

THE WINDY WEST

By Stan Hoig



IN THE HUMOR of every phase of our American frontier there has been tall-tale telling about the wonders of nature. Lusty frontiersmen were forever ready to brag that their part of the world had the biggest trees, the highest mountains, the hottest summers, the coldest winters, or the strongest winds of any. Such famous "liars" as Mike Fink of the Mississippi river-boat breed, Davy Crockett of the early Southwest, and Jim Bridger of the mountain men glorified their respective locales with imaginative yarns that tested the credulity of listeners.

The old-time American cowboy was not beyond a similar vanity for the Land of the Cow Critters, nor above telling a few lies to defend it. To him there was no place that could measure shoulder-high to the range country, and he was not the least bit bashful about saying so. If an outsider should comment on some scenic wonder in a place foreign to the cow country, the cowboy could be counted on to top it with a wonder of his own, actual or otherwise.

One Westerner who had listened to an Easterner expound upon the

majesty of Niagara Falls promptly denounced them as a mere "waterin' pot" and claimed that he could put up one that would "squirt it to a finish." Mostly, though, the cowboy stuck to subjects common to the range. One such was the amazing suddenness with which the weather could change on the open prairie. This is illustrated in the claim made by one cowhand that he always carried with him three necessary items of apparel: a linen duster, a rain slicker, and a buffalo overcoat. He never knew which he would be needing next.

A newcomer to the West, unaware of how the climate could change so abruptly, once made four harness tugs for his wagon out of green buffalo hide. The first time he used them he was caught in a sudden rain storm that filled his wagon so full of water that he was forced to get out and walk beside his team. But when he got to where he was going, he turned around to find that his wagon was nowhere in sight. The green rawhide had stretched in the rain, and the wagon was a full mile behind on the tugs. The greenhorn

started back to find his wagon, but just then the sun came out and dried the rawhide, which contracted so quickly that the wagon ran right over its owner and killed him.

"Last summer I 'uz ridin' along," said a cowboy, "thinkin' as how the weather must be hotter'n Satan in long-handles, when I hears a low moanin' behind me and turns about to see a blizzard sweepin' in. Right away I knows I got no time for admirin' the scenery, so I jabs steel an' heads for home. That ol' hoss musta known about blizzards too, 'cause 'fore I had time to chaw my terbaccer twice we 'uz there. But when I went to unsaddle the animal, danged if I didn't find that while its forequarters were plumb foamy with sweat, its hindquarters were frozen solid where the teeth of the blizzard had caught it!"

ANOTHER cowboy on a very hot day decided to go for a swim. When he shucked his clothes and dove from the edge of a cliff overlooking a small stream, a sudden drought dried up the stream. But he was in luck, for a flash-flood roared down the dry creek bed. The cowboy landed safely in the water, but by the time he came up for air a Norther had swept in and frozen the surface into solid ice. He surely would have drowned had not the sun made a quick appearance and evaporated the stream bed again. As it was, all the cowboy got out of it was a bad sunburn.

Just about any cowboy who had endured a winter in a line-shack was likely to have his version of how cold it could get on the plains. One told of the experience he had when the temperature dropped so low that the flame of his candle froze stiff, and he had to wait until the sun thawed the flame before he could put the candle out. Then when the sun did appear it became so hot that the corn he had for the stock began to pop. His horse thought the popcorn was snow and almost froze to death.

A couple of punchers were sent out to plant fence poles one winter day and found the ground littered with frozen rattlesnakes. Deciding to save the ranch some money, they drove the snakes into the ground for fence poles. They rode back to the ranch feeling proud of themselves but the next day they were fired. The snakes had thawed out and crawled off with several miles of good barbed wire.

"Cold!" exclaimed a cowboy. "Why it got so dern cold at our ranch one winter that the thermometer dropped to seventy-five degrees below zero. When our foreman went to give orders fer th' day, the words froze as they came outa his mouth. We had to break them off one by one and soak 'em in hot water before we could tell what he wanted us to do!"

Charlie Russell, the famous cowboy painter, liked to tell of the time when a friend left a poker game in

Great Falls, Montana, one winter night and froze to death on a street corner. A listener would view that weather-toughened face of Charlie's and comment how unfortunate that was.

"Oh, that wasn't so bad," Charlie would answer. "We hung a lantern on his ear and used 'im for a lamp post all winter."

Another Montana range yarn is of the traveling salesman who was caught in an autumn blizzard and forced to spend the night at a hotel which offered only the scantiest of bed covers. Even after piling everything he could find on his bed, the salesman still shivered in agony. Finally he heard sounds of life below and stumbled downstairs. There in the lobby was a stage driver who had been facing the storm for hours, but who was now stripped to his long-handles in an attempt to thaw out by the stove. The driver's breath had frozen to his mustache whiskers and icicles hung down from his chin. The salesman looked at him in amazement and exclaimed, "My God! What room did *you* have?"

IT WAS generally the wind that caused the most comment from any new arrival on the Southwestern plains. But the Easterner who asked, "Does the wind blow this way all the time?" was likely to gain the answer, "Hell, no. It blows the other way about half the time."

The great vastness of space in the West and the enormous distances

between points on the plains were often subjects of cowboy tall yarns. Cowboys liked to tell about the Englishman who arrived in the West fresh from his crowded island home. On a bright morning the pilgrim looked across the plains to where the mountains, standing clear in the sunlight, appeared to be only a couple of miles away. Actually, it was nearly thirty miles to them, but despite the warning from a couple of cowboys, the Englishman took off to hike the distance. That afternoon the punchers decided to ride out and see how he was progressing. When they caught up with him, about ten miles out, he was sitting beside a very small stream taking off his clothes. When they asked what he was doing, the Englishman announced that he was going to swim across the river. The cowboys told him that he was crazy to think about swimming a creek that was only a couple of feet wide and had only an inch or two of water in it.

"Hah!" said the Englishman. "I know I was fooled by those blarsted mountains, but I'll swim this river if it takes me all day."

Some of the new arrivals out West, though, found just a bit more elbow room than they really preferred. On the door of a deserted nester's shack this sign was found:

30 miles to water
20 miles to wood
10 inches to Hell
Gone back East
to wife's family

DOWN TO EARTH

BY ALAN DEVOE



"A BIRD is to me as wonderful as the stars," said the famous ornithologist Elliott Coues. In the making of a bird, every step was as with a single thought in mind: the thought of flight. Here was to be a creature of incarnate air, a "grace for the sky." Here were to be lightness, buoyance, arrowing strength, a sight to lift a man's spirit as if on wings itself. A bird does not have keen scent. It does not need that. But it has a third eyelid that can be drawn back and forth across its eyes as a "windshield wiper" as it rushes through the high sky.

A marsh hawk may seem clumsy on the ground. But when the male stages a show for his chosen female, he flies loop-the-loops, up and over, up and over, as if tireless and almost as if freed from the bonds of physical law. A bird has not much mind. But it has an instinct that tells a mother bird to turn her eggs, an impulse that warns an hour-old grouse chick

to crouch when a hawk passes, a seasonal inner urge that sends the migrant flocks winging north or south. That a bird is "bird-brained" is connected with its unique adaptation to its special kind of life. Such a life needs prodigious eyesight. A bird's eyes are so big that there is barely room in its skull for them. Many hawks and owls have eyeballs bigger than yours and mine. These immense eyes force a bird's brain to be a relatively insignificant organ squeezed to the rear of its skull. In many birds, the eyes weigh more than the brain. In some, *each* eye does.

The body of a bird is uniquely formed for lightness, supple strength, the life of the sky. To stoke its racing engine with fuel, a bird must eat at least half its own weight every day. As a bird draws in the breath of life, its body sometimes shakes and quivers almost as though it were inhaling draughts of air more deeply than just