

ROKE, JOSEPH and LYDIA

(from an interview with Lydia Roke by Fred Joy, April 2, 1940)

JOE ROKE was born in 1868, at Joliet, Illinois. His father died when Joseph was about five years old. His mother remarried when he was about seven, and the family moved, by covered wagon, to a farm in Kansas. His brother, Matt, who was four years older than he, left home to shift for himself immediately after the family arrived in Kansas.

At the tender age of ten, Joseph began to work for wages. He milked 30 cows a day, for which he received the magnificent sum of three dollars a month. He hoped to buy a saddle with his earnings.

One summer day in 1879, Matt paid his mother a surprise visit. He was working for the Hash Knife cattle outfit in Texas, and was helping drive a herd of longhorns from Texas to the South Dakota bad lands. Matt went on with the herds the following day.

Three days later, Joseph and his stepfather had a quarrel over money. His stepfather was short of cash and wished to appropriate the boy's saddle money. Joe lost the argument, jumped on his pony and started out in the direction the trail herd had taken. Five days later he was riding beside his brother, Matt, with the trail herd.

From 1880 until 1892, Joe helped to drive several trail herds from the eastern and southern states into Wyoming, Idaho, Montana, and the Dakotas. One herd was trailed through Billings, Montana, and left on the north side of the Yellowstone River, near Action. He helped bring a herd from Texas to Glasgow, Montana, for the N outfit.

Joe was in Wyoming when the Johnson county cattle war broke out. Many Texas gunmen were brought into Wyoming. These men were usually paid \$50 for each murder they committed.

On one occasion Joe happened to stop at a horse ranch owned by Tom Wagoner.

Shortly after he arrived, two men rode up to the house to speak to Mr. Wagoner. After a short discussion outside the house Mr. Wagoner came back in and asked Joe to stay with his wife until he came back, which would be in a couple of hours. Joe and Mrs. Wagoner waited three days before going out in search of Mr. Wagoner. They found him within a mile of the house, hanging from the limb of a tree.

On another occasion, Joe saw two "nesters" violently removed from the earth. The "nesters", in a running gun battle with several Wyoming cowmen, took refuge in a small log cabin in a deep ravine. There was no safe way for the cattlemen to approach the cabin, so they waited on top of the hill for the two men to come out. After 80 hours of waiting, they set fire to a wagon load of hay and let it roll down the hill and against the cabin. When the cabin caught fire the two men came out and the cattlemen shot them down with no chance for their lives.

When Joe was 14, he and his brother were again on trail herds together. One day Joe became involved in an argument with the trail boss and, becoming thoroughly enraged, he challenged the boss to a duel. Matt tried to talk his brother out of the notion of dueling, but Joe insisted on going through with it. The trail boss named pistols at 75 yards. When the distance had been paced out, the boss yelled, "Fire!" Joe turned and fired. Excitement and his inexperience, coupled with the long distance, caused the shot to wing harmlessly out over the long prairie. The boss didn't even bother to draw his gun.

According to Joe Roke, the early Montana cowboys and the cowboys from Texas didn't get along very well. The Texas cowboy considered the Montana man as being an inferior sort. The Texas cowboys were rather fast with a gun, and sent out lots of lead when they pulled one. However, according to Joe, their accuracy wasn't "anything to write home about." The Montana cowboy was slower, but when he pulled the trigger someone got hurt. There were numerous petty quarrels between these two sets of men.

Joe was a wanderer, never working very long for any one outfit. John T.

Murphy owned the 79 and the N bar N (N-N) outfits in the eastern part of Montana. Matt Roke was manager of the 79 from about 1884 to 1893. Joe worked for him in 1885 and 1887. In 1887 he rode for the N bar N. About 1890 he worked for the Miller and Lux cattle company in Idaho. Later he rode the Piney Buttes range, south of what is now the Fort Peck reservoir, for the D H S ranch. In 1892 he went back to ride for the N bar N. During the winter of 1892-93 the N bar N kept more than the usual number of men because of the severe winter.

One summer, while Joe was working for Matt, the boys all rode into Glasgow to have a little fun. There were two or three Negro riders who were working for Matt at the time, and while in town, one of the Negro riders entered into a quarrel with one of the town's big gamblers. Matt managed to get the Negro out of the saloon and ordered him to ride out to the camp, but before he got out of town the gambler waylaid and killed him. Matt managed to get most of his boys out of town before they found out what had happened. Matt's toughest job, however, was to keep them from going back when they found out what had happened. They wanted to go back and tear the town apart.

In the fall of 1892 the boys were located in the Missouri River brakes near the place where Cow Creek enters the river. Charles Russel happened to be in camp. One morning a lively broncho bucked across the cook's fire, scattering the cook's paraphernalia far and wide. The incident gave Russel the inspiration which took form in his picture, "A Bronc for Breakfast."

In 1898 Joe came to the Sweet Grass Hills, representing the N bar N outfit, which had put about 2,000 head of cattle in that region. Shortly after arriving there, he filed a desert claim on 160 acres of land near the head of Little Sage Creek. Because it was unnecessary to live on a desert claim to make proof, he kept working the N bar N.

About that time, Ed Lauener, a small cattle rancher in the hills, sent money to his sisters, Lydia and Caroline, in Switzerland, and asked them to come

to the United States. The two girls started on May 1, 1898. On May 22, 1898 they arrived in Chester and were immediately employed by the Bourne and Hamilton Stock Company as house helpers.

In the fall of 1898, Joseph Roke met Miss Lydia Lauener at a big barn dance. Joe made it a point to meet her very often after that. In January, 1899 the young couple drove in a spring wagon to Fort Benton and were married. They lived in a log cabin at the edge of Chester until the first of April. "I didn't intend to stay in the United States more than a year when I first came. But I met my Irishman and here I am," says Mrs. Roke.

Mrs. Roke had been raised as a city girl in Switzerland and had never learned to cook. Joe did all the cooking and didn't allow Lydia near the stove.

Joe ran a trap line that winter. Lydia went with him every day to look after the traps. They usually walked because of the heavy snow, but as spring drew near, the snow melted and Joe decided to use horses.

Lydia had never ridden a horse, but Joe brought one for her. He helped her on the animal and turned to mount his own. Lydia's horse started to go, and she screamed. Her scream frightened the horse and he started to run. Speed brought more screams and screams brought more speed. Lydia's first ride was a fast one, but Joe finally brought it to an end after a two-mile race.

After delivering a wagon-load of hides and furs at Fort Benton, about April 1, 1899, Mr. and Mrs. Roke set out on a honeymoon trip. They traveled in a light spring wagon loaded with camping equipment and a teepee-style tent. The trip took them south almost to Great Falls, east to Glasgow, north to Calgary and west to Glacier Park.

On this trip Lydia decided to learn to cook. She started most of the meals but ended by crying while Joe finished the cooking. "I was so dumb I couldn't even boil coffee," says Mrs. Roke.

A hail storm came up just as they were nearing Lethbridge, Alberta. A

wheel broke off the wagon during a burst of speed as they rushed for shelter. After hastily unhitching the horses and tying them to the wagon, the couple sought protection under the vehicle. Before the storm was over, they were joined in crude shelter by a young Canadian mounted policeman.

On July 1, the couple encountered a band of about 500 Piegan and Blood Indians, gathered to celebrate Dominion Day. Lydia was very frightened and wanted to go on by but Joe pitched camp next to the Indian village and left Lydia to worry about her scalp while he went into Macleod.

After a few anguished minutes, a young squaw came over, hung her papoose on a tent pole, and proceeded to try talking to the frightened young lady. Lydia's English was very poor and the squaw's was no better. After much hand waving and yelling at each other, they finally discovered that they both understood French.

The young squaw was especially pleased at the discovery. She ran back to the Indian village and brought a whole flock of squaws to see the pretty little white woman who could speak French. When the Indian women learned that she was celebrating her recent marriage, they showered her with beaded mossasins, gloves, jackets, leggings, and skirts. Because Joe found very good poker games in Macleod and because Lydia found that she actually enjoyed her Indian friends, they stayed there two weeks before going on to Calgary.

One night a furious thunderstorm came up. "Better get up and stake the tent down a little more," said Lydia. "Oh no! It's staked plenty," replied Joe. Just then the teepee went over. "Now, what you say, Joe?" "Pull the tarpaulin over your head and go to sleep." growled Joe. In the morning they found a stream of water six inches deep under their bed.

At Calgary they drove near a small bunch of dairy cows wearing bells. Lydia contracted a serious case of homesickness. She cried herself to sleep that night. All cows wear bells in Switzerland.

In August, the couple came back to their claim in the Hills. They set up housekeeping in a small log cabin, built for them earlier in the summer by Ed Lauener.

As soon as they were settled, Joe acquired an old chain-drive Jones mower and an old McCormick rake. He and Lydia, working together, harvested about 12 tons of wild hay. He did the mowing, she the raking. Together, they hauled the hay from the field and stacked it near the cabin. After the hay was up they purchased eight head of cattle from Mary Johnson and five from a Mr. Raglen, at a total cost of \$325. They left the place and cattle in charge of a young cowboy, and went back to Chester to spend the winter.

During the winter of 1899, Joe ran a saloon in Chester. They lived in the same log cabin in which they had spent the previous winter. Their first baby, a boy, John, was born there. Because the water in Chester was of a very poor quality and milk for the baby was scarce, they moved back to the ranch in the spring of 1900.

Joe used the R two (R2) brand from 1899 to 1906. From 1906 until 1920 he used the R2 and also the J bar W (J-W) on the right shoulder. He discontinued the R2 brand in 1920. Because Joe's herd was too small to keep him busy, he ran cattle for other small stockmen. He charged these stockmen from three to six dollars a head, depending upon the demand and the grass conditions. He often had as many as 200 head of outside cattle on his ranch.

The gold rush to the Sweet Grass Hills in 1901 caused a mild boom in Chester. Joe thought there must be some easy money to be made, so left his ranch again in charge of a young puncher, and went back to operate a saloon in Chester. However, the venture was not nearly as profitable as he had expected. He returned to the ranch in the spring of 1902.

The late summer of 1902 found Mr. and Mrs. Roke in very straitened circumstances. Haying time was near and the old chain-drive mower and the old

rake were beyond repair. There was very little left in the house to eat except rice. The two children (there was another by then) were not getting the kind of food they should have had.

One day Joe left home on a trip to the nearby town of Hill, driving a lively team of buckskin bronchos. When he did not retrain Mrs. Roke became very worried. She could not go far in search of him with her two small children. She feared that the buckskins had gotten out of control and hurt Joe. When he did return, he brought back a new mower, a new rake, a load of groceries and \$65 in cash. His only statement was that he had found "a very interesting poker game in town." There would have been pretty slim pickings for us, at times, if Joe hadn't been able to play poker," says Mrs. Roke in speaking of her husband's gambling ability.

On May 19-20, 1903, a big blizzard swept over the Sweet Grass Hills, killing hundreds of cattle and sheep. Mr. Harbec, who ran about 3,500 head of sheep near Joe's place, failed to get his sheep into his sheds and so lost most of them. Joe was out during the early part of the storm and managed to drive his cattle into Mr. Harbec's sheep shed before the storm became too severe.

There was a lot of tense feeling in the Hills from May, 1903, until the fall of 1906. A small war, or feud, was active between A. K. Prescott, sheepman, and a Mr. Wigmire, cattleman. All other sheepmen and cattlemen tried to stay out of the conflict by keeping their views to themselves. Detectives were brought in as shepherders and cowboys.

Mr. Prescott was well established in the hills before Mr. Wigmire came in and took a claim in Little Sage Creek, between Joe Roke's place and Joe Cicon's ranch. Mr. Wigmire trailed in 1,800 head of cattle from Big Timber, Montana, in May, 1903. Although he lost about 700 head in the May blizzard, he still did not have enough water on his place for those remaining. Mr. Prescott held a claim to most of the other water in the neighborhood.

There were many incidents of prairie fires and building fires during the

three-year war. On one occasion, 1,500 head of Mr. Prescott's sheep were locked in a shed and burned. Everyone was under suspicion. Each stockman wondered where his neighbor's sympathies lay. Mr. Prescott kept one herder and three riflemen with every band of sheep. He always traveled in a spring wagon with a rifleman seated on each side of him.

The war ended when Mr. Wigmore drove his cattle out of the eastern part of the state. However, the Hills were infested with detectives and stock inspectors for several years thereafter.

Summer range conditions on the Roke ranch have unusually been good. Wild hay, timothy, and bromas grass provide sufficient winter hay. By 1910, Joe Roke owned about 500 head of cattle. By 1930, the ranch contained 4,000 acres, acquired at an average cost of five dollars per acre. The Roke ranch never hired more than one or two men.

Hill, Montana, was the main source of supplies before 1907. After 1907, Chester became the trading center. Most of the cattle were shipped out of Chester and marketed in Chicago. The lowest price ever received was four and one-half cents per pound in 1933. The highest was 17 cents in 1918. In 1911, and also in 1912, the Rokes figured their yearly profits to be about \$6,000. According to Mrs. Roke, the cost of producing a pound of beef has been multiplied by five during the past 40 years.

About 1914, land prices were raised by the influx of homesteaders. Mr. Roke began cutting the size of his herd to fit the available range land. By 1938, the herd had been cut to about 200. Mrs. Roke plans to keep the number as close to 200 as possible from now on.

Most of the early roundups were organized by either Tom Strode of the Sweet Grass Hills, or Sam Kelly of the Circle Ranch. Joe usually represented his own interests in the roundups. The last big roundup in the Hills was a community affair headed by Bert Orr. The men scattered out, going in couples,

and met again in the evening in some designated spot.

Dances were not held very often in the early days. However, when a big dance was scheduled, people drove as far as 60 or 70 miles to attend. A round trip to a dance often took the biggest part of three days. A visit to the neighbors usually meant staying over night, at least. Although good times were few and far between, the old-timers really did make the best of their rare outings.

Four children were born to Mr. and Mrs. Roke. Two of the children died. The oldest son, John, operates a dairy in Chester. There is one married daughter in South Dakota. In January, 1934, Joseph Roke took pneumonia and died. Since then Mrs. Roke has been running the ranch with the help of two hired men.

Today, at the age of 58, Mrs. Roke is a very attractive, hard-working cattlegoman. She weighs about 80 pounds, but has energy enough to make up for her slight build. She wears spike-heeled shoes, "because it makes me feel taller." She is loaded with fond recollections of the early days in the Sweet Grass Hills, and loves her ranch and her beautiful white-faced cattle.