 393 residents as of the 2000 census; "Hermleigh, Texas," *The Handbook of Texas Online*, <<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/HH/hlh39.html>> [Accessed June 30, 2010].

⁴ Stewart reversed the initials of F. E. Hudson's name.

⁵ Cowboys often had to "lower" themselves to other tasks, such as house painting, to support their true love and calling—herding cattle and horses on horseback. The highly seasonal employment cycle of ranching meant that most cowboys found work only sporadically.

⁶ Cowboy shyness and social awkwardness is part of the popular stereotype that holds true. Given their relative lack of contact with women, cowboys felt ill prepared and ill at ease on such occasions.



Cattle herd. *Courtesy of the Cattle Raisers Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.*

We left there, came through Piolet Point.⁷ It came a rain just as we were getting into town. Pretty high wind, papers and rubbish flying, cattle got scared, tried to run. Lightning and thunder was plentiful and we had some sure wild cows in that herd. Some 5 or 6 cows ran through a black smith shop. There was several men and boys in and around the shop, and I shall never forget how those fellows ran and hollowed.⁸

We had lots of rainy weather on the trip. We were up many nights all night. Did you ever ride hurde on a stormy night? The lightening will just travel from horn to horn, run allover the cattle; in a real bad storm a fellow feels pretty lonesome.⁹

⁷ Pilot Point, in Denton County, is twenty-six miles from Sherman by road; it is probably around twenty miles cross-country, an average day's drive on the trail.

⁸ For more on trail drive hazards and weather, see Richard W. Slatta, *The Cowboy Encyclopedia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 94–97, 371–373.

⁹ Stewart describes a scary but relatively common phenomenon during storms on the range: St. Elmo's fire, also known as fox fire. This electrical discharge produced an eerie, blue light that danced across a herd. See Slatta, *Cowboy Encyclopedia*, 348.

I remember one night, we were all worn out, from sitting up, or standing guard as we called it. We taken turns of 2 hours each. I was all in, dead for sleep. Your father's watch came just a head of mine. when his time was up, he came, waked me up. I was in my tarp under the chuck wagon. it was a hot sweltry night, I had pulled my over shirt off. He called me, went back to the herd while I dressed and saddled my horse. I got up, slipped my arm into sleeve of my shirt, fell over dead to the world. He stood both watches and I was lying like a dead man at sunup next morn.¹⁰

We boys on one occasion, on Duck Creek in Denton Co., pulled posts from the fence, placed 3 on the ground, thus 1 1 1 and pull grass place between.¹¹ Lay down with our slickers, shap and spurs on. Slept while it rained and the whole face of the earth covered in water and running through our grass bed. We had to hold our horses ready, saddled. Just slipped the bridle and reins over our arm.

One night just after that, we camped 3 or 4 miles down river from Ft. Griffin. We intended to make the town to camp, but learned there was some 6000 head of steers on that camp. So he thought we better camp, not to get to clost. He said there might be a stampede and sure enough there was. That 6000 steers. We held our herd over until 12 the next day wating for them fellows to roun up what they could find. Most of their steers crossed the river. We met some of the boys 2 days later. They had found several houndred head 30 miles north from the Fort. That was the greatest noise I have ever heard. Just a continual rumble and roar.¹²

Just after dinner we crossed the river, into the little town. Got us a few drinks, watched them gamble a while. There was all kinds of games in the saloons those days. Every body went armed, wore six shooters, carried Winchesters on their saddles. Plenty song and dance musick and pretty girls in the saloons. That was my first real wild town.¹³

So after a short rest we started our herd on up the hill and rite by the old fort. We look the fort over pretty clost. First one either of us had ever seen. Thought a good place to kill Indians. So we had Indian on our mind, and just about one mile farther up the road, we came in sight of 12-15

¹⁰ The necessary but difficult chore of riding night guard meant very long days in the saddle. Often up at 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. and spending 12-15 hours in the saddle, cowboys riding night guard had every reason to feel weary. To help keep themselves awake and to soothe the cattle, they often sang to the herd or at least made human sounds faintly resembling music.

¹¹ Old-time cowboys had no love of fencing. It restricted the free and open life that they loved. It also cut the demand for cowhands substantially compared with open-range days; thus using fence posts for bedding or fuel served practical, economic, and ideological purposes.

¹² Stampedes presented the greatest danger on the trail. Hudson wisely chose not to locate his herd too close to the larger herd already in the area to minimize the risk.

¹³ A visit to town (Fort Griffin, in this case) during or after a trail drive represented a highpoint in a cowboy's often-dreary life. For various firsthand accounts, see Teddy "Blue" Abbott and Helen Huntington Smith, *We Pointed Them North: Recollections of a Cowpuncher* (1939; reprint, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), and the memoirists discussed in Slatta, *Cowboy Encyclopedia*, 16-21.

hundred teepies. The had just put the Tonks on the reservation.¹⁴ (Don't criticise my spelling nor my grammer.) So my hair began to stand up on my head and a sort of chilly feeling run up my spine. I loped up the line to where Ike was and said, "Ike, what does all that mean?" He said, "It's Indians and they are on the warpath. You can get ready to fight." You bet I was scared, then he told me the government had charge of them. They were camped on either side of the road. The old chief's tent was right close to the road an we got a good look at his tent and 2 of his wives. (I don't know how many more he had.) Your father bought an antelope ham from the chief giving him 50 cents for it. That was our first antelope meat. We seen women carrying their babies in quiver that was a shawl.

The next morning just as we were leaving came Jo Shipman's horse. Fell with him. His foot hung in the stirup. The horse drug him, four hundred yards or more, kicking at him steping on his hand and arms so Ike said, "Kill that horse Boys. He's going to kill Joe." We started after them. Your father, Pete King and my self, intending to shoot the horse but just as we were getting clost enough to shoot without danger to Joe, his foot come loose. He was bruised and skind all over but no bones broken.¹⁵

When we got to the Foster Ranch he was in need of a hand for 2 months. So your father told him I could fill his job and I stade there 2 months.

In the mane time, I caught 15 head of his cattle on the D. B. Ranch some 10 miles below where I was working. Brought them back to Foster Ranch. Put them in the horse pasture. Wrote Ike. He came and got them. Told me just as quick as my time was out to come on to the camp in Dark Hollow 5 miles west of Anson.¹⁶

Our camp was a tent 10x12 and a wagon bed sitting on four spools of Barbe wire. We range herded the cattle for several months. Built pasture fence south of the Abilene Road. I left there in October, for home in Comanche, Tex. Was never there again until 30 when I went across from Raton. As I cam from Clovis, N.M. I seen your brother Tom in Anson. We had a jolly good time. Lots of fun and plenty hard ships.

In Decatur we razed the sign boards. Pulled them down. Put them in the wagon to use a kindling of a morning.¹⁸

¹⁴ The name "Tonks" refers to the Tonkawa Indians ("Tonkawa" meaning "people of the wolf"), who were mortal enemies of the Comanche. Fort Griffin had been founded in 1867 to combat Indian incursions and the general frontier lawlessness in the area.

¹⁵ Joe was fortunate here. Accidents on trail drives, distant from medical care, could be fatal. For other examples of the many dangers of cowboy life, see Slatta, *Cowboy Encyclopedia*, pp. 94-97.

¹⁶ Dark Hollow Branch still flows today, rising three miles southwest of Anson (in south-central Jones County). Its mouth lies seven miles to the southeast at the Clear Fork of the Brazos River, just east of Truby (a town just under nine miles south of Anson in Jones County).

¹⁸ Stewart is making his way back to the beginning of the drive in Grayson County. Decatur lies some forty-two miles northwest of Fort Worth in Wise County and about seventy-five miles southwest of Sherman.

In all that roun we only stold one yearling. It was a little dogie. Pot bellied and long haired. Some body had lost or dropped on the river where the Abilene Road crosst. We sure had lots of fun about our stock. Joe Shipman an I brought him in one Sunday Eve. I willed Joe my intrest when I left. Poor old Joe was a fine fellow, good hand, trusty, and worthie.

The hands that helped on that trip were Joe Shipman from Jacksborrow, Pete King from Blue Ridge in Grayson Co., Harvey Furr of Sherman.¹⁹ I often think of them. I have never seen any of them since I left there. Joe and my self were all that workt after we got the cattle on the range. These will be hapy thought for me while I live.²⁰

¹⁹ Jacksboro, the county seat of Jack County, Texas.

²⁰ Most cattle drives involved ad hoc crews. Adventurous boys, some as young as twelve or thirteen, went on some drives. Trail bosses put together a crew from whoever might be available. Saloons provided fertile recruiting grounds.