

Pioneer's Love of Land

By SAM WOOLFORD

WOOLFORD'S TALES

Love of the land still is an ingrained instinct in the human heart. Since Columbus, this fundamental trait has shaped history in our hemisphere; it has been the leaven which has expanded America. Despite our burgeoning population, our great cities which spread like catsclaw thickets over our soil, it still is there: Whether it be the sprawling cattle ranch of the rich man, the week-end "Grassburrs acres" of the city dweller, or the lonely African violet blooming on an urban window-sill in a 10-cent pot.

One day last week I sat on a wind-swept hill overlooking the Guadalupe river, with Twin Sisters peaks in the distance. I sat with a man who truly loves the land; and his story, coming from his aging lips, seemed a classic to me, almost the story of America.

I had arrived early on this first fall day, shortly after 8 o'clock, and at my call beside the front gate of his ranch home—"Anybody home?"—he came slowly to the door. (He is the oldest man in that part of the Hill Country.)

His name is W. E. Ludolf (his friends have always called him Willie), and he was born in a log cabin a few yards from his present home on Jan. 21, 1877. That makes him 83 years of age. He said: "My father came from Germany and took up a pre-emption on this piece of land. Five children were born to my parents. When I was nine years old, my mother died."

The cool north wind blew across the crown of the hill; the tall seedheads of the grass waved and formed a back-drop for the old iron monsters that had helped to keep this piece of God's earth for Willie: Reapers, threshers, traction engines, well-drilling outfits and buzz-saws rusted in their last resting-place.

We thumbed through the old family Bible to study the dates of the Ludolf family—people with a record of more than a hundred years in land-free Texas. One page had births, one deaths—"died in the morning," "died in the evening," "died at 2 a. m. in the morning."

First Trip

"When I was about 7 years old I made my first trip to San Antonio with my father," the aged man said. "It took us three days to get there. We watered our horses at the San Antonio river, and then we rode

back down again. Alamo plaza wasn't much in those days. (1884).

"Two years later, when I was 9, my mother died. My youngest brother was about a week old. Father still owed money on the place, and he couldn't keep it and support all the children. So he lost our land. Two of us were given to a man and his wife whom my father knew. I got a job working around on the nearby farms. My father went to Louisiana with the other two children.

"The people who had my sister and brother were mean to them. Once he made them shell corn; and because he didn't think my sister was working fast enough, he threw an ear of corn at her, hit her in the face. My brother told me that her face was bloody all over. He didn't give them enough to eat. My sister said he would lead them out to the cotton field and put them to work picking cotton, and then he would go back to the house. She could see him through the window, eating sausage.

"One day I decided to get my brother and sister away from these people. I walked 12 miles to a little school which they attended. I sent word to them that when they next came here, they were to hide in a cave and I would get them and bring them back to where I was staying. When I got to the school to do this, they were not there; so I went on to the cave. But no one was there either. They had not waited long enough for me and had

waded the river. When I got home they had already arrived, after a 12-mile walk.

Meanest Man

"I got them away from those mean people. He was the meanest man in the world, I guess. In fact, he was so mean that later on, he hung himself."

The house that Mr. Ludolf still lives in is 75 years old. For almost a year he has "batched," as he says; his wife died last winter. But his three children, who live on neighboring ranches, bring him lots of cooked food. However, we are straying from the story—the story of a boy who wanted his land back, a boy determined to keep his family together. He told me:

"So, I went to work. I got a job grubbing land. All I owned was a pair of pants and a shirt. I worked for eight and a half months and never drew a cent. When I was through, the man paid me my earnings for the eight and a half months work: Eighty-five dollars in gold. He told me to be mighty careful of it, as there were people who would take it away from me. But later on I loaned it to a fellow; he never paid it back. And that was the hardest money I ever lost.

"I got to where I could do all kinds of farm work, and I was pretty good in the cedar-brakes with an ax. Then I sold posts, and began to take contracts to cut cedar.

"When I got to where I had a little money, I bought a pony and a saddle and I began to trade cattle. And that was the most money I ever made. It has taken me right at 20 years to get the old home-place back. It's as good as any place in the country."

As the years went by, and the family was brought back together, Willie Ludolf married, at 35 years of age. He began adding tracts of land to the old pre-emption claim of his father. Today, 1100 of his acres sprawl through the live-oak-studded pastures. This land, his place, lies on all sides of the old home that Willie Ludolf worked so hard for, because "I was always trying to keep the family together.

Redbird Carpet

Redbirds made a red carpet on the yard, where the tools of his long struggle to hold the land lay at rest now, mute,

young ones were fast losing their spots. They were picking up the grains of corn that Willie scatters for them.

Then it was time to go. As the car wound along the road on top of a hill overlooking the longer hills over across the Guadalupe, toward the Pedernales country, doves pecked at the crevices in the rocks for their salt, and the old doe and twins stopped to watch me. I looked back. Willie was walking toward the barn, to crank up his tractor—and plant winter oats in the lower field. And in the spring, some corn.

All of his brothers and sisters are gone, except Dosia Elizabeth, the eldest sister, who lives in a Fredericksburg hospital. *GRANDMA* *BE REMAN*. One more year: There will be winter grazing for the deer, grain for the doves and red-birds. And Willie Ludolf will still live on the land where he was born—his land. Somehow, I think it always will be his.

C., 1960, Sam Woolford