

SKETCH

My name is ORVILLE DALE RUSSELL. I was born of goodly parents 15 March 1919. Redundant spelling suggests they chose my name just for the L of it. I was preceded in mortality by two brothers and two sisters and succeeded by three sisters.

This is a sketch about my father. He was old-fashioned and, early on, made all five of us call him Papa; however, by the time I became a teen-ager he had mellowed and all eight of us had him answering to "Dad".

Dad had little formal education but exhibited common sense in many aspects of general education. For example, he could invent and solve mathematical problems, and I can remember getting his help with my arithmetic problems brought home from school.

Dad's wisdom, patience and understanding were apparent to me while I was yet very young. He had friends among men whose image and deportment might repel some folks.

The Standing Rock Indian Reservation was not very far from where we lived. One resident named White Cow Walkin' would come to visit from time to time. He seemed very old to me at six or seven years. He seemed to like children and I can recall sitting on his lap and talking with him. He taught me to count - "wahnchee", "nopah", "yahmini", "topah", "zahpatah", "shockapah", "shocko", "shockalokah", "noptchiokah", "wikshiminee" - to ten in his language. He also taught us some dialect words and the meanings of some sign-language gestures.

White Cow Walkin' was one of Dad's friends.

Dad had special effective ways he used in breaking and training horses or 'broncs' as he called them. Over a period of several years he settled many dangerous animals down to field work, horse-and-buggy and saddle horse usefulness. I remember a contrivance he called a whirlygig. It was developed by burying one wheel of the rear end of a car, covering the differential gear housing and the drive shaft housing and leaving the other wheel to spin in the air. Dad attached a long pole extending from the wheel hub and having a snap ring attached to the remote end. At the opposite rim of the wheel was attached a singletree. A rebellious colt would be harnessed, hitched to the singletree behind him and having his hackamore snapped to the ring at the end of the pole. Dad would remove the colt's blindfold and whack the colt on the rump and yell, "GO!" Lots of senseless horsepower would be expended running in the whirlygig-confined circle. When the colt got tired of the silly game, he was unhitched - docile, now - and put to work, usually harnessed with an experienced sensible animal.

Florence, my youngest older sister and I learned to build

our sod house by helping Dad on the project. First, the sod was turned over with a one-horse single bottom walking plow. I led the horse (Ol' Wheeler was his name) while Dad managed the plow handles. Then Dad, with a sharpened spade cut the sod into nearly equal squares. These were three to five inches thick, the soil being held firm by fine, tough, close-knit roots of the buffalo grass, so called.

Florence and I would load the sod squares on a sled and she or I would lead Ol' Pete (Ol' Wheeler's offspring) who drew the sled to the building site. Dad laid every piece of sod in its special place to bind them all by their weight and position as the walls of the house went up.

Several groves of ash, a native hardwood tree, grew nearby. It was from these that Dad fashioned the rafters which rested on the walls and the telegraph pole "ridgepole" of the Soddy, as it was fondly referred to by Dad.

Dad made effective use of two naturally curved ash trees he selected because of their curves. He trimmed off the branches with an axe, sawed the remaining logs into matching lengths and let me help peel them with a drawing knife. He then cut wagon wheel steel tires into proper lengths which he wrought and screwed to the bottom of each curved log to form a pair of bobsled runners. I remember seeing that finished sled in use on the snow covered North Dakota prairie that lay about our Soddy on the hill.

I love my Dad. There are many things he didn't do for whatever reason. I remember and respect him for the good things he did do.