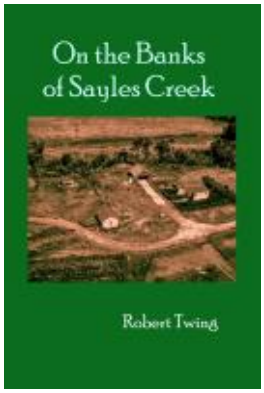
On the Banks of Sayles Creek

Robert Twing



Challenged by a granddaughter to write of his childhood on the Wyoming ranch, Robert Twing wrote and published West of The Bozeman Trail. Now, writing the sequel, On The Banks of Sayles Creek, this ninety-year-old-rancher tells of his World War Two service, graduating as a multi-engine pilot and returning to Wyoming to establish a ranch.

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First Edition

INTO THE UNKNOWN

"*He that dwells in the secret place of the Most High, shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty*." Psalm 91:1

Just as fall was arriving this group of young men was entering a new season in their lives. Ranch work completed, the call came to report to Denver, Colorado, for further orders.

Thus it was one early September morning in the fall of 1943 we had said our good-byes, gave those last hugs and, with a stiff upper lip, I boarded the bus. With seats found, most of us sat and stared out of the windows as the bus rolled out of Buffalo, Wyoming, pretending to be interested in scenery that we had seen hundreds of times.

Was it the dust in the old bus that caused our vision to fog up now and again? Hadn't we all had those life moments where the speck of dust got in our eye?

The only noise in the quiet of the morning was the steady hum of the bus engine and the tires methodically thumping along on the rough spots of the highway, intermittently accented by a rattle or squeak of the laden vehicle.

Not a sound came from the contemplative passengers. You see this was a special group of young men in route to serve their country, either having volunteered for a specific branch of the military or having received notice from the draft board to report for duty.

All too aware of the massive fire that burned in the Big Horn Mountains behind us, we motored on down the road to Powder River—the river that the old timers used to say was a mile wide and an inch deep … too thick to drink and too thin to plow! (Funny the things one remembers in life.) Casper would be next.

Casper, the largest town in Wyoming at the time, boasted of oil refineries and a B-24 base—a sight that was familiar to myself and my buddy, Sandy. We had come to this base a few months earlier to take our Army Air Corps exams.

Onward we traveled down the winding road through the semi-arid regions laced with sagebrush of southern Wyoming. We had a late lunch in Cheyenne and boarded the bus for the last 100 miles to Denver.

Our destination in this city was the railroad station. We disembarked and were ushered into a large room. Roll call was given; we answered with our appointed serial number and understood that that would be the routine

from now on. Next we were divided into groups according to our enlisted or appointed services and we began loading onto the troop train. Leaving the auditorium we looked up at a large sign which read: "You better give your heart to God, because the rest of you belongs to Uncle Sam." At first glance it amused us, but we were soon to find out just how true that statement was.

Loading completed and a few last minute checks, the steam locomotive gave two shrill blasts and we were on our way.

The passenger cars on the troop train dated back to 1921 with bench seats two people wide, and facing us the same set up. No reclining seats, no padded cushions … you know, I don't believe they were even made out of 'soft' pine! (I began to understand how those 40 head of steers must have felt, crammed into a cattle car headed for market: close quarters, very close quarters!) Later I learned from some of my fellow cadets from other regions in the country that they had gotten on a passenger train and had Pullman cars complete with valet service and all amenities!

We rolled to the east out of Denver with the Rocky Mountains behind us and the western sunset settling in over the snow-capped Rocky Mountain peaks. I soaked in the sight, and as I did it became etched on my memory … a place of comfort to be visited during those dark sleepless nights that were to come.

Sometime during the late night hours we pulled into Omaha, picked up two more cars of troops and continued on our route to Kansas City.

While eating breakfast the next morning, word began to circulate that our final destination would be Keesler Field near Biloxi, Mississippi. Certainly this was a destination I had never heard of. Someone then mentioned that it wasn't actually in the state of Mississippi but was a large island about a mile off the coast. The thought crossed my mind this sounded more like Alcatraz!

Next stop—St. Louis and more troop cars were added to our growing train. The locomotive steamed the length of Illinois to its southern point and began to slow down until it was just barely crawling. I had stepped out on the deck to escape the thick cigarette smoke inside and peering around the side of the forward car I could see we were approaching a huge river. It had to be the Mississippi!

The train worked its way up the approach and began to cross this meandering giant. I could see the boiling, muddy water below us and remarked to those around me, "It looks thick enough to plow!"

One of the southern troops said, "Just wait a minute!"

He had no sooner made the statement and I saw the river change. The right half of the stream remained dark and muddy while the left side turned to a beautiful sky blue.

The chap then commented, "Welcome to the beautiful blue Ohio River!"

As far as one could see the river ran divided. I was told that the Ole Miss and Ohio River ran that way for 50 to 100 miles depending on the season and the amount of water.

We steamed into Nashville after dark that day, took on more coal and water and added more troop cars. While all of this was transpiring we were disembarked, lined up on the loading ramp. We went through our first calisthenics. Jumping jacks, push-ups, the whole nine yards. It really felt good after those hours of building callouses where they wouldn't do us any good!

All aboard, the chugging, smoke-spewing transport pulled away from Nashville before midnight, embarking on the final phase of our journey.

The next morning found us traversing through the low lands of the Mississippi, an eye-opening event for this Wyoming boy! It was as if I were traveling in another world where trees growing in water were accented by large strings of moss eerily hanging down from their limbs. Color was added to this scene by the aerial antics of many many different species of birds! I drank in the adventure created by this foreign scenery.

I was jarred back to reality by comments suggesting there was the smell of salt air. (Couldn't have proven it by me! No, I had no point of reference for what salt air might smell like … well, at least for that moment!)

A short time later the iron horse began to slow down, down, down, finally to a crawl. The trees and vegetation began to thin out, the aviary stunts diminished and we merged onto a bridge stretching over a huge body of water. Yes, this bridge spanned from the continent across to an island and Keesler Field.

The train crept to a halt inside a large compound. We were met by a fleet of army trucks, given orders to get in the trucks and then taken to the staging area and unloaded. Roll call began.

Names were called in alphabetical order and we were then ushered to an open area at double-time (on the run) and lined up in groups of 48 (four wide and 12 long). We were marched over to the quarter-master's Quonset, filed through and issued two sheets, a mattress cover, a pillow and case, and a mosquito net. Marching still we crossed the field to a low lying area that

was covered with rows and rows of big 12 and 16 person tents. Assignment to our tents was then made in alphabetical order. Home sweet home?

Early afternoon had arrived by now and food was on everyone's mind. Our sergeant blew his whistle. We had been forewarned this meant to fall out into our 4x12 formation. We followed our leader to the assigned mess hall.

Ten standard mess halls lined the field—further down from them was our mess hall. It was called "Number 11" but was more fondly referred to as Ptomaine Tavern. Why? Apparently if there was a case of food poisoning on the field it always came from "Number 11!"

Ninety-thousand men were fed three meals a day out of these 11 mess halls—a massive undertaking! The preparation of the food, the filing of the men through the chow line, tables for eating and all of the clean-up during and afterwards, mind-boggling yet the food was plentiful and very edible.

After chow we were marched back to our tent area, given time to make up our beds and have a bathroom break then came the indoctrination speech. We were given an overview of the field, told what we should anticipate in our training, what was expected of us and how the next day would begin. The session opened for questions.

Someone asked if a mosquito net was necessary. The sergeant turned and pointed to some pine trees that had the tops broken off and remarked, "That's where the little mosquitoes come in off the Gulf!"

By the next morning most of us believed him as during the night the hum of the mosquitoes was so loud it was difficult to sleep. Along with the mosquitoes keeping us awake was the dynamics of our location. We were only 11 feet above sea level with 100% humidity. Midnight approached and those of us who came from a mile high elevation felt as if we had an elephant sitting on our chests. It took two weeks for us to acclimate to our surroundings and for the heavy feeling to dissipate.

Morning of the second day dawned. We were to receive our new GI clothing, but for some unknown reason they were not available. So we were stuck with the clothing we had worn on the trip. We marched in our civvies, we did calisthenics in our civvies, we slept in our civvies. It was nigh unto a week before we were again marched over to the Quonset hut to receive our fatigues and by then our clothes could stand by themselves! We were told to pick up a box, put our clothes in it, address the package and Uncle Sam would send it home. (My mother told me years later that when she received the box and saw how filthy the clothes were that she sat down and wept.)

After several days of falling in, falling out, and all the other commands that accompanied that phase of training, we were taken to the base hospital for shots. When one arm became so full of holes that it leaked the other arm was assaulted. It seemed as if we received shots for everything ever known to mankind including hoof and mouth disease! Many was the time we saw big men faint at the sight of the needle, but this ordeal passed, and along with it another phase of preparation for our military service. But there was more …

The meat of our training began when we were introduced to psycho-motor testing. These tests produced stress both physical and mental even down to each individual receiving an interview with a psychiatrist. I was asked about my home life, about ranching in Wyoming, what my hobbies were and my plans for the future. The importance of those tests became apparent when a good number of our peers were washed out of the cadet program.

Rumor began to swarm around the field that these tests could also have a bearing on whether you would be selected for a pilot, bombardier or navigator. The outcome might even affect one's commission rating such as 2nd Lieutenant or flight officer. Rumors aside we were just thankful to have this phase of testing behind us.

Intermingled with the other training was K.P. (Kitchen Police). However, somewhere along the line someone in authority declared it not proper for future officers to have K.P. duty, thus the name was changed to Mess Management. Same job—different title!

When on MM we were whistled out of dreamland at 4 a.m., assigned our mess hall, marched to the area and given our jobs for the next twelve hours. The center of the clean-up area was a huge steam cleaner affectionately dubbed The China Clipper.

Food was served on metal trays and once the trays were used they were brought back to the receiving area, scraped clean, handed to the next station to be dipped in hot soapy water and hit a lick with a stiff brush; onto the next man who placed them in wooden racks and set them on the conveyor belt which took the trays through the steam cleaning process in The Clipper. Out of steam bath and out of the racks, the trays were stacked and placed at the beginning of the serving line. Repeat!

Two weeks into the program, after we had acclimated to some degree, we were moved from the original dwellings of the tents to tar paper barracks—what a step up in the world! Our new dwellings were positioned on a sea of sand. Everywhere one went it was sand—sand in your shoes,

sand in your bed, sand in your food, and even sand in the showers. Only the paved areas were free of the continual grit. And, as in the tents, there was another natural element to contend with underfoot—water!

When we had been issued our clothing, we also each received a barrack's bag, a large canvas sack big enough to hold all our clothing and personal items. While in our tents we kept the bags on our cots during the day and at night we hung them from the tent poles. The reason? Many mornings we swung our feet out of bed in the darkness at 5:30 to find ourselves standing in 6 inches of cold water. You see, each time it rained we had running water! Yet, as unbearable as the setting sounds, we survived it quite readily with very little illness and with dry belongings.

Days became weeks as the training continued. Once we were able to march in some semblance of order we joined the Saturday parade. Now, that in itself was quite a sight to behold! Ninety-thousand men in review marching by the stands with all the Generals and other high ranking brass looking us over.

On the downside, it was not uncommon for the whole field to be ready to march only to stand and wait two hours for the brass to show up. Standing that long on the blacktop runways in 100 degree weather could be a bit trying. Due to this imposed duress there would always be at least two ambulances behind each squad to treat those who passed out. Some days the EMTs were quite busy!

In our barracks there was a young man who could not wake up in the mornings. We literally had to pull him out of bed and stand him on his feet before he would wake up. One morning four of us each took a corner of his cot and carried him (sound asleep) out to reveille formation positioning his cot in his place in the squad.

The inspecting officer came by he stopped and looked at the cot for a minute before asking, "Who is this?"

Once we identified the sleeping soldier we were dismissed. Going back to the barracks we noted that the officer had pushed the cot over with his foot. The cadet rolled out and as his feet hit the ground we heard the officer shout, "ATTENTION!!"

Needless to say, the young man was wide awake standing there in his birthday suit and saluting in the early morning sun! The next 30 minutes he was ordered to march up and down the sandy walkway.

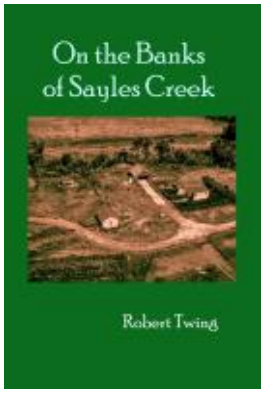
The officer finally stopped him and asked, "Mister, can you make reveille in uniform from now on?"

"Yes, sir!" came the reply.

The event marked a turning point in the cadet's career and the moment the first note of reveille was heard his feet were on the floor.

Truly memories indelibly etched into our minds help us recall the best of life and yes, some of the most trying times! Each event in a life is designed by our Creator to be a growing and learning experience, written forever as a chapter in our life story. Such were my first days in basic training thousands of miles from home.

God is so good!



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