

CONRAD KOHRS — CATTLEMAN

HERBERT P. WHITE

(Continued from October)

Mining prospered at Virginia City and Con's butcher shop did a thriving business. Besides he had geared up with a partner, Ben Peel, as a wholesaler and supplied beef to other shops in various camps.

Highway robbery was a "business" that flourished around Virginia City and other Montana gold camps. Conrad Kohrs joined with other righteous folk to form the famous Montana Vigilantes, a counter-organization to the outlaw bands. Knowing the outlying country well, he acted as a guide on several expeditions and once when a party was going to Summit he took \$5,000 along with which to buy cattle. He borrowed the money from Nolan & Weare. They demanded 10 per cent interest per month and, high as the interest was, Con took the money, for he had protection against

highwaymen. Con's partner, Ben Peel, repaid Nolan & Weare the \$5,000 within a few days but learned, to his sorrow, that the 10 per cent had to be paid as the bank refused to make a loan for less than a month's interest charge.

The next spring cattle were scarce. Kohrs rode all the way to Fort Benton in six days—found no cattle—and then went back into the Bitter Root where he was able to buy a lot of fat steers and dry cows from the half-breeds in the St. Ignatius Mission area. He lost a man in fording his herd across the river opposite the present location of Missoula.

That herd helped make the summer of 1864 very prosperous for Kohrs. Lured by the age-old story of gold, thousands of immigrants swarmed into Virginia City. The next

winter new diggin's were discovered and there were several stampedes—Last Chance Gulch, where Helena is now located; the placer mines of Silver Bow Creek; the diggin's on Ophir Gulch.

Winter set in early. Late wagon trains from Salt Lake became snow-bound. Consequently, provisions ran low. It was a great inning for "black marketeers." Flour went to \$1.50 per pound, salt even higher, and tobacco commanded \$25 per pound.

"Con and Peel," the Kohrs-Peel partnership, realized it must keep its beef inventories up. So Con borrowed \$12,000 from George Forbes at five per cent per month. He bought up all the beef and many of the work cattle at an average of about \$85 per head.

Con and Peel sold beef at a nominal figure and its price was so moderate in comparison with other food items that Virginia City and other towns ate proportionately more meat that winter. It might have been a very prosperous era for the firm but their retail shops lost money because so many miners followed each developing stampede and left their debts behind them. The bankers chided Kohrs for the laxity of his credit-giving, but he dismissed the advice with the reply, "I've been broke and I've been hungry. I know what a bit of help means."

Partner Ben Peel fell in love with a girl whose family had decided to return East and Peel elected to go with them. Con Kohrs bought his interest for \$17,500.

The next years saw Kohrs' enterprise branch into the water business. He and his associates acquired water rights and built diversion dams and ditches around the hard, reluctant hills. By dint of sheer labor, courage and venturesome dollars, the enterprises marking the first use of this water in the Territory were successful.

While the original use of this water was made by the miners for sluicing purposes, it marked the beginnings of irrigation in the Treasure State.

In the summer of 1866 Con acquired the Johnny Grant ranch and 350 head of yearlings for \$19,000, paying \$5,000 down, the balance to become due in the spring. The mild fall gave way to a week-long snow storm that started about Christmas Day. In early January extremely cold weather set in. The thermometer often dropped below minus 40°. A chinook wind in late January started a heavy thaw but in a day or so the wind changed to the northwest, crusted the snow, and the severely low temperatures returned. In March many of the cattle died. Kohrs paid \$100 a ton for the little hay he could get. He kept some of his herds together by slaughtering the worst, cutting up the carcasses, boiling them with chopped hay and saving some of the cattle by feeding them this mess.

The Johnny Grant house still stands at the north edge of Deer Lodge and it is still "the big house" of the area. After Con acquired it he was host at many social gatherings there, many of them dances. At the first gatherings most of the feminine guests were half-breeds and Indian women, but late in that first summer of Con's ownership of "the big house" the tribes moved to the Red River Valley. After that white women, who were now coming into the Territory, assembled at the gatherings.

There was a memorable dance just before the fall elections. Invitations had been extended to everybody within "traveling distance" (about 20 miles). A couple of fiddlers provided the music. The women wore calico dresses. Those with babies deposited them in a room specially set aside. Boots and shoes were scarce articles and most of the men danced in Indian-made moccasins. Refreshments

were tea, coffee and sandwiches, although many of the men brought their own "chemicals" and cached them in the woodpile.

David L. Irvine, a candidate for the office of clerk and recorder, was a man who had never taken a drink. In his electioneering a prospective voter promised allegiance if Dave would take a drink. Others were quick to follow with the same offer. Before the evening was very old, temperate Dave was well in his cups.

Someone, it was probably Judge Wiles, tapped Con on the shoulder and declared, "Kohrs, the country is saved."

"How's that—what do you mean?" Con inquired.

"The girls have gone to dancing and the boys to drinking—it's a good sign!"

By this time Conrad Kohrs had attained definite stature in the developing picture of Montana Territory.

That year a cousin came out from Davenport and reported he had been disappointed in love. "Yes sir; I was turned down by as fine a girl as I ever knew!" he told Con Kohrs.

"You might recall her," he continued. "Her name's Augusta Kruse. Remember, she lived in Hamburg."

Yes sir, Con Kohrs remembered. He had thought about her many times; her dancing, intent eyes and the happy ripple of her laughter. She was lovely in pigtails; she was probably even lovelier now.

Con decided to spend Christmas with his mother in Davenport!

It was a long journey. He bumped over to Virginia City in his own through-brace wagon and four horses—then the stage to Salt Lake. The overland coach from California was full and he was forced to take a top seat but with the help of a lot of

buffalo robes he and the other passengers managed to keep warm in crossing the mountains. In four days he reached Cheyenne, then the western terminal of the Union Pacific. The train trip to Omaha required two and a half days. Two or three days later he reached Davenport. It was the first Christmas in a good many he had spent with his family and it proved an entirely enjoyable experience. He learned that Augusta Kruse was in Cincinnati, so in a few days he took leave of his mother and headed for Ohio.

Augusta Kruse of the dancing, intent eyes and who had a happy ripple in her laughter, had remembered, through the years, the tall, intent lad of 15 who had run away from his Wewelsfleth home. So, unlike the way she had put off Con Kohrs' cousin, she accepted Con's proposal. They were married in late February.

Kohrs engaged passage for himself and his bride on the Octavia which left Omaha in mid-April. The Missouri was low that year and the trip to Fort Benton was tedious and long. The Octavia continually got stuck on sand bars until it reached the mouth of the Yellowstone. There the provisions ran out and fare got down to a beans-and-bacon ration. On June 8 she docked at Fort Benton.

Then, in a surplus Civil War ambulance wagon which Con had obtained at St. Louis, Mrs. Kohrs drove with her husband to her Deer Lodge home, 180 drizzle-filled miles away. Many a time as the trudging teams sloshed along the deep-rutted trail she must have felt she was a long way from Cincinnati indeed; all her life had been lived in cities. But like most of the frontierswomen to whom we of the West owe so much, Mrs. Kohrs attacked the problems of her new life with vigor.

(To be concluded in December)