

So the story goes, or the known part: big, big, flooding rains fell on the Spring Creek watershed one spring. The crests of the raging water ripped new netwire and uprooted fence posts set five feet deep in hard ground. Drowned sheep, cattle, goats, rattlesnakes, rabbits, and washed a sick horse downstream when he was too weak to swim.

The force of the current parted rails from bridge timbers, necessitating a special work train to repair the tracks. One ranch operation close by used mules and wagons to pull vehicles from mud holes to higher ground.

The atmosphere became clammy, saddle skirts turned green with mildew, beds never felt dry, the underground water turned brown, haggard unpapered aliens, weary and footsore, joined the flood victims, and yellow single-wing planes brought the foreboding sign that the green-shirted Border Patrolmen knew to strike.

So the story goes, a son or grandson of one of the ranchers affected rode a bay black mane and tailed horse to the west side of the flood waters too late to swim his horse to the east side. After unsaddling, he sought shelter in his grandfather's warehouse served by the rail siding of the Santa Fe.

It was known, or told later, that he took three lunch boxes off the small car the section crew rode but had abandoned before being rescued by the last train prior to

the rail and bridge washouts. We know he unrolled wool sacks to make a bed on the warehouse floor on loose hay.

Thus fed and dry in places, he laid back in his nest and stared in the last light of this stormy evening at the relics hanging and stored in the rafters of his grandfather's warehouse. Up overhead hung the old man's silver-horned Andrews saddle — the last one he owned.

He used saddles, the grandfather did. No matter the rigging was gone, the boy looked right up inside the lining where 50 or maybe a hundred horses fitted to carry his grandfather's weight.

Most likely, the rain shattered against the tin; probably lightning and thunder raged to the west, shaking the old warehouse. Yet the boy knew the exact position "the Man" of this big operation struck in his saddle, how he held his reins, how he fitted the stirrups to boot and spur, and how he tallied his counts, resting the tablet on the crook of his arm without dismounting.

He (the grandfather) sheared 20,000 or more sheep 20 years in a row at the corrals fronting the warehouse. He stored the wool there, waiting for the railroad boxcars to load the clips and ship them to Mertzon. In one fateful gamble, he freighted two years' crops to the Gulf Coast to ship direct to the mills in Boston for a beating on the world's wool market that shook ol' Granddad so much he leased a 30,000-acre sheep ranch on the Pecos to settle his nerves.

But back to the boy. His habit was to smoke before going to bed. He was pro-nicotine, opposed wet matches, and supported dry tobacco. Nor was it his habit to eat dry tortillas and beans with cold sugared coffee for supper from a railroad man's lunch box. Nevertheless, his cowboy instincts guided him to accept discomfort and to be grateful for the food and dry bed.

Now all this was omitted in the story he told. The part he cherished was the dream he had after going to sleep staring up at the old saddle as the wind died and a soft rain fell in the darkness.

And here's his verbatim account: "Uncle Tom rode a gray, long-backed horse. Grandfather rode a big 16-hand sorrel most of the dream. The bawling herd was held over on the flat west of the Switch. The two partners worked together cutting old and thin cows to move to better grass. Uncle Tom rode back and forth, bringing his cut so quietly the cows laid down along his path. At times, the sun reflected off the silver peso conchos on Granddad's saddle. The work went on and on. A little cowboy named Fritz worked between the bosses and the cut." (Short of breath, he paused here.)

"In one sequence, dinner was served from a chuckbox in the back of a wagon by a Mexican cook. Were lots of cowboys eating big pones of bread in plates full of beans. Was strange, but they kept rolling cigarettes and striking matches on their boot soles to exhale big clouds of smoke.

"Sometimes, they'd be changing horses and working a bigger herd. Other times, I'd wake up after trying to buy a sack of tobacco with a wet dollar bill."

Not much else goes with the story. The warehouse was moved off the tracks years ago. The cowboy lived, but his audiences died. Mesquites covered the big herd ground. And the land is no longer home to 20,000 head of sheep, nor will it be ever again.