

A VERY LIVELY “HERMIT”

A History of Charley Parke

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YOU’LL LIKE HIM. IF HE’D BEEN THROWN INTO A RIVER AT BIRTH HE’D HAVE PADDLED TO SHORE. HE HANDLES THE 20th CENTURY THE SAME WAY!

“I don’t pay electricity (never miss it since most of the places I have lived never had it), pay no water taxes and have been granted the right to stay on this place of deeded ground, Thirteen years ago I got tired of the government taking about half of what I made and decided since I was used to half of what I made and decided since I was used to half anyway, I’d try living that way, providing I hit on the right place. Feller said this place could be our home as long as we wanted to stay here.”

These words were spoken by seventy-nine-year-old Charley Parke who stands long and lean, has a full head of silver-gray hair, and a gentle way of talking. He still wears a bright kerchief tied around his neck, and his Levi’s, in the old-time way of a loose fit, ride low on the hips. His summer hat is worn with a jaunty air and is pulled from his head from time to time as he talks – a habit of long standing. When a question comes up and he doesn’t know the answer, he’ll tell you, “You’ll have to go upstream to find that out.”

Occasionally he puts a chew of “days Work” tobacco in his cheek while he visits with friends. No modern washing machine could wash his clothes any cleaner than this retired cowboy gets them; no modern conveniences could make a cleaner camp.

His home and that of his brothers Paul nestled side by side in the hills of the Salmon River on an oasis of wild bluegrass, cottonwood trees, and a spring that flows continually by Charley’s door. The closest town is Challis, Idaho.

Each brother has outfitted his one room home exactly as old-time sheep camps were – with a precise place for everything. Charley has banked his up with dirt to the windows on three sides to keep it warm in winter and cool in summer. Each brother has a large pile of split wood neatly stacked by his camp and when the weather permits, Charley cooks all his meals on a small black sheep camp stove out in the yard.

Their blacksmith shop is in the open by the fence with the necessary tools hanging on a large sagebrush. Charley remarked with a twinkle in his eye, “When it’s raining we ain’t blacksmithing anyway.” The corral enclosing a small pile of hay is made from cottonwood trees.

“Couldn’t bring ourselves to be without horses or a dog,” says Charley. “Spent too many years with them as our only companions. Besides riding him, I’ve taught my horse to pull my garden plow and drag in a little wood.”

An old blue car and a radio are the only concessions to modern days that can be seen at the Parks’ Camps.

Charles says, “I keep up on the world affairs with my battery radio (never turn the clock up or back – spring or fall), hear a little music, and when it rains, I lay on my bed and let the world take care of itself.”

Both Charley and Paul make their own bread. Charley says “We used to use sourdough; now days we just use yeast.” They don’t bother with butter, saying, “Never got in the habit of using it; never had it around camps.”

The Parks have their own bees since Paul captured a wild swarm. They each raise their own garden; mostly vegetables that can be put into the root cellars. These cellars are dug into the hill, with many feet of dirt on the roof. Inside, the temperature holds pretty even. They observe, “We’ve kept potatoes in here over a year; still firm and good.” Besides their own produce, both cellars are well

stocked with canned goods. So other than a few plugs of tobacco, a sack of flour, some salt and coffee, not many trips are made into Challis.

Just outside of Charley's door is a piped spring (his refrigerator). He muses, "If I go to hankering for a cold can of tomatoes or cold can of beer, I drop them into the spring here for a few hours.

When Charley saddles up his horse an observer's eye immediately goes to the beautifully braided rawhide reins. For many years Charley spent long winter nights alone in line and sheep camps and kept busy braiding hundreds of feet of rawhide rope, hackamores, halters and bridles. He also learned to make razor-sharp knives from old saw blades. He still uses some.

The Parks brothers were born at Conant, Idaho to Mary and Moan Parke. Charley was second oldest of eight. "Our three-room log cabin was located on Cassia Creek in Raft River country," he says. "at Conant there used to be a store, post office, and everything; now ain't nothing. My folks had a small ranch, just big enough to eke out a living. In those days people scratched a living any way they could. Our folks taught us to look out for one another, and me and my brothers never did have a fight. I never fought anyone, in my life anyway, except one kid at the Malta, Idaho school. We fought durn near every day; one day he'd whip me and the next day I'd whip him."

Charley left home when he was seventeen. He purchued cows that winter at the head of Raft River for a large cow outfit. "I guess I grew up knowing horses. That first winter away from home, I started breaking horsed and that's when I started my life's work. Not that I didn't so a lot of other jobs; from herding sheep for eight years to working on a dairy in Texas. Never barred no job; tried them all. I favored horse breaking better'n anything, but the sheep job kept me in grub.

"First big outfit I rode for was down in Nevada. They had over 30,000 cattle and lots of horses to break. One spring me and two other guys broke out over a hundred head of work - horses. When those were polished off we broke sixty head of saddle horses. Them days cow outfits didn't have to have gentle horses. Those boys could ride! They'd go ahead and finish the breaking job. Nowadays it's a different story. First thing one of these dudes does is run up and try to pet a horse on the nose. If there's anything a horse don't like, it's that.

"This outfit said they had a lot of spoilt and outlaw horses. I'd never seen a spoilt or outlaw horse so I thought I'd go around. I found out those horsed wasn't spoilt; just the way they'd been handled. They all turned out gentle.

"You read a lot about bucking out horses. In never did that. Always kept them from it. The way I found horses, there's a lot of difference in them, some are easy to handled. They all turned out gentle.

"I always found if you want to make a fool out of a horse you start out being a fool with him. You've got to get his confidence, get him so you can handle him, and keep advantage of that.

"One time on a new spread in the Big Hole they had a horse they called Ol'Mexico. He was a little stiff but looked like he'd chased many a cow, and I asked if I could have him in my string. Well this morning I went and caught him I noticed the seven irrigators still hanging around, the cook and her daughter standing out in front of the house - just seemed like a lot of people was around. "I hopped on Ol'Mex and he humped but I just talked to him and we rode off. Found out later four professed cowboys had bit the dust from him and the crowd was out to see the new kid from Idaho do the same.

"When I drifted down into Nevada I started working for the Utah Construction Company on Goose Creek. Closest I ever came to a killing was one time the Basque, a fellow, named George, let 2000 head of sheep graze pretty close to a forty-acre spread of a retired railroader. Had a nice place enclosed with high fence, nice home. When those sheep came within sight, the railroader jumped on his horse and tried to ride down and whip George off his horse. Will, George's horse was twice as fast as the railroader's and George was heading for camp.

“First I knew they were coming I heard horses pounding the dirt, and knew they were coming in fast. Just as George got close to camp he jumped from his horse while he was still running and disappeared into his tepee; he came out with his 30-30 and threw a shell into the chamber. Things were happening pretty fast and I dropped what I was doing and reached George just as he came even with the railroader and threw his gun to his shoulder. I knocked the gun sideways and told Him, George we don’t need a gun to take care of this feller.” When the railroader saw how close his temper had brought him, he turned whiter than my ma’s washing, and kneed his horse and rode off. Another feller was killed just before I started to work for that spread, name of Bates. But tempers generally never got out of hand.

“The Utah Construction Company was my boss for eight years. Summers I’d ride for cattle and break horses (cattle outfits had their own cooks), winters I’d go with the sheep down into Nevada desert country. Had my own tepee and made my own sourdough bread and cooked for myself.

“The only colored feller I ever Knew with the cow outfits was an old man around seventy-five or eighty who had came up from Texas with the old Sparks and Harold trail herd of 1,000 yearlings steers. Said he was seventeen at the time. Said the only horses in the country at that time was little blue roans and the buckskin with black stripes down the backs. The only corrals they used was the rope ones.

“He was the most polite man I ever knew. When he rode into camp at night after tending his and gear he’d always fill the water buckets and wood box. He would absolutely never walk in front of anyone.

“Those days there was always a job ready for horse breakers. You could just about name your price or take your choice of outfits to work for. Sometimes if the outfit I was working for didn’t do things to suit me I’d up and leave for awhile. But they’d all put me back to work soon as I’d show up again.

“Right about this time I got to figuring I’d rode hundreds of horses and why not try the rodeo circuits. So me and another kid hit the circuit for about three years. Tried it all – bucking, bull dogging, and tem roping. Mos Edmo and I hit it off one year, taking prizes at several different places. Course other years we’d have to quit and work awhile to make enough money to stay in the business.

I’ve just naturally been all over the West. Even drifted down into Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and up into California. Spent about three years breaking horses. And I even worked for a dairy once. Never barred nothing when it came to jobs.

“I tried mining one year down below Salmon, Idaho at the old Ulysses mine. A two-bit outfit was running it and was taking out and wouldn’t pay the help (about twenty of us including me and my brothers Eph and Paul). We brothers held a little conference and decided the only way to get our money was to hold up the truck hauling out the concentrates. Which we did. Those promoters saw the handwriting on the wall and told the sheriff to open up the bank at 11 p.m. We got our money. Only ones that did to. The rest of the gang stayed in there until spring and all they ever got was their room and board.

“Then one time the same two brothers and me decided to be land leasers. Leased the old Falconberry Ranch on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Packed and guided some and raised some hay”

“The last place I worked for was the Browning Rifle people down in Tremonton, Utah. They always respected their cowpokes at the Bar B.B. Nice spread, had horses to break 365 days a year. The tapaderas on my saddle and that Navajo blanket was Christmas gifts from them. Came from some trading post in New Mexico. I’ve worn out three sets of taps in my lifetime.”

“One winter day I had a hankering to ride out and do a little sightseeing. I noticed some car tracks heading toward the hills and for lack of a better place to head, I just dropped into the tracks and rode up on the darndest sight I’d ever seen. It was at Bovine Point, Utah and there in those fifty foot high sandstone bluffs in an old kind of a quarry was over 100-50 gallon barrels full of mash right out in

the open. The guys that had that still had a pretty good setup, what with the heat from the semi-round enclosure of rocks and the spray from the spring that cascaded over them. It must have made a good fermenting place. Found out later most of that moonshine was sold at Ogden.

“For the devilment of things I’ve been excited to see new country; I’ve roped buck deer and chased antelope; tried every horse anyone ever put my way. I’ve seen lots of different ranges and worked with all kinds of people. I’ve spent a lot of my life alone so I don’t get lonesome. Course, when people come by I palaver a lot with them.

“I kind of think the way time has moved along that old Visalia saddle I bought forty years ago, and this last set of taps, will likely see me through.”

The pictures are not good enough to scan and I have had to type the stories please excuse the mistakes.----- Jay ward