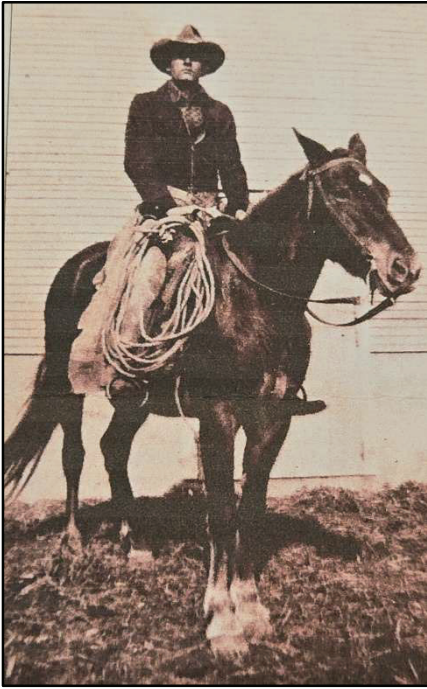




"Sharing the Legacy of a Transportation Empire"

Short Stories from the Trail: Dirty Thirties Trail Drive

By Warren Leroy Johnson as told to Mary Ann Johnson, Submitted by Todd Johnson



In the fall of 1929, my folks, Clark and Blanche Johnson, and six kids moved from Tiff City, Mo., to Lamar, Colorado. In the spring of 1930, we moved by teaming wagon to 40 miles southwest of Lamar and homesteaded 320 acres. It took five trips to get everything. We lived in a dugout at first. It was 6 miles to our mailbox, and the mail ran every other day. Dad once hitch-hiked about 75 miles to La Junta, Colo., to buy a saddle, and gave \$25 for it. On the way back, he met the mailman, who dropped the saddle off at our mailbox. But Dad walked the rest of the way home since the mailman couldn't carry any passengers.

These were Dust Bowl days, from 1930-1936. It was often so dark the chickens went to roost at noon. We stayed on the homestead until the spring of 1935, when Dad decided to move back to Missouri.

Dad had me trail-drive our horses and mules cross-country, because we didn't have any other way to move them. I would travel through the area hardest hit by several winds and brutal dust. I was 16 years old, had \$15 in my pocket, and rode the saddle Dad bought in La Junta.

The day I left, the wind was blowing dust so hard you couldn't see half-a-quarter-section in front of you. I had two horses, two mules, and was riding the only broke horse close to the Kansas state line. The first day, I made about 30 miles, to Two Buttes, Colo., a place of about a dozen people.

At noon the next day, I got to the state line, where I had to wait for a brand inspector before I could cross the state line into Kansas. The only thing there was a store in a sod shanty. I had left a stray black horse at home; because he wasn't branded, I was afraid the brand inspector would give me problems. When he finally arrived at the state line, the inspector didn't even go outside to check my horses. Boy, I wished I had brought the black the. Horses were real cheap out there.

My next stop was Ulysses, Kan., where Dad had bought some unbroke horses from Vete Bramburg. They were in a pasture south of Ulysses, and we gathered them, and brought them to the stockyards at Ulysses, where we waited for a guy Dad had sold mules to.

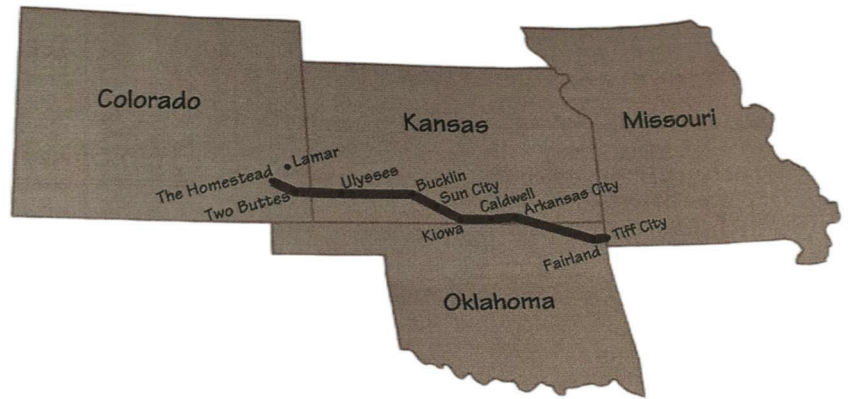
I had dust pneumonia and wasn't feeling very good. Vete said what I needed was a drink of whiskey, which would be bootleg whiskey from Colorado because Kansas was a dry state. As we left Ulysses going to our camp, 15 miles northwest, I was feeling better after a drink. I was riding a litte green-broke mare. I gigged her with my thumbs; she bucked the pint of valuable bootleg whiskey out of my coat, but it didn't break. Vete picked it up, and you can bet I didn't do that again.



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Short Stories from the Trail: Dirty Thirties Trail Drive (continued)

We slept in an old granary, but the other buildings had blown away long ago. I stayed at camp a day or two and rode a couple more of the horses and then left Ulysses with 22 head. Since none of the horses were shod, I had to switch mounts often to prevent lameness. This meant I had to break my mount as I went. After about a week in Kansas, I decided to ride this 4-year old black horse who belonged to my brother, Ivan. I saddled the black, and he bucked me off. He kicked himself in the ankle, peeled the hide off, and lamed himself; I had to get another mount for the day. Down the road 4 or 5 miles, I sold the black to a farmer for \$15. I had already spent the \$15 I started my trip with, so now I could buy another sack of Bull Durham.



I averaged about 20 miles a day, but didn't carry any feed along with me, so I grazed the horses along the way. Several times this made wheat farmers mad, because it was their wheat I was grazing. I would try to find a farmer who had a corral or small fenced pasture to let me stay all night. The farther east I came, the harder it was to find someone who would.

I finally rode out of the dust of Bucklin, Kansas. Then I got my first barbershop haircut at Sun City. At Kiowa, I decided to ride the little bucking mare again. I saddled her up and turned her loose. After she almost jumped a fence, she settled down, and I rode her about 100 miles before she went lame.

When I finally got to Caldwell, I was a little over halfway across Kansas, Dad had a friend there, so I hunted him up and stayed for 2 weeks. While the horses rested, I helped Dad's friend haul wheat and worked on the combine. I sent Mom and Dad a card, for the first time, to tell them where I was. Dad wrote back and said to get home; he needed the horses.

When I reached the Arkansas River, the low-water bridge, about 20 miles south of Arkansas City, was underwater. I had to go back to Arkansas City and cross another bridge right through town. Some men met me at the edge of town and said they had a herd law-I couldn't take the horses through town. I told them I was herding them through anyway; I didn't have time to wait for the water to go down. I held traffic up for quite a while, too, right in the middle of the day.

After Arkansas City, I made it real good, but I still had a bout 130 miles to go, as the crow flies. The weather was getting warmer all the time, but there was no dust blowing, and it was good to be getting closer to home. I went between Miami and Fairland, in northeast Oklahoma, and hit Council Hollow. One of my neighbors, Frank Records, waited for me to cross Bee Creek Bridge, east of Fairland. Frank was the only neighbor to actually witness me driving in these horses,. I got to Tiff City, Mo., at 5 p.m. that day. The horses and mules were sore-footed, they could hardly walk. It had taken 8 weeks to make the long and lonesome drive.