



TALES FROM THE PRAIRIE

by Paul F. Long

Our family's journey to the Colorado prairies began in Oklahoma in early 1900s. My father, along with his family came to Oklahoma from near Rich Hill, Missouri during that period. Father was likely in his late teens, and along with his father he worked on the construction of a branch of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad, which ran from Kiowa, Kansas to Moreland, near where they lived, and on to Amarillo, Texas. As the construction moved on west, my father met and married my mother, and they lived on a small farm near Haskew, Oklahoma.

From there, the prairie saga of our lives began.



Above: Two Buttes Mountain at the very edge of Prowers Co., CO, some four or five miles from our home.

Left: Little imagination is needed to visualize the author and his family, in their wagon (drawn by horses), picking up groceries in downtown Two Buttes, Colorado on a winter day in 1929. While in town, the kids all got to have a big treat, an ice cream cone. (photo from the Territorial collection).



Somehow Father had learned land was available for homesteading on the eastern prairies of Colorado. Apparently the farm in Oklahoma was not large enough to provide a living; by this point their family had grown with the addition of two small boys and a baby sister. So Father traveled to Colorado and filed on a half section allotted of the stark prairie land in Prowers County. Lamar was the largest town in the area, some 30 miles to the north. Two Buttes, a small inland town, was around 15 miles south.

Very early in the spring of 1917 the Long family started the long trek to Southeastern Colorado in a covered wagon. Father would have been 26 years old, and Mother was 23, Allen, the oldest child, was going on seven; Dude, the second boy, was four, and Sylvia was not quite one year old. One can only imagine the crowded conditions in the wagon, which also contained whatever meager belongings they possessed. Although it was early spring, it was still bitterly cold. Poultry (chickens) in crates were hung on the sides of the wagon; these froze to death one cold night. To make their plight even more uncomfortable, they encountered a late spring snow storm with very low temperatures. Due to the extreme cold, they stopped at a lone farm house and asked the farmer if they might spend the night in his haymow. In spite of the weather, Father's request was denied. Despite the hardships and discomfort, they survived.

Finally, the trip of possibly 200 miles in a covered wagon with unusually cold spring weather, was finished. As noted earlier, poultry which froze to death in their crates, hanging on the side of the wagon and brother Dude and the loss of his shoes, are about all recalled from the stories of those bleak days. Further, a home to move into on the prairie wasn't available. Where our family did live was a crude dug-

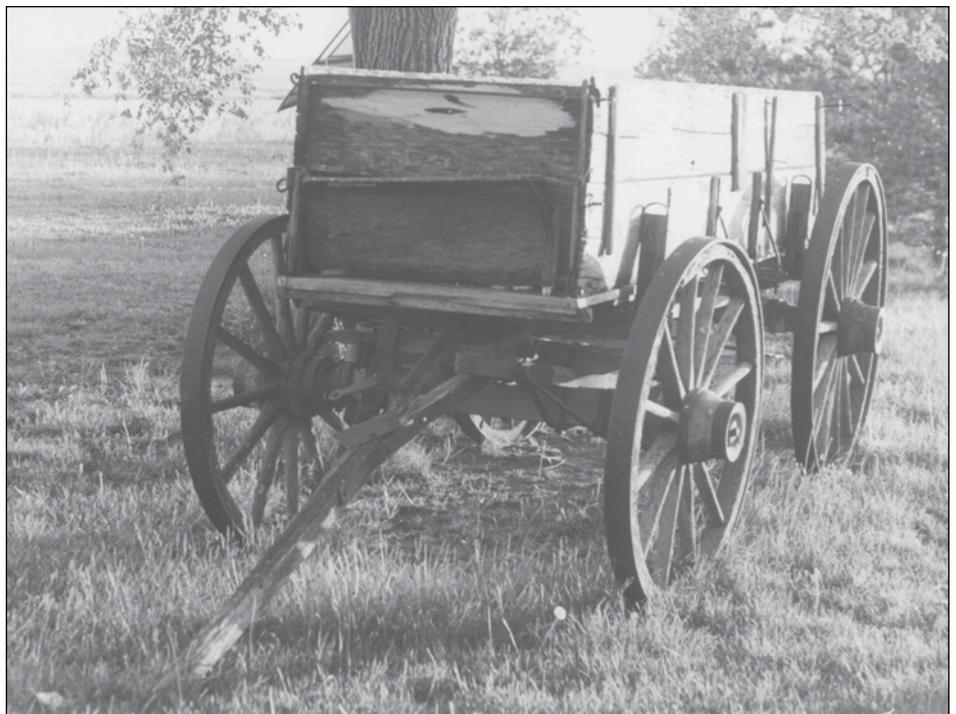


Our "Little House on the Prairie" in about 1928 or 1929. House was on homestead in Prower County, CO. Photo--Paul F. Long.

out in the side of a hill toward the west side of the property—the view was good there, as Two Buttes mountain could be seen looming on the horizon some three or four miles to the west. Who was responsible for digging the dugout and had earlier lived in it was unknown. Apparently the dugout was very small, as the two boys had to sleep under the dining table; which as it transpired, was a good thing, as one night after they were all bedded down, some large chunks of plaster

fell from the ceiling onto the table under which the brothers were sleeping.

How long the family lived in the dugout is uncertain, though possibly for several years. During that interval Father constructed a crude, flat-roofed shack which consisted of two relatively large rooms. The exterior of the wooden building was completely covered with tarpaper, including the flat roof. Not surprising, after several years the roof sprang some leaks, which wasn't as serious as it might



Family transportation in the later 1920s in Prowers Co., CO.



sound. We were homesteaded in the epicenter of the coming Dust Bowl and the region was never blessed with a great deal of rain.

At some point early on, Uncle John had also filed on a half section on land available for homesteading. He had never married and brought with him to Colorado, Grandma Long, two younger brothers, and two twin granddaughters whose mother had died at their birth. Their father had forsaken them. Granddad Long had died in 1916, so Uncle John took it upon himself to provide for Grandmother and the family. Uncle John and the family also lived in a tarpaper shack, on a half section of land abutting our section on the south. Ultimately John gave up living on the Colorado prairies with his group. They returned to Kansas where they had moved earlier from Oklahoma. Apparently they had lived on the homestead long enough to prove on it, since Uncle John sold his acreage to Father.

One of the early necessary tasks on our ranch or stock farm was to maintain good barbed wire fences around our small acreages of row crops; the grasslands were free range. Barbed wire has to have posts, and trees were almost non-existent on the prairie. For that reason my father and Uncle John took two teams of horses and two wagons and went westward to the Purgatoire River. There, in a region which they referred to as the "Cedars", they cut two wagon loads of cedar posts, camping out at night. How long the going and coming of a round trip of roughly 150 miles, plus the time necessary to cut the posts took them, is unknown; probably they were gone at least two weeks. I can recall we would often beg Father to tell us about this adventure, which included the screaming of a mountain lion (also known as a cougar) at night. The horses sensed that mountain lions like



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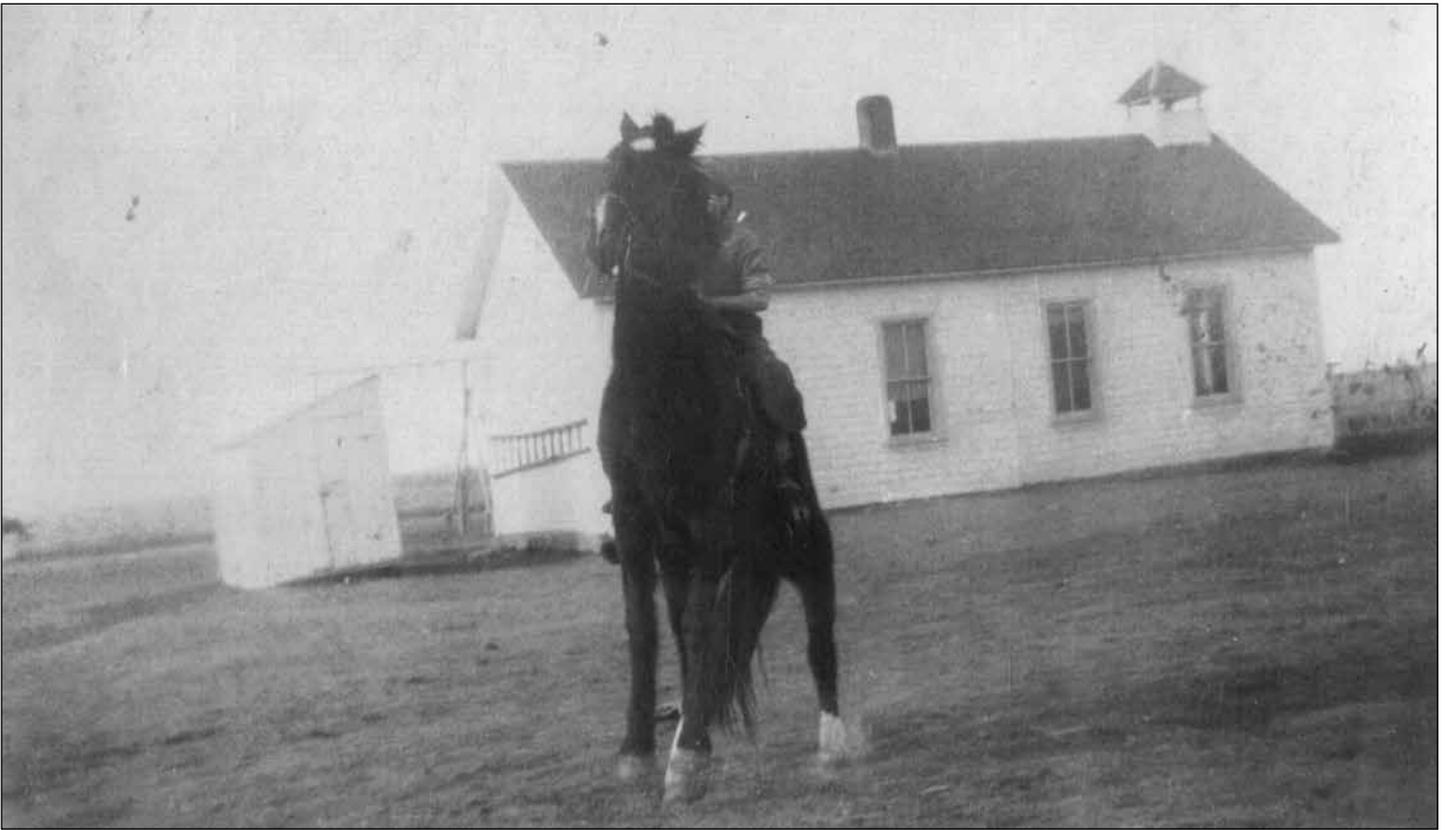
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A student at the old Ridge View school in Prowers County, Co. showing off with his saddle horse after school. (circa 1930) Photo--Paul F. Long.

horse meat, and Dad and Uncle John knew these big cats liked horse meat; so all were justifiably highly nervous.

While it was soon evident that most of our earnings would be from cattle ranching, utilizing the prairie grasses and free range, and some growing of farm crops would be necessary for getting fodder and grain for winter feeding. Planting and caring for crops took farm equipment. As our family had arrived in Colorado without any farm machinery, Father had to improvise, repair and use old machinery someone else had discarded, or purchase some piece of old machinery at a farm sale. So our farm equipment was poor at best, and strange-appearing in some cases.

To weed a spring crop such as corn or sorghum cane, Father devised a strange-looking sled. Using what was probably old lumber, he built large sled-like runners out of what was likely 2 x 22" lumber. The two runners were nailed together with 2 x 4" lumber so the sled runners just

fit into a furrow, passing on either side of the newly-emerged corn or cane plants. Near the front of the sled blades were placed at right angles to the runners. The metal blades sheared off any weeds starting their growth on the furrows. I believe the sled runners had metal bands nailed on the front so the runners were not immediately worn out. The power to drag the sled down the rows was provided by a pair of horses. The driver of this contrivance sat on an old bucket or some such object. Whether Father invented the weird machine out of necessity or saw one utilized by some other settler is, is unknown. Unfortunately, the work horses we had at that point were little more than broncos, possibly purchased cheaply as there were a good number of horses on the prairies which were allowed to range free. Given this, run-aways were frequent, which made operation of any farm machinery an unpleasant assignment.

Regarding the source of a plow,

I am not certain. I am sure we had a walking plow, but whether it was used to break the prairie sod when some section of our half-section became a cultivated field, is not remembered. It may be we had an old horse-drawn riding plow. Of course we had the farm wagon; the only means of taking the family to any place or function for a number of years. The wagon was used to make a necessary trip to the small town of Two Buttes where we bought groceries. The wagon was also used to take the family to church. On Sunday the Ridge View school buildingsome three miles distant, was utilized as a church. I can remember cold winter trips when our family traveled to church in the farm wagon.

I was born in 1923 in the tarpaper shack Father had constructed. It is believed that a brother was born dead during the time slot between my elder sister and myself; my sister was six years my senior. However, no written proof of the birth of this brother has been found. In those days, mothers



were not taken to a clinic or given nursing care for several days when children were born. In Mother's case, someone had to make a trip to alert the doctor in Two Buttes. Then the doctor had to make the trip to our home on the prairie; hopeful that Mother was all right and the baby had not been born over this lengthy period of time. I recall the birth of my younger sister and brother.

My older sister Sylvia had to take us to the neighbors. When I was some two and a half years old on June 24, 1926, my younger sister Evelyn was born, I was bought off to make the trip to the neighbors by a stick of chewing gum, a

real sacrifice by my sister. Where she got the gum is a question, but it did the trick.

The final member of our family, youngest brother Earl was born on March 30, 1930. When my father told me I was to go to the neighbors with my two sisters, I rejected the idea. I was out at the cattle corral wearing a huge pair of cowboy spurs; imaginatively (or play-like, as we said) I was riding the range. So I wasn't interested in taking off my spurs to quit cowboying. However, Father knew best, and soon my older sister, my younger sister and I were headed to the neighbors, an old couple named Johnson. One thing I remember about the evening, was Mr. Johnson went down to his cellar and brought up an apple for each of us, a real treat on the prairies.

While the southeast corner of Colorado appears, and was a bleak

treeless forlorn section of the state, it had a most interesting history. The plains of Eastern Colorado were frequented by several Indian tribes, who may have hunted in the vicinity or passed through when headed for some other destination. It seems likely the Indians most apt to have passed that way and perhaps spent some time along Two Buttes creek,



Ridge View School: a one-room school which stood on the bleak prairies of Eastern CO, Prowers Co. CO. The old school building and district was located about ten miles from the little inland town of Two Buttes, CO. Photo--Paul F. Long.

were members of the Comanche and Cheyenne tribes. Certainly members of some tribe had spent considerable time there, as on some of the rock cliffs along the creek they had left their mark. My brother discovered pictographs where they had been carved into the rocks by Indians; still preserved and visible probably 75 years later.

Another group also came into the region and left evidence of their presence. For many years the Hispanic shepherds on the plains of northern New Mexico had trailed their sheep herds northward and grazed them on the prairies of Southeastern Colorado. They, too, left evidence of their earlier presence on the prairies, which would have included our half-section (ultimately a section after Father acquired the half-section homesteaded by our uncle). Along the stream in places

sheltered by the cliffs bordering Two Buttes creek, Hispanic shepherds had laboriously taken huge stones and built corrals in which the sheep were kept at night. As had the pictographs, the corrals still remained in good repair.

As we were living on a farm/ranch, we had few problems regarding food. Chickens were utilized both for food

and for keeping a supply of eggs on hand. Hogs could be butchered as were young cattle, milk cows kept us in milk and cream, and Mom and Dad did considerable gardening by the windmill. Water for the garden was taken from one of the two stock

tanks. Father devised an ingenious method of siphoning; an old discarded length of iron pipe was bent so one end was short and put into the tank but only extend a short depth into the water in the tank. The long end of the pipe reached the ground. By tremendous sucking on the end of the pipe near the ground, Father started the water flowing by siphoning it into the rows of garden plants.

A food which our family was particularly fond of was ice cream. Any trip into town meant we would be begging for ice cream; usually it resulted in each one getting an ice cream cone with one dip of ice cream; ice cream cones in those days were really conical. As I recall, the ice cream choices at the Two Buttes Drug Store were vanilla, chocolate or strawberry. At home we had milk, cream, eggs and sugar, the ingredients needed



for ice cream, but alas we had no ice cream freezer. Thinking about it, perhaps hungry for ice cream, father remedied that obstacle. He took one of our large milk buckets, a gallon syrup can with the handle intact, and presto, he created a freezer! Well sort of, but problems remained—an ice cream freezer has a crank which turns the bucket around paddles in the container, which scraped the freezing mixture off the interior, otherwise it would freeze just around the inner surface of the container.

Father had a remedy for that, although it entailed considerable effort and time. Putting the gallon bucket down in the milking bucket, he packed ice from the horse tanks around it, and gripping the syrup bucket handle, he rotated the bucket containing the enclosed ice cream mix, back and forth. Periodically he had to stop, remove the lid from the bucket, and use a case knife to scrap the freezing mixture off the insides of the syrup can; not a perfect answer to the problem of needing a freezer but it worked. I recall as a very young child eagerly watching the procedure through the considerable amount of time as it progressed. Finally it was frozen as much as it would freeze under the circumstances, and we feasted on ice cream. Admittedly it was mushy and certainly not brick ice cream, but we were delighted.

Although the rainfall in Southeastern Colorado averaged only a scant 20 inches a year, during the latter several years of the 1920s the rainfall lessened considerably, so the meager crops were inadequate for successful farming and livelihood. In addition, by the beginning of the 1930s severe dust storms began to move the soil. So in the spring of 1931 after 14 years of sojourning on the prairies of Colorado, we went away, moving eastward to mid-Kansas and leaving the grass-

lands behind. In Kansas, father had acquired a half-section of a sandhill farm in Rice County. Although dust storms touched Central Kansas with violence, we had escaped from epicenter of some 50 million acres of what was to become known as the Dust Bowl.

Still, in retrospection, we looked back at those years in Colorado with nostalgia and a certain longing. We never had to go hungry, and without TV or radio we had lots of family fellowship; often we would sit around after supper and eat popcorn or pull taffy, and always we begged father to tell us about his boyhood escapades in Missouri. Sometimes Mother would have time to tell us something of her childhood in Oklahoma. Only in later years did we realize our parents doubtlessly made many sacrifices for the benefit of all of us children.

A few years ago we returned to Prowers County, Colorado to visit our old home place. Someone has said, "You can't go home again", and in some measure that is true. At our old place, nothing remained except the old windmill pumping water for cattle, which were grazing on the grasslands which were now fenced. Only a nearly-buried concrete foundation told where the old barn had stood; nothing remained of the old shack, it was as if it had never been. We drove the three miles to the site of Ridge View school which we had ridden horseback to each morning. It had stood high on a ridge which gave its name. No trace remained of the little one-room school or the horse barn out some distance from the school building. It was as though it had never existed. Now, tall drought-resistant grasses which had replaced the prairie grasses, waved in the gentle wind where once we had played ball and tag in the schoolyard; the grasses were a government project of the mid-

1930s. We could see across the prairie and alongside the dirt roads that all the farmsteads which had originally dotted the countryside were gone. Literally, all were gone—gone with the wind and dust.

But memories remained, and we found Two Buttes creek still flowed down between the cliffs as in historic times. We recalled riding up the creek on horseback and stopping and feeding on choke cherries. We also found the pool where we had gone swimming or fishing. Along the way was a sandbar, and I fancied this was where my older sister and I had picnicked one day, and cooked our food which was eggs and bread. Off in the west Two Buttes Mountain still loomed, appearing to brood above the prairies. It came to mind how after the evening chores were done, one of my older brothers and I played catch in the barnyard. While we played, high above in the warmth of a spring evening several nighthawks (we referred to them as bull bats) in erratic flight, hunted insects as twilight neared. As it was the mating season for the nighthawks, occasionally one in aerial display would drop down from the sky in a great stoop and come out of its dive, making a rushing or booming sound. Also, on spring mornings we would hear the song of the western meadowlark from its perch on the corner post of the fenced front yard. It was a beautiful tinkling call across the prairie.

So again, with a measure of regret we turned away, leaving behind the poignant memories of a long-ago time. What was likely the last farewell was made to which far down the way had been a part of our lives. With sadness we departed; darkness was creeping across the canyons and grasses were nodding in the wind. Forever left behind on the Colorado prairies were some precious remembrances, and surely a part of our hearts.





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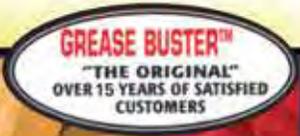
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