

Lewllon Blank

Born at La Porte Indiana, May 27, 1864, of German-Irish parents, he moved with his family when he was three years old to Cedar Rapids Iowa; spending his boyhood days and attending school in various parts of the state. During these days he made the acquaintance of "Old Bement", a buffalo hunter, who fired the young boy's imagination with wonderful tales of the plains. The buffalo hunter displayed an old tally book and skinning knife, the blade almost worn away, and swore that he had tallied a total kill of 6,000 buffalos.

The summer of '78 found young Blank at Fort Leavenworth Kansas; he was then 14. Upon learning that the "Little Mule" wagon train had completed their preparations and ^{its} was about to depart for the Black Hills, the boy asked the leader to be taken along, but was refused.

The third day out, a member of the wagon train discovered a "stowaway". It was young Blank. Determined to go with the outfit, he hid himself in a wagon amidst some freight and tents; leaving his place of hiding only at night. He was well prepared with food and water, but he became very tired and cramped. Unable to endure it any longer he ventured forth and so was discovered. Having no alternative, the leader allowed the boy to go on. One of the "mule skimmers" took young Blank under his wing, and he retaliated by helping with the chores as much as possible.

The Sioux, resenting the white man's intrusion in the Black Hills, were on the war-path, so the wagon train always "made circle" at night; young Blank doing his share of guard duty. The train, however, proved to be too large for the fierce Sioux to attack, yet there were attacks made on other outfits close to them.

A short while after the wagon train had arrived at its destination, and was ready for the return trip, the boy joined another train coming to Cheyenne, then on to Denver. After spending a few days there he joined a freighting outfit bound for Arizona, travel-

ing with them as far as Pueblo. There he made the acquaintance of an old trapper, named Moore, with whom he spent the winter trapping in the region between Pueblo and Canon City. "Old" Moore was a veteran and an expert trapper. Using a No. 2 or 3 double spring steel trap, he would place it at the foot of a tree or bush, covering it with leaves, small twigs, etc. He would then hang the bait--a cottontail, prairie dog, or piece of venison--on the branches, four feet above and almost directly over the trap; then building a hut of branches around the trap and bait. After completing this he would then sprinkle everything with water to do away with the human scent. Even then the wise foxes were not always fooled, and often they sprung the trap with a stick and made off with the bait. Moore estimated that a fox, seeking food, traveled on an average of 60 miles a night.

The season was a profitable one for the two trappers who caught over 300 foxes, also a few coyotes, lynx, bobcats, and mountain lions. The pelts were shipped to John P. Lowry at Denver, the fox pelts bringing from \$3.50 to \$4 per pelt.

The pair afterwards went to the vicinity of Howard and Cleora, trapping up and down the Arkansas. Young Blank then traveled to Leadville with a freighter and prospected in that vicinity--with no luck--for six months. He then returned as far as Brown's Canon, where he prospected and engaged in various occupations and spending some time in the embryonic town of South Arkansas, this was in '79. and '80. While on the trip to Leadville--which I have already mentioned--he helped to erect the first building in the budding town.

In those days the present site of Salida was, during the summer, a veritable sea of green waving grass knee high, and there the freighters camped, turning their stock out to feed on the lush grass. One of the "mule skimmers" suggested to Joe King, who was looking for a saloon location, that in as much as the division point of the railroad was going to be located there a town was surely to spring up, so why not start a saloon there. Where upon King confessed that he had no lumber with which to erect a building or whiskey for stock. Such a state of affairs did not bother the company of "skimmers", however, for they promptly halted some freight wagons loaded with lumber con-

signed to Leadville, and forcibly took enough lumber with which to erect a small building; and then secured 2 barrels of whiskey in the same manner. It is needless to add that King was soon behind his bar, such as it was, doing a very brisk business. This first building of the new town was a clap board shack, 12X12, located on the second lot of the east corner of F and Sackett Sts, facing F.

In September 1879 our subject and M. V. B. Whipple, a geological engineer went to the Mt. Shavano district on a prospecting expedition, seeking the main lode, running from the San Juan district to the Breckenridge country. Though they failed to do this,--Mr. Blank discovered it 1910--they located some promising claims which are still in Mr. Blank's possession.

During '81 and '82 he was engaged in the freighting business with headquarters at Buena Vista and Leadville. Later he freighted across Independence Pass to Aspen. On one trip he was caught in a heavy snow storm, and had to pay \$300 per ton for baled hay in Aspen.

In '83 the freighters operating between Granite and Aspen lost many horses and mules, all of them splendid animals, caused by a strange hoof infection; the disease breaking out during the muddy seasons. A horse or mule would become lame, its hoof then turning blue and swelling to immense proportions, finally bursting within six hours of its inception, the animal then dying. Losses ran into the hundreds. This disease was thought to have been some form of foot rot caused by a poison mud on the east slope of Independence Pass. A cure was not discovered; but the epidemic finally died out.

Mr. Blank was present and witnessed the "Ninemyer Shooting". It started when the Ninemyers, accompanied by some friends, including Mr. Blank, came to Salida for the purpose of preparing for a bear hunt. Later some members of the party entered Katie Bender's restaurant for a meal. Service was too long for coming which displeased Tom Underhill, who had imbibed enough liquor to make him boisterous, so he gave vent to his displeasure by stabbing and cutting the table with his long hunting knife. Katie Bender, seeing this unwarranted attack upon her furniture, such as it was, requested Underhill to stop, and

when he refused to do so, called in the police. Marshall Baxter Stingely, the first to enter, upon perceiving Underhill still industriously engaged, as before described, promptly drew his gun and killed Underhill. Ninemyer then joined the affray, wounding Stingely, and killing another officer. During the ensuing battle, three more men were slain--all innocent bystanders. Ninemyer was lodged in jail, but later escaped.

After his freighting experiences, Mr. Blank engaged in tie contracting in "Two Bit Gulch" and the Granite district. He was sub-contracting under John Tipton, who was supplying ties for the D&RG. They received 25 to 30 cents for white pine, narrow gauge tie, paying 15 cents each to the cutters, some who made 100 ties per day. Later he entered the lumber business with Pat Gatchell, who furnished lumber and bridge timbers for the Colorado Midland Railroad, which was then preparing to build thru that country.

On December 23, 1886, he was happily married to Maggie Blanchard, daughter of John Blanchard, Poncha Springs rancher. Five sons and four daughters were born to the couple, all of whom are still living except the eldest, Roy, who died in 1923.

1891 found him in the livery business in Montrose, leaving there to join the rush to Creede. There he and a partner, Jack Bunch, "grubstaked", to the extent of \$700, an old English prospector, Dick Tomlin; the best prospector Mr. Blank had ever known. He had prospected in many places in the world, including Africa, where he figured in some important discoveries.

Mr. Blank sent him to the Bear Creek District, where he discovered and located three rich claims. He proved his dishonesty, however, by selling the claims at a very handsome price and departing for Australia without Mr. Blank's knowledge; who, having no written agreement, could do nothing. These mines proved to be very rich, making wealthy men of their owners.

Our subject returned to Chaffee County during the panic of '93, and from then to the present time he has been engaged in ranching, stock feeding, and other various occupations. In 1931 he was employed by the state as an instructor to public classes in panning, placer mining, etc., a subject he knows well, probably better than any one

in this county, as he has spent a half-century at it, and a fortune of \$40,000. At one time he was the largest holder of gold claims in Coffee County.

At the present time he still ^{is} interested ^{has} and as much faith in the Mt. Shavano mining district; and ~~in the~~ spring he intends to secure financial aid to open and work his mines there.

He and Mrs Blank, both in good health, now reside in Salida at 1030 E Street.

Lellan Blank