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Libbie Custer

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Eclogue at Twilight
Letitia Huckaby

2013 — Fort Riley

TENTING ON THE PLAINS — 1883

LIBBIE CUSTER

Libbie Custer paints a picture with her pen and eloquently captures the five basic human senses one can experience in the Flint Hills. She writes of the freedom ... that no impediment lies between you and the setting sun; that the air of the Plains is like champagne. She notes the fragrance and purity of the atmosphere in the "land of the free," as well as the neutral tint that continues for many unvarying miles, and the springy turf under foot. These things which she writes about are all true, but there is an indescribable feeling that comes over you when you step foot onto the open terra firma, a feeling that extends beyond pen and paper, and one that cannot be experienced anywhere else in the world, but right here, in the Flint Hills of Kansas. — Dick Carter

It was delightful ground to ride over about Fort Riley.

Ah! What happy days they were, for at that time I had not the slightest realization of what Indian warfare was, and consequently no dread. We knew that the country they infested was many miles away, and we could ride in any direction we chose ...

Coming from Michigan, where there is a liberal dispensation of swamp and quagmire, having been taught by dear experience that Virginia had quicksands and sloughs into which one could disappear with great rapidity, and finally, having experienced Texas with its bayous, baked with a deceiving crust of mud, and its rivers with quicksand beds, very naturally I guided my horse around any lands that had even a depression. Indeed, he spoke volumes with his sensitive ears, as the turf darkened in

hollows, and was ready enough to be guided by the rein on his satin-like neck, to the safer ground. It was a long time before I realized that all the Plains were safe. We chose no path, and stopped at no suspicion of a slough. Without a check on the rein, we flew over divide after divide, and it is beyond my pen to describe the wild sense of freedom that takes possession of one in the first buoyant knowledge that no impediment, seemingly, lies between you and the setting sun. After one has ridden over conventional highways, the beaten path marked out by fences, hedges, bridges, etc., it is simply an impossibility to describe how the blood bounds in the veins at the freedom of an illimitable sea. No spongy, uncertain ground checks the course over the Plains; it is seldom even damp, and the air is so exhilarating one feels as if he had never breathed a full breath before. Almost the first words General Sherman said to me out there were, "Child, you'll find the air of the Plains is like champagne," and so it surely was. Oh, the joy of taking in air without a taint of the city, or even the country, as we know it in farm life! As we rode on, speaking enthusiastically of the fragrance and purity of the atmosphere, our horses neighed and whinnied to each other, and snuffed the air, as if approving all that was said of that "land of the free." My husband could hardly breathe,

from the very ecstasy of realizing that nothing trammelled him. He scarcely left the garrison behind him, where he was bound by chains of form and ceremony — the inevitable lot of an officer, where all his acts are under surveillance, where he is obliged to know that every hour in the day he is setting an example — before he became the wildest and most frolicsome of light-hearted boys. His horse and he were one, not only as he sat in the saddle, a part of the animal, swayed by every motion of the active, graceful beast, but such unison of spirit took possession of each, it was hard to believe that a human heart did not beat under the broad, splendid chest of the high-strung animal.

The horses bounded from the springy turf as if they really hated the necessity of touching the sod at all. They were very well matched in speed, and as on we flew were "neck by neck, stride by stride, never changing our place." Breathless at last, horses, dogs and ourselves made a halt. The orderly with his slow troop horse was a speck in the distance. Of course I had gone to pieces little by little, between the mad speed and rushing through the wind of the Plains. Those were ignominious days for women — thank fortune they are over! Custom made it necessary to disfigure ourselves with the awkward waterfall, and, no matter how luxuriant the hair, it seemed a necessity to still pile up more. With many a wrathful opinion



Cattle on a Thousand Hills
Letitia Huckaby

regarding the fashion, the General took the hairpins, net and switch, and thrust them into the breast of his coat, as he said, "to clear the decks for action for another race."

There was a long, smooth stretch of land beyond Fort Riley, where we used to speed our horses, and it even now seems one of the fair spots of earth, it is so marked by happy hours. In reality it was a level plain without a tree, and the dried buffalo-grass had then scarcely a tinge of green. Their neutral-tinted, monotonous surface continued for many unvarying miles. We could do as we chose after we had passed out of sight of the garrison, and our orderly, if he happened to have a decent horse that could overtake us, kept drawing the muscles of his face into a soldierly expression, trying not to be so undignified as to laugh at the gamesomeness, the frolic, of his commanding officer. What a relief for the poor fellow, in his uneventful life, to get a look at those pranks! I can see him now trying to keep his head away and look unconscious, but his eyes turned in their sockets in spite of him and caught it all. Those eyes were wild with terror one day, when our horses were going full tilt, and the General with one powerful arm, lifted

me out of my saddle and held me poised in the air for a moment. Our horses were so evenly matched in speed they were neck and neck, keeping close to each other, seemingly regardless of anything except the delight at the speed with which they left the country behind them. In the brief moment that I found myself suspended between heaven and earth, I thought, with lightning rapidity, that I must cling to my bridle and keep control of my flying horse, and trust to good fortune whether alighted on his ear or his tail. The moment I was thus held aloft was an hour in uncertainty, but nothing happened, and it taught me to prepare for sudden raids of the commanding officer after that. I read of this feat in some novel, but was incredulous until it was successfully practiced on me ...

I wish I could describe what delight my husband took in his horse life, what hours of recreation and untiring pleasure he got out of our companionship with Jack Rucker, Phil and Custis Lee ... It is one of the results of a life of deprivation, that pleasures, when they come, are rarities, and the enjoyment is intensified. In our life they lasted so short a time that we had no chance to learn the meaning of satiety.

Libbie Custer was a writer and chronicler of frontier life. Beyond her marriage to General George Armstrong Custer, she forged her own path, sharing her experiences from a female perspective on westward expansion.

Dick Carter convinced Margaret Johns to go on a blind date that involved a day trip in the Fall of 1998, traveling from Topeka to visit the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, concluding the day with dinner at the Grand Central Hotel in Cottonwood Falls. From that day forward, the Flint Hills has held a special place in their relationship, with different communities within the Flint Hills catchment area serving as gathering points for anniversaries, family photos, weekend getaways, and of course the capstone event, the annual pilgrimage to the Symphony in the Flint Hills Signature Event. Dick and Margaret have supported the Signature Event as a Patron since the beginning in 2006.

Excerpt from "Tenting on the Plains," by Elizabeth Bacon Custer (Libbie Custer), 1887.