

"Gathering No Moss"

By: Cull A. White

P1

Seventeen-year old Charley Osborn and his older brother, Oscar in 1883, bought 150 cows from former Arkansas neighbors who settled in the Colfax-Palouse area in the mid-seventies. Cattle prices were weak and range too crowded, so the McCroskeys were pleased to find responsible purchasers who would pay 18% interest. As the Osbornes trailed to their Grand Coulee range, they felt that the primitive range would not suffer crowding for many years.

With slow demand, steers were hard to sell in small lots. Osborn traded "she stuff" for steers and by 1886 had enough to justify a long trail. Charley was to find a buyer. Big, rawboned sorrel Baldy was their best mount for tough trips, but required "snubbing" for the first half day as he had thrown some riders and caused them to walk many miles of desert to get home. Oscar an excellent snubber, kept Baldy from bucking until Charley felt safe in riding Alone to Ritzville.

In 1919, Oscar snubbed a green horse two days for the writer. As we camped at Wild Goose Bill's ferry, he told of endurance trips which Baldy had made. At Ritzville, Charley learned that Pasco was nearest possible market, though it was shaky. Pasco stockmen told of a Seattle buyer being at Prosser, but headed soon for Seattle. Ferrying the Columbia, Charley rode part of the night to reach Prosser, only to learn that the buyer had gone to Yakima.

By crowding Baldy to his limit, Charley reached Yakima in time to speak with the buyer as he was boarding the train for the coast. He offered a good price if the cattle could be delivered to Ellensburg five and a half days from that hour. Charley was afraid to tell him that would be impossible as it would take over three



days to get home. He always regretted not asking his buyer to advance enough cash to buy a fresh horse or two. Urgency of this delivery date rested on a ship which had to sail at a given date without the cattle if they were late.

Bashful Charley could find no one in Yakima, Ellensburg or Clockum Ferry who would trust him with a fresh horse. He knew that a winter such as the killer of 1881 would clean out their herd with no interest paid. Palmer Bros., popular livery and stage drivers of Ellensburg from early 80's until after War I, told me in 1913, they worried about turning Charley down, as they had plenty of fine horses, but no one knew anything about him and Ellensburg was since 1870 a mecca for horse thieves and gamblers.

Before reaching Colockum summit, Baldy had weakened to a point of stumbling as he was led. Usually travelling Indians had extra horses.

Often there were caravans of hundreds, but Charley failed meet any but small groups with sorefooted horses, worse than Baldy. Ferryman really regretted not having some kind of a mount and he gave Charley the name Al, a Moses Coulee horse rancher, who not only would let him rent a good horse, but might himself make a forced ride to advise Oscar to start riding at mouth of Grand Coulee along Columbia and heading cattle toward Steamboat Rock.

Encouraged by sight of Al on his powerful, fast thoroughbred starting for Grand Coulee with prospects of starting cattle drive at Coulee City and from Columbia a full 24 hours before Charley thought possible, so relaxed the latter that he yielded to Al's instructions to rest well before starting out. He was delighted to find that Al had impressed on banker Van Paul and McAttee, the



founder of Coulee City, the urgency of helping Osborns make this drive on time! So well was the gathering being done from Steamboat Rock to Coulee City, that Charley rode right on to meet Oscar, who with Al had engaged two Indian visitors to ride some of the more tedious canyons and hidden pockets, thereby saving several hours and gaining some steers which might not have been found.

While Oscar fixed up a pack outfit, Charley and Al kept pushing the steers toward Coulee City, arriving several hours before Dan Paul thought possible. Although prospects were improving, every possible gain must be made to save the deal. The Indian visitors gladly consented to make the trip to Ellensburg and as the cattle neared Al's ranch, Charley instructed the Indians to keep the cattle moving down the Coulee via moonlight, while Al, Charley and Oscar got some needed sleep and changed horses. Baldy had been well fed by Al's family and "made a good hand" for the rest of the trip.

The wind even stopped blowing while the cattle were ferried, thus saving a few hours. Since 1884, the Colockum Hill on both sides, has been one of the "meanest" for hasty driving. My first car trip over this was in July 23, 1963. My last trip was in May 1917, leading a packstring to Ellensburg to enlist for War I. Only changes were plenty of elk, a continental Oil Pipe Line and most modern high tension transmission lines. Deep nostalgia hit me and I longed for some of the Splawns, Taylors, Longmires, and Milt Burge to see this change with me and compare it with the wilderness where they patiently tried to keep me, a rank greenhorn, from myriad of mistakes such as noddieing up the horses and causing Bill Splawn and Stanley Coffin Sr. 12 hours of painful walking.



As Bill told Stanley: "These Easterners are alright, but they have little horse sense."

Oscar camped at the top of Colockum Summit. As time was getting short and Charley feared the train might leave ahead of schedule, he helped get the cattle down the most difficult places. Near the old stage station on the present Mark Smyth ranch, he left them and hurried to Ellensburg. The impatient buyer scowled and asked, "Where's them cattle?" With confidence he did not feel Charley answered, "They're out here a little way and you will see they are in good shape."

It was all he could do to keep the buyer from pulling out without the cattle, but they were finally loaded and Osbornes were paid. At a pioneer reunion, I heard Charley tell Parler Bros., "Whoever bought that meat, had tough chewing!" This good sale changed the status of Osborn Bros. from struggling homesteaders with limited credit and reputation, to men of substance and sound judgement.

A few months before Wild Goose Bill Condon fought his fatal duel, Charley bought his cattle brand. Due to Bill's reputation few cattle were stolen from him. At the home of this writer, Charley told Bill's popular and successful grandson Jack, that the actual tally exceeded the estimate for which Charley paid Bill. The latter left many sincere admirers in the Big Bend. They remembered his going to great trouble and expense from 1876 on, to drag in and break to milk, range cows for families with children. The town of Wilbur is justly proud of its founder, Bill.

For years the Osborns prospered and lived to see the Grand Coulee Dam built. Old Baldy never wanted for anything, the rest of his days.