

## HORSETHIEF CANYON: LANDMARK ON THE CIMARRON RIVER

*By LeRoy H. Fischer and Thomas D. Isern\**

In the northeastern corner of Logan County, Oklahoma, midway between the towns of Perkins and Coyle, lofty, forested bluffs of red shale and clay loom above the southern bank of the Cimarron River. The heights afford extensive vistas of patchworks of fields and pastures to the north, east and west. Below, a raised embankment, the remains of a railway with tracks removed, threads its way between the edge of the river and the base of the escarpment.

At one point where tributary waters have cut a broad, V-shaped opening through the bluffs, a deep canyon extends for 400 feet to the south and east. The canyon narrows as the distance from the river increases, while its walls, covered with cedars and with white, black and chinkapin oaks, become steeper. The upper extremity is a natural amphitheater: three distinct crescents of russet shale are stacked one above another, each a partial circle encompassing the end of the canyon at its own level. The uppermost shelf forms an arc of 200 feet; it overhangs the lower outcroppings and the floor of the canyon fifty feet below. Water has undercut each shelf and created caves in which a person can stand. From the midpoint of the top shelf falls a trickle of water that originates in a seeping spring forty feet away. Precariously perched cedars threaten to follow the water over the edge.

Since the earliest settlement of the region, this landmark has been known as Horsethief Canyon. Such a spot invariably becomes the focus of much local folklore. The story of Horsethief Canyon illustrates how popular legend and historical fact may intertwine.

Horsethief Canyon lay on the northern edge of the Iowa Indian Reservation, established in 1883, but the area north of the river was part of the Unassigned Lands. Prior to the coming of the homesteaders, line camps for cowboys attending nearby herds dotted the valley. Settlers quickly filled the prairie north of the river after the opening of the Unassigned Lands in 1889. The Iowa Reservation was opened by a land run in 1891. In 1900, the Eastern Oklahoma Branch of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway built along the Cimarron River past the mouth of Horsethief Canyon. This sparked the founding of the village of Goodnight about a mile east of the canyon. Goodnight once possessed several businesses, a

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Almond T. Greene, a former freighter who cut cedar lumber in Horsethief Canyon, is seated on the bottom shelf of the canyon in this photograph taken in about 1900

depot, a post office and a school, but the only present remnant of the town is the shell of its schoolhouse.

Early settlers from north of the river who visited Horsethief Canyon found a dugout on the western wall and a rail fence across the canyon's entrance, together with feed boxes of split logs. This gave rise to speculation that the place was a haven for horsethieves, but the facts were unclear. There was no evidence that notorious desperadoes such as the Doolins used the canyon. Tales of outlaws there related by Frank "Pistol Pete" Eaton of Perkins were vague as to the persons involved. Probably the dugout belonged to line-riding cowboys. After the settlement of the area some line riders remained as drifters of uncertain means of support called "long



Almond T. Greene halts his buggy on the north bank of the Cimarron River just downstream from Horsethief Canyon—to the right is the eastern end of the escarpment through which the canyon cuts

riders." Some of these suspicious long riders may have frequented the canyon. Apparently vagrants often camped there, and no doubt some of them were horsethieves. However, the place was by no means a hideout, for not only was it too well known for security, but also the surrounding terrain and vegetation made it more of a trap than a bastion.<sup>1</sup>

Tales of outlaws persisted, reaching a peak in a yarn that originated with a former railway station agent at Goodnight. According to this account, on a snowy morning in 1905, a stranger wearing dark glasses and a beard got off the train in Goodnight and inquired about the way to Horsethief Canyon. He proceeded there alone carrying a canvas bag; he returned in the evening to board another train. A few days later the railway agent went to the canyon, where he found recent excavations and empty cans. Three

<sup>1</sup> Interview, Leonard Parks, June 23, 1976 (Parks provided the photographs of Almond T. Greene); Interview, Ethel (Eaton) Case, January 3, 1977; Fleet Mercer, "Horse Thief Canyon," *Guthrie Leader* (Guthrie), April 16, 1939 (Golden Anniversary Souvenir Edition).

oak trees surrounding the holes showed scars where they had been blazed years earlier. The stranger, so the story said, was Emmett Dalton, who was returning to recover riches buried prior to the Dalton gang's disastrous raid on Coffeyville, Kansas, in 1892. Unfortunately for a good tale, Emmett Dalton was not released from the Kansas State Penitentiary in Lansing until 1907.<sup>2</sup>

An equally lurid part of the folklore of Horsethief Canyon was Goodnight's chapter of the Anti-Horse Thief Association. This organization originated in Missouri and spread into Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory during the 1890s. Its purpose was to conduct independent investigations of thefts from its members, who wore an identifying pin marked "AHTA." Most of the men in the area attended the association's biweekly meetings in the schoolhouse at Goodnight. Although seldom effective against criminals, the organization flourished as a fraternal society. However, some oldtimers insisted that the Anti-Horse Thief Association met in Horsethief Canyon. Accused thieves, it was said, received midnight trials from horseback juries, then were hanged from a great oak. Names and dates of such incidents never surfaced.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the legends surrounding it, Horsethief Canyon also had a real role in the lives of early homesteaders in the area. The canyon's walls and the adjacent bluffs were a source of cedar timber for buildings and fence posts. Cedar was scarce north of the Cimarron River, so settlers crossed the stream and cut timber illegally on the Iowa Reservation. Almond T. Greene, a freighter who formerly had hauled supplies to line camps in the Cherokee Outlet, built a one-and-one-half-story home of cedar on his claim near the river. He also sold cedar posts in Arkansas City for ten dollars per hundred. Such poaching was no matter of conscience, for Greene was a religious man who often set up the tents for revival meetings. E. T. Edmunson of Coyle cut cedar from the canyon for sale and for personal use as late as the 1920s.<sup>4</sup>

Horsethief Canyon also was a popular place for recreation. Numerous children of local pioneers came there to play during the 1890s and 1900s; after crossing the river, they often dried their clothes before a fire built beneath a hole which formed a natural chimney in the canyon's second

<sup>2</sup> Harland Wells, "Horsethief Canyon Holds Exciting Memories," *Stillwater Star* (Stillwater), January 28, 1960; Harold Preece, *The Dalton Gang: End of an Outlaw Era* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1963), p. 281.

<sup>3</sup> Kent Ruth, "AntiHorse Thief Group's Pioneer Members Sought," *Sunday Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City), December 30, 1973; Interview, Leonard Parks; Interview, E. T. Edmunson, May 20, 1976; Robert Cunningham, "The Bad Nights at Goodnight Recalled," *Guthrie Daily Leader* (Guthrie), April 15, 1973.

<sup>4</sup> Interview, Parks; Interview, Edmunson.

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shelf. Sometimes entire families, such as that of former Texas Ranger Charles B. Cruse, came there for picnics or for overnight campouts.<sup>6</sup>

In 1907, residents of the area began a custom of holding an annual gathering at the canyon on Easter Sunday. The first such affair apparently was organized by the Anti-Horse Thief Association. Roy Hays, president of the association, was the day's master of ceremonies, while Major Gordon W. Lillie, "Pawnee Bill," gave the featured address. Present were Frank Eaton, Rolla Goodnight, Zach Mulhall and other nearby celebrities, as well as a crowd of several hundred. By the 1920s such gatherings had ceased, but a new organization, the Old Settlers' Association of Payne and Adjoining Counties, brought new social life to the canyon. Founded in 1922 and succeeded in 1927 by the Old Settlers' Sons-Daughters Association of Oklahoma, this organization for many years held an annual encampment or pageant on the farm of Bert Frame, adjacent to Horsethief Canyon. The ceremonies featured excursions to the canyon.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps it was young people, not old settlers, for whom Horsethief Canyon held the greatest fascination. The Old Settlers' Sons-Daughters Association of Oklahoma invited troops of Boy Scouts to their encampments; in 1931, an honor guard of old settlers conducted scouts to the canyon by stage-coach. In succeeding decades the canyon was the scene of numerous campouts by Boy Scouts, who came with the permission of the owners of the property. Students from Oklahoma State University long esteemed the place for picnicing. In 1974, however, a tragic incident brought about the restriction of public access to the property. On an unseasonably warm day in November, six students from Oklahoma State University were playing "Frisbee" near the canyon rim. Gary John Smith of Denver, Colorado, running too close to the edge, slipped and fell to his death on the floor of the canyon.<sup>7</sup>

Despite this tragedy, through the years many people benefited from visits to Horsethief Canyon: to travelers it provided shelter; to homesteaders it supplied lumber; to children and adults alike it offered relaxation in an idyllic setting; most of all, to story-tellers it imparted a focal point for historical anecdote and fictional embroidery. The folklore associated with this

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<sup>6</sup> Interview, Parks; Interview, Paul Cruse, May 15, 1976; Robert Cunningham, "Happy Cimarron River Memories Still Echoing," *Stillwater News-Press* (Stillwater), May 29, 1972.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, Ward Hays, January 4, 1977; Robert Cunningham, "Ward Didn't Have 'Pipe' Dream at Goodnight," *Guthrie Daily Leader*, April 15, 1973; Mary Amorette Kelso Buffington, *That We May Not Forget* (Stillwater: Mary Amorette Kelso Buffington, 1972), pp. 58-60; *Tulsa Daily World* (Tulsa), May 27, 1928; Interview, Sybil Wall, April 10, 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Undated newspaper clipping in possession of Sybil Wall; *Stillwater News-Press*, November 24, 1974; *Daily O'Collegian* (Stillwater), November 23, 1974.

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Visitors on the lower shelf of Horsethief Canyon about 1905

memorable landmark is factually unreliable; nevertheless, it is as much a part of the tradition of the locale as are the truths of history.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Present owner of the property embracing Horsethief Canyon is Ben Holder of rural Perkins. The property is not open to the public.