

Challenged by a granddaughter to write of his childhood, Robert, an 85-year-old retired Wyoming rancher, tells the story of his parents' coming to the state in 1906 where they operated a stagecoach station, acquired a ranch and survived the great Depression. These short stories continue to unfold with the humorous escapades of Robert and his brother, as well as detailing hardships and victories of life on a Wyoming ranch prior to 1945.

West of the Bozeman Trail

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West of the Bozeman Trail



Robert Twing

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THE BEGINNING

Edward and Elsie Twing, my parents, came to Wyoming in 1906 immediately after their wedding in Nebraska. My father and his uncle had a two-year "dirt contract" to build an irrigation canal in eastern Wyoming, a feat that would be accomplished by employing 350 men and 300 teams of horses.

My parents enjoyed the climate and country in northeastern Wyoming. The ditch contract completed, they set their sights on settling in this beautiful state. This decision prompted my father to lease a ranch at Banner, Wyoming, a location between Sheridan and Buffalo, Wyoming - a breathtaking location at the foot of the Big Horn Mountains and a far cry from the flatlands of Nebraska. What my parents would soon discover was that the Wyoming climate was not always as "pleasant" as what they had previously encountered! The spring of 1908 was one for the record books. When my parents moved onto the ranch April 1 of that year, there were 30 inches of snow on the level; next they would learn that this was not the exception but the norm for that area. Added to that, they would soon find that this particular amount of snow would remain on the ground until May 1 . . . now, that WAS unusual!

True to so many pioneering stories, my parents would begin this new chapter in their lives facing hardships. During 1908 there was very little in the way of crops so it was "take up a notch in your belt and hope for better next year". One amenity that pulled them through was that the ranch they were leasing was the overnight stagecoach stop between Buffalo and Sheridan. My parents were paid by the U.S. government for keeping and feeding the stage horses and securing the mail. They also charged for the passengers on the stage to stay overnight. A small sum to us today but it put food on the table back in those days (NOTE: In going through my father's record books from that time period, these are for one person: Overnight - \$1.00; 2 nights and 1 day - \$3.00; 5

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meals - \$1.25. No record was found as to what the government paid him for his services to them.)

My mother, Elsie, was engaged in this "ranching" providing meals for all of the traveling guests and took care of the beds as well. The people who traveled were not a great number, usually one or two; then the next week there might be six. Whatever the number, there were still meals to prepare and lodging to provide.

One day while cooking the evening meal on the wood stove, my mother suddenly felt like someone was watching her. The feeling was so intense that she stopped the meal preparation and turned to the windows. Peering through the window at her was a Native American with his hands mirroring his face. You would have to have known Mother to understand what happened next - she simply raised her hand in greeting, pointed to the kitchen door, gathered up her toddler in her arms and opened the door. (Dad, who called her 'Mother', would say of her, "Well, Mother is just like a duck on the pond: above, all is serene and pleasant, but underneath she is paddling like crazy!")

Opening the door, Mother could see several Natives mounted on their horses. One Indian, the leader of the group, pulled his horse forward and swinging his arm from right to left pointed to the stream that was down in a small valley behind the barn. As he swung his arm he uttered these words "Pharaoh! WHE-E-E-E-E-E-E!!" When Mother did not answer him, he repeated, waving his arm and pointing, "PHARAOH! WHEE-E-E-E-E-E-!"

A young Native slipped from his pony and came to Mother. Speaking to her in impeccable English, he asked, "Ma'am, do you understand him?"

When she replied that she did not, the young Native began to explain, " Pharaoh - a horse. Whee - to run." The young man went on to tell Mother that the leader was asking if they could take their horses down to the small creek and let them run and graze while they camped there for the night. Mother gave them permission and returned to fixing the meal. The next morning upon rising at the break of day, Mother looked toward the creek to see nothing. No horses, no camp, no Natives where they had been the night before.

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However outside her door was a large supply of chopped firewood that would last days - a thank you from the visitors of yesterday.

Years later when the story of this visit would come up, she would just smile and say, "Well, you just do what you have to do!" It seemed to be her way of life. Meeting the day to day problems head on, truly the embodiment of the pioneer spirit that carved a way of life out of the Old West.

The Banner ranch was nestled in the foothills along the face of the mountains and, with the moisture and climate, these foothills lent themselves to an abundance of wild fruit. Chokecherry bushes, service berry bushes, wild plums, wild currants and many other varieties were available, bearing heavily every fall. The chokecherries were in the greatest demand as they were made into wonderful jams and pancake syrup. Just before the first frost of fall, it was berry picking time for Mother and others.

The community of Banner itself was situated close to the last slope (or face) of the Big Horn Mountains. It was not unusual to see wild gray wolves, bears and cougars following the "food chain" from their summer homes high in the mountains down to the face of the Big Horns where the winters were milder. Several times, while picking berries, Mother would hear noises on the other side of the berry patch. "Don't worry", she would say, "It's just a bear and he's hungry too." And the berry picking would continue until the buckets were full. (Mother's twin sister Elta used to joke and say that it wasn't that the bear on the other side of the bush was hungry but that he was afraid to confront the pioneer on the other side of the bush as she would win!)

Life for my parents in the early 1900's was not an easy life, but still was rewarding as they built toward a future and a full life. No matter how difficult the times were, how fierce the elements, there was always a roof over their head and food on the table and the love of the family . . . truly the essentials in life that we still strive for today.

God was and IS good!

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