The Passing of an Era

Who says cowboys are only found in Texas and roaming the prairie? Cowboys are found right here in our own area. Estelle Edward Thomas, better known to his friends as Cowboy Thomas, or Tommy, has drawn world attention as a cowboy. He was the youngest of three children born to Joseph Benjamin and Lusetta Barnett Thomas on April 6, 1886 near Lancaster, on the Missouri-Iowa state line. His mother died when he was less than four years old. Later, his father married Georgia Folly Coe, who was from the Novelty area.

Because Tommy lived near Lancaster, he, along with the whole town, was aware of William P. Hall's wintering headquarters in Lancaster. Hall provided him with his first job; it was Tommy's duty to carry feed and water to the wintering animals. At this early age, Tommy developed his life long love for horses, and it was even said Tommy thought like a horse.

In the year 1900, Lou Hall took Tommy and Tommy's 16 year old brother, Orville, to New York with a herd of horses. Part of these horses were on order for London, while the rest were to go to Capetown, South Africa, to be used in the Boer War. After the delivery to Capetown, Hall returned with wild African animals which were sold to several famous circuses. Orville was on his way to go with the horses to London, and it was Lou's wish that Tommy accompany Lou to Africa. But Tommy turned him down saying, "That was too much water to travel over. I don't like water. Never learned to swim and I didn't like the thought of being in the middle of the ocean with a lot of lions and tigers. It just didn't appeal to me."

It was at this age Tommy showed signs that he was destined to be a man of the outdoors. In the early 1900's Orville went to work on the railroad, and soon learned to be a telegraph operator. He was stationed in Maxwell, Nebraska. Tommy thought he, too, would like to learn the trade. The pay was good, fifty dollars a month, but Tommy didn't like being shut up in a little room all day.

Soon after this, Tommy took a job at a nearby cattle ranch. Being the youngest and least experienced hand, he acquired the name of "kid operator." But no sooner had he received this unfitting name than he proved to the crew that he meant business. On the second morning of his new job, the cocky-looking boy was led into the corral. The boss challenged Tommy to prove any ability he might have at breaking horses. 'I knew right then, the boss was trying to dump me. All were standing around to see me get bucked off. While a couple of the crew held the reins and the horse steady, I proceeded to saddle up. When I finished I took the cheek strap in my left hand, and pulled his head to me as I mounted, and got my feet planted in the stirrups. He made a couple of straight leaps, and since he wasn't very big, I thought I'd make it look good, so I took off my hand and started fanning him all over. I kept spurring and fanning him till he raised his head and stood still. I then rode over to where the boys were standing and dismounted. I kicked the horse in the belly and said, 'damned knot head couldn't buck off a wet saddle blanket.' From then on, they never tried to trick me, and stopped calling me 'kid.'"

Tommy returned to Missouri a few years later, married Altha Wardlow and was blessed with two boys and four girls. He set up residence with his family near Lancaster and farmed; but wasn't content at this, so in 1927, Tommy moved his family to Ardmore, South Dakota. He sent his two sons, Charles and Dick, by immigrant car, and the rest of the family came in a Model-T Ford. Their new farm was located near the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Tommy spent one year farming and the rest of his time rounding up wild horses and selling them to Eastern dealers.

Tommy said that one day when he was in town, the talk was of an upcoming horse race. It was a short race from the west side of the reservation to the city limits of Orlrich, about 15 miles. "I think the purse was something like $500. I had a horse that I was sure could win hands down. The horse's name was Rex McDonald, which was half thoroughbred and half Percheron. Immediately the racers started training. But hell, old Rex had plenty of training; sometimes forty miles a day." Tommy used Rex to round up the wild mustangs. Since Tommy was so sure of Rex he decided to place bets like everyone else. He had only one problem; he had no money to bet. He decided to go to the bank for a loan. When the banker heard his purpose for borrowing the money he said it was against the bank's policy to loan money for gambling. "Now I knew that was a lot of nonsense because they loaned money to farmers all the time and farming in South Dakota was the biggest damn gamble anyone could take." Finally the banker agreed to loan Tommy $300 from his own personal account, with 10 percent interest, of course. The next day Rex had the day off to rest for the following day's race. The day of the race Charles was selected to ride Rex, since he was lightweight, and could still maneuver a horse well. Tommy gave Charles some last minute pointers, and then the race was on. Now, all photo below shows Tommy with a stallion. This prize horse, owned by Leonard Louis Lancaster, was ridden by Tommy during parades.
Tommy could do was wait and see if Rex would come through. "We waited for what seemed like forever," Tommy said. "Dick stood with me, and my wife sat on the running board on the Model-T. Finally, a man pulled up in a car and said the horses were about six miles away. The tension began to rise, and the crowd started to shift toward the finish line. A minute or so later a cloud of dust was spotted coming over the hill, and it was Rex. It was five minutes before another horse was ever seen, so Charles slowed Rex down to a slow walk when he crossed the finish line. The first thing Charles said was, 'I lost my hat back there somewhere.' But Tommy said he would buy him another hat. Ironically, on the way home that night they found Charles' hat. Now he had two hats: an old one and a new one. The prize money couldn't have come at a better time. Tommy bought a ranch in Ardmore, Oklahoma for $3,000 and still had a tidy sum left.

Now Tommy and his family set up residence, farming and

Photo above: Tommy displays his horsemanship.

selling wild horses. Tommy commented, "This land was never really made for farming, just grazing horses." But one day George V. Adams, or Vic as he was called, met Tommy and was in need of wild horses for a rodeo he was putting together back East. Tommy told Vic they could purchase horses from the Montana Indians cheap and finally an agreement was reached. For three to four dollars a head, Vic purchased 165 horses. Now they had the horses, so the only thing left to do was drive them to Iowa. Early one morning George, his wife Vivian, Tommy, and his two boys started out on the "would-be" adventurous trail drive. Vivian drove the buggy, the boys rode with the herd, and the men rode up ahead to scout the land. Tommy said, "It seemed the farther we went the more it rained. And after the rain, the mosquitoes got fierce, there were swarms of the damn things."
About mid-summer they came to the Missouri River at Chamberlain, South Dakota and spent the afternoon looking for a suitable place to cross. They found a ferry dock and a man that owned a flat bed ferry. His rates were a dollar a head for any kind of livestock. They tried to get him to give them a discount, since there were so many horses, but he wouldn’t knock off one cent. That was nearly half what some of the horses were worth, and they couldn’t afford it anyway. So now the only thing left to do was swim the horses across. About a mile and a half down the river was a break in the cliffs, so this was the assigned place to cross. Charles had to paddle a boat since he couldn’t swim, Walt and Tommy guided the herd from horseback. The horses were hesitant at first but when they heard the shouting and hollering, they ventured into and finally across the river. Vic had made plans to pay a dollar and have the buggy, the cooking utensils, and guns sent over on the ferry. The conductor and Vic sat alone on the flat boat as they made the trip across the river. Vic sat forlornly, and all this time the man kept trying to strike up a conversation. Finally he said, with a smirk on his face, “Too bad you had to leave the horses behind since you couldn’t raise the money.” But Vic obliterated the man’s smirking face with this comment, “You mean all my horses? Hell, they’re already over there. The rest of the outfit and the entire 165 head are waiting for me about a mile downstream. I just didn’t want to risk getting the guns wet so I spent a dollar.” Then Vic took off his hat and showed him all his teeth. Vic later told Tommy, “I could have knocked his eye balls out with a stick.” After passing and surviving this barrier, the trip into Iowa was fairly easy going. When they arrived in Iowa, these horses became the backbone of the first traveling rodeo in the United States, known as the George V. Adams Traveling Rodeo. Tommy worked in this rodeo and it was in this rodeo he acquired his famous trait of riding Roman style. This feat required standing up, balancing yourself on two horses, and riding them around the arena.

In 1948 Tommy moved back to the area and took up residence on a ranch which was known as Cowboy Corner. It was located between Memphis and Baring at the junction of Highway 15 and Route W, which leads to Rutledge. His purpose may have been to “retire,” but retire isn’t really the word for it. Once back in the area, Tommy acquired the name of Cowboy Thomas. His neighbors called him this as a result of his using horses to help them move and corral cattle. In his earlier years in the rodeo Cowboy was known as “Wild Horse Thomas.” While in his retirement years Tommy worked constantly with horses and raising cattle.

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A parade or rodeo didn’t seem as entertaining without Tommy leading the way. He now began traveling to the surrounding towns for this purpose. It has been said that the old seasoned cowboy could make the young greenhorn cowboys blush in their tracks. But Tommy wasn’t out for praise or position. Rather, he liked to take pride in his story-telling of the old days when he was young.

On April 6, 1981, for Tommy’s 95th birthday, he was once again seated on one of his horses. The amazing sentiment was that he was seated in one of his earlier bucking saddles, which had been restored in every detail. But the cowboy’s days were numbered. This old cowboy had led the kind of colorful life millions only dream of, or see in western movies. But on October 25, 1981, Estille Edward (Cowboy) Thomas was peacefully taken from this life and on to his reward. The funeral
Story by Bobby Poston

arrangement and procession were quite fitting for Tommy. Cowboy's body was delivered to and from the funeral home by a wagon drawn by two sorrel mules. This procession was escorted by many mounted riders, and a multitude of friends and associates of Tommy. Inside the funeral home, a pair of Tommy's old boots made up one of the many potted flower arrangements. His newly restored saddle sat idle at the foot of the casket. Several other western artifacts were present; and all contributed to a western setting.

Cowboy's daughter, Leona Drake, of rural Baring, commented that the death of her father..."marked the passing of an era." Truer words were never spoken. For several years until his death, Cowboy lived with Leona. During his life he was living history, but even now, after his death, this same history lives on. Hardly a story that is told among his friends fails to include,"...and remember the time Tommy and all of us...". With memories that burn this strong, whose memory could die? The seasoned figure of a cowboy, the West carved Tommy into this living legacy.

Residents of Lancaster mourn Cowboy Thomas as his funeral procession passes by. Inside the funeral home were articles from his western past, such as a saddle, cowboy boots, and a horse drawn wagon was used to carry his body.