

# CONRAD KOHRS—CATTLEMAN

Herbert P. White

*(Continued from November)*

Problems at "the big house" came thick and fast. The old home-made beds, with strings of rawhide stretched across for springs, and a straw tick for a mattress, Mrs. Kohrs discovered, harbored bed bugs. Right then and there a war of extermination began—attacks of kerosene and boiling water. It continued all that summer and into the next year and after that, unless some chance traveler left some of the pests, there were never any more bed bugs.

Mrs. Kohrs had the old-fashioned pride in taking care of her own household; she had a horror of having her mother know she had a man cook, so Con had to discharge the cook and Augusta Kruse Kohrs did all the work of "the big house" herself.

When the first baby was born there was no woman to help in the country, so Doc Crippen and Con had to attend her. Unfortunately the doctor neglected her and she suffered for months.

"The big house," under the direction of Mrs. Kohrs, harbored many of the great names of the time. It was a bit of civilization in an otherwise expansive raw land. In later years the folks who sat at the table might run from 18 to as many as 40.

In the early years the ranch hands ate at "the big house" and one night after the evening meal, Mrs. Kohrs asked the men to remain.

"My baby will presently learn to talk," she told them. "I want you all to help me see that the first words she learns are not cursing words. Down at the corrals and around the ranch the way you talk is your own business, but around this house your language is my business. I ask you to remember that."

The boys knew from her determined tone she meant just what she said and, while their expletives might rend the air away from "the big house," there, at least, their talk was moderate indeed.

The Kohrs herds had grown so extensively they required more and more of Con's attention. Quality became more and more a consideration as the state settled up and the competition grew more strenuous. Con was among the very first to bring Herefords to the state. He raised the bulls at the Dog Creek Ranch near Deer Lodge and they were then shipped to the range for breeding purposes. From that time—1880—the Herefords took first place in Kohrs' operations.

Tom Hooban, who had worked for the CK outfit, Con's main brand, for a long time, advised Con to put a thousand cattle in the Sun River country, as they were too numerous to winter in the Deer Lodge valley without feeding. It was the finest and largest herd in Montana.

His first sortie into politics occurred about that time. He was elected

county commissioner and discharged his duties nicely.

Taking no chances when the second child was expected, Con sent over to Helena for Doc Click. It cost him \$1,000 but Mrs. Kohrs had good care and the second baby—also a girl—got a good start, so Con was pleased to pay the bill, high though it was.

Con went into mining to some extent, but all in all he never prospered greatly in that industry. He did make a stake in the Cable mine, near Anaconda. It was a gold-quartz property and from it he obtained certain funds that gave him a better start in his cattle enterprise. His success as a cattleman had gained wide attention and, as is the cost in the free enterprise scheme of things, competitors moved in on him. A herd drove in from Texas and settled in the Sun River country. Hall and Martin, big operators, located another large bunch on the Big Hole—these in addition to the big drives from Missouri and the additional cattle which were being produced in the Territory.

By this time the cream of the placer mining was past and many of the miners followed the stampede to White Pine and other districts in Nevada. Thus there was less local demand for beef and there was an outward flow to the CK fortunes.

Mr. and Mrs. Kohrs took time off that winter to return to Hamburg. In Denver Con made arrangements with Colonel Roberts, an old acquaintance, to buy cattle in Texas the following spring, and trail them to Montana.

After a stormy passage, on the return voyage, the Kohrs family returned to Davenport where Kohrs bought his first herd of Shorthorn cattle from a Mr. Paddleford who lived on the Illinois side of the river.

Meanwhile Colonel Roberts was trailing northward the herd of 2,500

head of Texas cattle he had bought for Kohrs. Tom Hooban had moved into a new Kohrs ranch on the west side of the Snake River, some distance above American Falls, out in the Idaho country. The bottom land was named Hooban Bottom. It was a great place for hay and Hooban put up a lot of it that summer. This was to be the terminal point for the Texas drive. Roberts, however, had trouble and delays. It was a dry season and he left about half the herd to winter near Fort Steele on the North Platte.

Determined to get the balance to Hooban Bottom and its nourishing hay, Colonel Roberts ran into severe storms and lost many of the cattle and quite a few horses, but late in November landed with the balance at Ross Fork. The slush ice had all begun running and it took several days to cross. The cattle milled wildly about in the chilly water and further numbers were drowned or froze to death afterward. The remnants of the herd were gaunt and lean when they reached Hooban Bottom. The winter was severe and even with all the hay that had been provided the cattle did not do well. And, singularly enough, the winter on the North Platte was mild. The herd which had been left there wintered well and without loss!

The upturning economic cycle was running out its course that year. The best of the mines were being worked out and it was the last year of several in which Con Kohrs sold beef at profitable prices. Lack of demand and oversupply combined to lower prices of the beef and cattle. Fine big steers from the Sun River herd went at \$25.00 a head. The Colonel Roberts end of the business was liquidated, the steers on the North Platte going at \$10 a head. The stuff on the Snake, not being salable, was carried over the summer grazing season.

By this time Montana could not absorb all the Kohrs cattle. Feeling

that the fall drive from Montana to the rail head at Cheyenne was too far for a season's drive, Kohrs decided to gather his Montana cattle and drive to the Snake to winter. He had a lot of steers in the Bitter Root and the Deer Lodge areas and he started out with them rather late in the fall. Storms made the going so difficult it was almost impossible to get the wagons through. Many times four-horse teams had to be aided by all the cow horses pulling with ropes hitched around the saddle horns.

Within a few days from the Hooban Bottoms they got the herd into a fine bottom with plenty of grass. The cattle became quiet and were doing so well the boys went to supper without guarding the herd. Con came up the back trail and surveyed the peaceful scene below him. Then his eyes caught the quick flash of a brown object coming out of the wilows. It was a bear!

The cattle became terrified, stampeded. Every horse tore loose and the whole outfit was left afoot.

The cattle scattered to the four winds. Only remnants of the herd were finally put into the Hooban Bottoms. For a long time after that the CK brand showed up in roundups in that area.

Cattle continued cheap. Kohrs cleaned out the production in the Bitter Root at ten dollars a head for four-year-old steers. For those in the Deer Lodge valley he paid twenty dollars. He had another twenty-three hundred head that had been wintered at Father Van Corp's St. Ignatius Mission. To these he added a herd from Sun River and started out for Cheyenne over the Cherokee trail. One of the drives was a waterless stretch of 35 miles, but he got the herd aboard cars without great loss and sent them to Joe Rosenbaum at Chicago.

As Montana settled with homesteaders, Kohrs was forced to extend

his operations over a wider area. In 1877 he purchased cattle in the Bitter Root, and throwing them with his herd from Sun River, he wintered on the North Platte. In the spring he drove them into North Park in the western part of Colorado in whose lush high-mountain meadows no other cattle ranged except those bearing the CK brand. Antelope by the thousands grazed in the area. By fall the cattle were fat and were driven to Laramie. Being unable to get cars, Con drove them toward Pine Bluff where there was plenty of feed and water.

Take a look on a map sometime and see what a drive this was. Kohrs considered it just a part of the season's work. As is usually the case, the hard work paid off. Kohrs got \$48 per head at Pine Bluff. His expenses had not mounted much past \$4,000, so much of the return was clear profit. Quite in contrast to today's operators, the profit all belonged to Conrad Kohrs; he had no income tax to pay.

That fall Con got word that his third child, a boy, was born. The youngster was named William.

The years went on. Besides his "steer" operations Kohrs branded 4,900 calves in his Sun Valley herd which had increased wonderfully in quantity and in quality. However, blackleg broke out and he lost a majority of the calves.

Kohrs' operations extended also to the eastern part of the state where he acquired large tracts of land for, as others took up the open range, Kohrs was forced to change his pace from free-grass to owned-grass.

As time went on his deals grew larger. He bought out the firm of Davis, Hauser & Stuart for \$400,000 for the cattle, horses and ranches, with the cattle being marked in at \$32 per head. And that was only one of his purchases.

The golden spike was driven at Gold Creek, just beyond Deer Lodge,

linking Montana by rail with the east and west coasts. In 1885 Con was elected to the Territorial Legislature—the so-called Cow Boy Legislature. He and Theodore Roosevelt, who represented the cattlemen of the Little Missouri, were members of the executive committee of the Montana Stock-growers Association, whose meetings were also held at Helena that winter. He was a member of the Constitutional Convention of 1889. The convention consisted of a fine body of men who were influential in drafting laws safeguarding the rights of all classes. Later he served several terms in the state legislature.

Cattle and horse rustling had grown to such proportions that some proposed the formation of vigilance committees. Roosevelt spoke out positively against the proposal, declaring the action to be contrary to the privilege of such an association.

However, the next winter eastern Montana cattlemen who had suffered grievously banded together, descended on thieves at Mouse River in North Dakota, identified their property, and hanged the men. And that wasn't the only time the Montana Vigilantes struck at cattle thieves.

It was natural that Con Kohrs should attend the cattle convention in St. Louis the following fall. The western and southern men wanted concessions from the government. The southerners wanted the Texas Trail to be left very wide so they could have plenty of grass to graze their cattle and drive north. They wanted the trail to remain open for twenty years, appreciating that barb wire and men with plows would by then overrun the trail. The westerners wanted a lease of all the grazing country from Colorado and Wyoming north to Canada.

While he was in the east Kohrs got word of his mother's serious illness and he was with her at her passing.

His own health was not good. Doctors diagnosed his illness at tuberculosis. His illness slowed him down. He spent most of the next summer at home but made a trip to Fort MacGinnis to look over the range situation. He offered his eastern Montana herd to eastern capitalists. The price was one million dollars. The ranch had about 35,000 head of cattle—23,000 branded DHS, of which Con and Bielenberg, Con's half brother, owned one-third; and about 12,000 CK cattle. That was a dry year on the eastern Montana range and because of the dryness the deal was not consummated. Arrangements were made for winter grazing in Canada. The fall season set in with indications the winter would be long and difficult. A top mantle of snow covered the Montana land and all the roads became blocked.

Con planned to take his family south for the balance of the winter, but instead he went to New York to a Doctor Curtis who had been recommended to him by a Canadian who seemed to suffer the affliction that had befallen Con Kohrs. Con was certain nothing had ever been wrong with his lungs. He felt the difficulty was all in his nose and throat and he was pleased indeed when Doctor Curtis assured him his lungs were all right. The doctor removed some polypi from his nose in a series of minor operations and Con's recovery from then was rapid.

In Chicago, on his return home, he met a Mr. Broadwater who had brought cattle into Montana in the fall. Broadwater told him that the cattle losses throughout Montana had been heavy.

"Broad," Con told him, "I have my health again; that is worth more than all the cattle."

Con's associates in Montana, not wanting to heap further worry on a sick man, did not inform Con of the winter's severity. But the spring

roundup showed the situation graphically. The branding dropped from 8,000 calves to a mere 900!

More than that, his usual sources of credit dried up. Hearing of his difficulties, A. J. Davis, Sr., of Butte's First National Bank, sent word to Con. When Con paid his visit Davis said to him, "Kohrs, I've watched you over the years. You're honest and you know the cattle business. What more can a banker ask? . . . Draw on me up to a quarter million dollars."

The confidence of such a friend added greatly to Kohrs' courage but conditions that year did not seem auspicious. He did not draw on any of the Davis line of credit. However, the next year, he decided to build back his herds. His drafts started coming into the Butte bank and Davis is said to have looked them over with the pleased comment, "Well, I guess Con's getting back into business again!" Kohrs, together with Bielenberg and the Pioneer Cattle Company, in which Con had an interest, bought 9,000 head of cattle that year.

The next year was one of good grass in Montana but the corn belt suffered a serious drought. Result: cattle prices tumbled. Kohrs and Bielenberg and the Pioneer Company shipped only enough that fall to cover expenses and interest.

Spring came early on the Montana range in 1891. In May the grass was six to seven inches high and the cattle were fat. Beef was scarce. Even in the Butte and Helena markets the firm sold a train load with cows at \$45 and steers at \$65 per head, without a cut.

By this time young Bill Kohrs was big enough to accompany his father on cattle trips but in loading some stuff that summer of 1891 the youngster was thrown from his horse and broke a leg.

The fall market price was even better than the spring's. The first fall

train averaged 1,585 pounds and brought \$5.25. The steers, of course, were four and five years old. That fall the Davis loan was repaid and there was plenty of profit left over.

The last decade of the century saw Kohrs occupied with even more extensive operations—buying up herds in the Idaho, Washington and Oregon areas; trailing in from Texas; operating in eastern Montana as well as the Deer Lodge area and in Idaho. In 1899 the Kohrs family spent the winter at Helena and continued to live there most of the time from then on. That year Kohrs acquired a large ranch in Dawson county and stocked it with Texas cattle which were unloaded at Billings and then trailed in.

Conrad Kohrs had battled and suffered, had his ups and downs, his good and his ill fortunes. Once he told John Clay, founder of the live stock commission firm that still bears his name, "I guess I've been broke more times than any other man in Montana!"

However, by dint of hard work, courage and credit, he always came back and as the string of his years began to play out it became his happy hope—as it is of all fathers—that his son would carry on his enterprises. Imagine then the hurt to his soul that bright spring day of 1901 when a telegram came notifying him of Bill's serious illness. The young man was in his second year at Cornell. Before Con and Mrs. Kohrs could get started on the journey to their boy, news came of his death. It was the hardest loss Con had ever been called on to bear.

Young Bill Kohrs would miss the tall, green grass, the far-flung hills and the silver-running rivers of Montana in springtime. Yet, as Con probably mused, Bill must have been called to ride a happier and prettier range.

They say we live for our children

after we're forty and Con Kohrs' years were much beyond that in 1901. Bill's death seemed to sweep from Montana's Mr. Cattleman much of the purpose of life.

The man with the plow had ripped up whole sections of sod. Barb wire was more than ever fencing in the colorful adventurous spirits that had attacked the battlements of the frontier.

The years to 1915 were years of liquidation in the career of Conrad Kohrs. He got rid of his ranches; sold out his mining and water properties, and shipped his cattle. He continued to live at Helena, saw the young men march away to war in 1917. He lived to see the war's end and joined in the ultimately futile hope that the world had witnessed its last war. In the twilight of his time he could take comfort that the west had grown more peaceful—had become a better place in which to live. And he, as Montana's Mr. Cattleman, had aided in bringing about that security.

He died in 1920.

#### Epilogue

Conrad Kohrs had one grandson. This youngster was born to Katherine Christine Kohrs, younger daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Conrad Kohrs, and Dr. Otes Yancy Warren, a noted alienist. Dr. Warren died when his son was a small lad, but young Con got some of the story of his grandfather and his "feel" for cattle from the old gentleman himself. The Kohrs' land holdings were then reduced to less than a thousand acres near Deer Lodge, the good meadow land that surrounded The Big House.

Young Con entered the University of Virginia. It was the family's hope he'd follow in his father's steps in medicine. But back there in the east, in his second year of college, young Con got to thinking of Montana in

the springtime, and he decided that medicine was not for him.

Back to Montana he went. He made a deal to acquire the old Kohrs ranch that had been started by Johnny Grant and established himself in the cattle business. He assembled a good quality commercial outfit and found ready sale for the bulls he could raise, but he had not gotten far into the business when Montana wisely decided that only registered bulls could run on its ranges.

Young Con went into the registered business. The first sire he obtained was Prince Blanchard 5th, by Painter's Domino 482nd. In more recent years he obtained Proud Star by WHR Proud Princeps 9th, \$6,000 sale-topper at Walton Thorp's (Britton, S. Dak) 1946 sale. He paid \$15,000 for Sun Stan Domino 1st at Sunland Hereford Ranch, Sanger, Calif., and with an ever-constant eye for the good ones he had to pay \$36,000 at the Thornton dispersion in Gunnison for National Western Champion TT Triumphant.

In 1948 young Con decided that with nearly \$60,000 invested in herd sires—"It's about time I started paying some of my creditors." So he held a sale that fall and lots of his good cows that carried the services of the fine bulls he had bought clear across the country left his ranch.

There was a bit of drama to the sale that may have escaped those who did not know the story of Conrad Kohrs.

Auctioneer H. B. Sager called the crowd to attention. He introduced young Con—Conrad Kohrs Warren—and his attractive wife, who was a Montana-born girl. But Con Warren wouldn't come into the ring until he

got hold of the halter of Prince Blanchard 5th.

"The Prince" was then 15 years old. He had founded the entire female herd of Warren Herefords. Even in his advanced years his greatness was plainly discernible. Con rubbed his neck and "The Prince" liked it and you could tell there was a bond of affection between the two.

"This old fellow has played a major part in what Warren Herefords have to offer you today," Con told the crowd.

You could see young Con swallow hard and his voice broke a trifle. It was a question whether he could continue his speech but he struggled on.

"He's going to no packing house to end his career. He'll stay right on here just as long as the Good Lord will let him."

Con's mother, Katherine Kohrs Bogart, was in the crowd and she smiled approvingly. Who can say that there was not another smile by Montana's Mr. Cattleman—Conrad Kohrs—whose spirit must still hover over the Deer Lodge Valley and the hundred other splendid areas that are Montana's cattle country.

If you listened closely that day—if you had known the story of Conrad Kohrs—you could almost hear the Old Cattleman say proudly to his grandson, "It's all right, Con. There's got to be a place for sentiment in life. There's got to be a bond of affection between a man and his cattle or he won't ever be great in the cattle business."

*The foregoing article on Conrad Kohrs is in part based on an article by Mr. White which appeared in Western Livestock (Denver, Colorado) in 1949.*