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*Tattered Tidbits: Alpine Historical Society*

**TIME TURNED BACK—THE OLD WEST**

*The following is an original story written by Vic Head who lived in Alpine in the 1920's. The setting of the story is the Abraham Lincoln McNett Ranch—Mr. McNett was Alpine's sheriff for many years. Vic was never a cowboy, but the story tells how he, as an 8-year-old boy, saw the cowboy's life.*

The movie cowboy has helped America to stand tall. But can you imagine a real cowboy in a valley of Southern California with an electric guitar? Where you gonna plug it in—the trunk of a live oak? And imagine riding in the crush of the herd with a guitar only a little stronger than an eggshell. No, the instrument of choice was the harmonica. “Tumblin’ Tumbleweed?” Nice, but only movie stuff. We played songs we heard on the hand-wound gramophone. Mr. McNett’s daughters wore out ten steel needles of an afternoon; things like “There Ain’t No Sense—Settin’ on a Fence—All by Yourself in the Moonlight” or “The Prisoner’s Song”—you remember, “If I had the Wings of an Angel?” The harmonica cowboy knew ‘em all.

Now, there wasn’t a ten gallon hat in the crowd. Only the rancher or the state governor wore ‘em. And where the movie cowboy totes a gun, we wore canteens on our belts. Oh, the foreman might carry a revolver when we were on the trail, more for mountain lions than for rustlers.

The ranch house had no electricity, only wood stove and kerosene lamps, and no telephone. Now, wouldn’t you find that a blessing today with three teenage daughters? And no plumbing. Three holer down the hill. A well with a hand pump and a post with a tin cup on a nail. Lug all the water in for family bathing. Cowboys? We bathed in the creek. Big hole surrounded by willows. When the well went dry, we had to use the creek hole early. Afternoons reserved for the three daughters. I wouldn’t try to tell you that no cowboy ever peeked over the willows on a sunny afternoon.

Social status? Huh! The only thing lower than us was the steers. Pay was room in the barn, durn good grub and seven dollars a month. Silver, please. None o’ your back-east paper for us, thank you! Charlie Bottsford, the foreman, did better; fifteen dollars a month, enough for him to buy and plant a lemon orchard. It was OK if HE asked a McNett girl to a dance, but not us!

Two things you fear when you’re riding herd. You wake up to see that orange sunrise glow along the hogback ridge, but wait—it’s only 2:00 am. Mountains are covered with grease-wood. Ever smoked a mantle burning a Christmas tree in your fireplace? Guarantee you never tried it twice! Well, greasewood burns about fifty times as fast. If the fire comes over the top and down our side, seven hundred head of cattle are going to stampede, and so we pray. Thank God, there’s a ridge of bare rock top the hogback and the sky slowly darkens, but we don’t sleep well.

The other thing is like, after you’ve sat around the campfire and Junior (he’s 42 years old and still Junior) has durn near put us to sleep with his harmonica. The fire burns to embers and we bank them. Not sure how long we sleep, a rustling, a pawing of the ground. Those horses seldom shy, but they’ve got the jitters now! We’re suddenly wide awake. Shhhh—listen! But we don’t hear a sound. Charlie stirs up the fire. Look! No, look over there. A pair of yellow eyes, nothing else, maybe ten yards away. We stare. Those eyes stare back. Two minutes? It seems like ten. We tiptoe over to seize the halters and calm the horses. At last those eyes seem to get closer together and dim, as that something—that SOMETHING—fades out of sight. Toss and turn the rest of the night, and in the morning a four-inch wide track in the dust says mountain lion! They seldom kill a human, but seem to think a horse is fair game.

Oh, we had our joys, too. Ever smell the wild lilac? Ever see the “Lord’s Candles,” those fifteen foot stalks of the yucca in bloom or a shady wet spot where maidenhair fern and watercress and sometimes

even a mariposa lily grow? Ever have the lonesome wail of a slow freight at midnight set you dreaming, or see the dawn coming up like an orange curtain stretching from east clear round to north and south while the sky above the orange tapers through bright turquoise to palest blue, deep purple, star studded black and feel the dawn breeze? Man, that's livin'!

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