

RODEOS IN HAMILTON COUNTY

Hamilton County, Kansas

Written by Ruth Ausbun

Consultant: Jim Pratt, Syracuse, Kansas

Reference: The Big Cage, an animal book by Clyde Beatty with Edward Anthony

** Additional information added about certain people mentioned in this story
Photographs provided by Lance Carter*

See another Hamilton County rodeo story written by Ruth Ausbun titled... Old Rodeos.

The last rodeo was held in Hamilton County in 1932 at Phinas E. Dunn's* ranch located about three miles southwest of Syracuse, Kansas. It was the first one held in the area for many years. This place was an ideal place for rodeos as it had lots of large shade trees. As a whole, the people did not take much interest in the affair, so Mr. Dunn did not sponsor any more rodeos.



Rodeo grounds were located on the ranch of Phinas Dunn, southwest of Syracuse, Kansas. Bud Howell... on the fence with Emmet Dunn, son of Phinas and Millie Dunn, holding the rope.

Many rodeos were held long ago at the old fairground and racetrack, located several blocks northeast of the Catholic Church. The race track was about a half-mile long. At these rodeos, cowboys and professional horse riders came from far and wide, such as Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Wyoming. Many local riders were quite famous

for their riding. Jim Pratt (*See additional information on Jim Pratt and his family in the Hamilton County story, "OLD RODEOS"*), who is now the ex-postmaster, was one of the West's best riders. He rode horses in many of the rodeo contests in Colorado, Texas, and Oklahoma. He was born and raised here in Kansas. His father also had racehorses, perhaps nearly a hundred of them which he had trained. He raised them from colts and would hire professional cowboys and horse trainers to help train his horses.

They held the old rodeos at different ranches in Hamilton County. The cowboys were clad in terra-cotta buckskin elaborately trimmed with white leather. Around the lower part of their legs, they wore heavy cowhide as a sort of legging. They were fully armed with jingling spurs, flapping ropes, plus buckskin strings. Their look was very impressive.

It was interesting to see the cowboys round up the cattle to leave the ranch on the day before the rodeo. Some had a long distance to travel. Some of the larger ranches were thirty or forty miles from the actual ranch holding the rodeo.

This one particular event was to take place on July 4th. The morning was a bright sunshiny morning, but by noon the heat was almost unbearable. At noon the workers gathered at the ranch house where they were seated to a bountiful meal and served ice cream. It was very refreshing to the men after such a strenuous morning, trying to round up the herd. A slight cloud of dust was blowing over the brown prairies in the early part of the afternoon, and people could see the cattle a mile away or more. They left a trail of dust behind them as they went along. It was indeed a beautiful sight to see. The hundreds of cattle walking side by side over the golden brown prairie looked more like a parade than herds of cattle being driven to a rodeo. Many of the cattle began their journey before daylight.

Later, three mounted men charged after a steer, roping it and leading it to the ranch, where it was quickly thrown and slaughtered. They turned it on its back, the way the old buffalo hunters did, quickly disrobing and cutting it into hundreds of pieces. Then it was cooked and prepared for the visiting cowmen at the rodeo.

The horse herds were moved in and rounded up in the corral. One could see from the ranch house a great semicircle of gray on the yellow plains. It was hundreds of horses and cattle going to the rodeo, and the cattle were bellowing. Cowpunchers would sometimes ride behind the herd to deal with the bulls that would break from the herd.

Fresh horses were saddled from time to time for the riders, but the work was usually finished before noon. Next came the cigarettes and the broiling of beef. They would also indulge in games, shooting matches, 100-yard dashes, etc.

They then proceeded to the rodeo corrals, which were made in stockade form from roughly shaped posts set on an end. The cows and calves were bunched up at one

end in fearful expectancy. Into the corrals went the cowpunchers with their ropes coiled in their hands. Selecting their victims, they threw their ropes, pulling and tugging a bull calf out of the bunch. Then two men would sit on a calf and wrestle it to the ground. It is humorous when a calf throws a man but pathetic when a man throws a calf. Sometimes a cow takes an interest in her offspring and becomes angry. Men throw dust in her eyes, or they sometimes throw their hats over her horns. In corral roping, they try to catch the calf by the front teeth.

When galloping over the plains, the puncher is the epitome of grace, and if he desires to look behind him, he shifts his whole body to one side and lets the horse go as he pleases. In the pursuit of cattle, he leans forward in his saddle, and with his arms elevated to his shoulders, he plugs in his spurs. No matter how much a bull may twist and swerve about, he is at his tail as true as a magnet to the pole.

Their saddle trees are very short and straight and quite as shapeless as a sawbuck-pack saddle. The cowboy punchers all use hemp ropes imported from the southern states. They carry a lariat of hair, which they usually make themselves. The cowboy lives on a very simple diet. Usually, eight to twelve dollars a month is sufficient for him to live on. He buys nothing but his gorgeous buckskin outfit, big silver-mounted hat, spurs, lariat, and saddle.

Rodeo in Spanish means a cattle market, and in some places, its significance is translated as "round up" in the Western plains. The round-up is characteristic of the West and the Westerners. On a large ranch, preparations for the rodeo would begin some weeks before the event. They also let the neighbors know about the up-and-coming event. The ranchers all arrived in the early morning. Calves were all branded before entering the contest. Races were held in the afternoons to bring the entertainment to a close.

Fifty years ago, a bull and a grizzly bear were likely to be an attraction at a big rodeo. Sometimes the grizzly bear declined to fight. At times the contest was cruel and demoralizing. No other animal is quite as full of surprises as the bear. Bear stories have a habit of being funny, pathetic, revealing, etc. They have confused audiences with their clowning around and then have sent some of the best animal trainers to their graves. Perhaps a fight between a bear and a tiger would be more interesting than a battle between a bull and a grizzly bear. Soon that is just what happened.

Strangely enough, in the early days, the bears did not seem to realize how large and powerful the tigers were. Out of mischief, the bears would reach for the tigers as they entered the cage. Not until the bears got clawed up a few times did they become aware of the tiger's dangerous potentialities that they had treated so lightly. The bears and tigers grew to hate each other, and there was continual growling and snarling when they were together. A tiger had no use for bears, and it made no bones about it. The bears took advantage of every opportunity with surprising speed and effectiveness to avenge themselves on the tigers.

One time a tiger fell to the floor off the pedestal. The bear leaped at the fallen cat in a split second, grabbing it from behind the neck. The bear had that unbreakable hold and snapped the big cat's neck before it had a chance to defend himself. The tiger died a few minutes later. The bear had a tremendous advantage during this brief encounter, but the odds were a hundred to one against him getting that unbreakable hold. If he failed in doing this, he was a goner, for tigers are lightning-fast, and the tiger would have quickly brought his claws and teeth into play and put an end to the over-ambitious bear. Bears invariably attack with their teeth. They go in for a series of biting. They bite and then relax their teeth just before sinking them in again and again. This bear held on instinctively and emerged as probably the only bear that ever killed a tiger.

Additional Information

PHINAS E. DUNN

Many thanks to Lance Carter for information, stories, photographs, newspaper clippings, and obituaries about his grandfather, Phinas Dunn, and his family

PHINAS EARL DUNN, son of Francis Emmett Dunn (1861-1898) and Mary Jane Goostree (1868-1947), was born on 7 Feb 1892 in El Dorado Springs, Cedar County, Missouri. He married MILLIE IRENE PLATZ, daughter of Mendhous Platz (1857-1945) and Margaret Catherine Warner (1857-1921), on 25 Nov 1910 in Syracuse, Hamilton County, Kansas. Millie was born on 8 Oct 1887 in Alma, Wabaunsee County, Kansas.



PHINAS AND MILLIE (PLATZ) DUNN

Six children were born in their marriage; EMMETT MENELIOUS DUNN (1911-1986), CHARLIE MILTON DUNN (1913-1990), IDA LOIS DUNN (1915-1915), RUBY FAY (DUNN) CARTER (1918-2001), LEAH MAE (DUNN) FLOYD DURHAM OLSON (1920-2003), and BETTY LOU (DUNN) DISHON (abt 1928-).

Phinas started as a cowpuncher and eventually ended up as a ranch owner and in the cattle business. He also raised polo ponies as a hobby.



PHINAS DUNN

As mentioned before, rodeos were held on the Phinas Dunn ranch, which was approximately three miles southwest of Syracuse. The family's first home burned down about 1931, and he then started the construction of their second house. The only thing completed was the basement and the foundation. A large concrete slab was made for dances held following the rodeos and later used for roller skating.

About 1939, Phinas invented an improved automatic gate that would open and close itself when automobiles drove up. Although it was not a financial success, the following Wichita Eagle newspaper article reveals he did make an effort to promote the product.

In 1940, Phinas and Millie separated, and Phinas lived briefly in San Angelo, Tom Green County, Texas. He shortly moved on to California, and they divorced in September of that same year. He

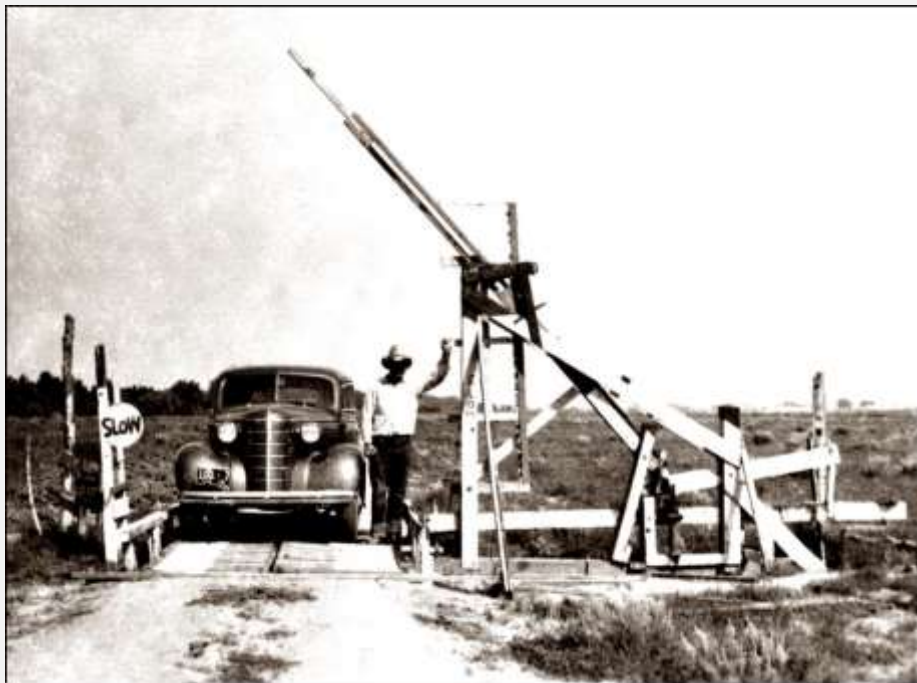
then married a woman named Jewell, which was revealed in his obituary. Millie died on 8 Feb 1948 in Syracuse, Hamilton County, Kansas, and buried there at the Syracuse Cemetery.

Phinas died on 19 Jul 1953 in Los Angeles County, California, and buried at the Westminster Memorial Park Cemetery in Westminster, Orange County, California.

WICHITA (KANSAS) EAGLE NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

April 1939

SYRACUSE RANCHER (PHINAS DUNN) BUILDS AUTOMATIC GATE TO SOLVE RANGE ROAD CATTLE PROBLEM



Phinas Dunn with the automatic gate opener that he invented
(On his ranch southwest of Syracuse, Kansas)

Out in Hamilton County, where they use 100-acre tracts for cattle-raising, the principal industry, ranchers are often troubled with their cows and steers injured by automobiles. Before there were automobiles, they would brand their cattle and then let them roam almost at will. But with roads running through the pastures, the cows were straying onto highways, causing injury to motorists and themselves. So P. E. Dunn, who now owns his ranch near Syracuse, thought he would do something about it. Conventional type "cattle guards" across the road proved ineffective, he claims, and a gate slowed down traffic as drivers would have to get out, open the gate, drive through, and then stop to close it. Dunn, therefore, invented and improved the automobile gate, which solves all the problems. His gate, on which the patent is now pending, consists of a platform and a system of levers. When an automobile is driven onto the

platform, the weight of the car lowers the platform. This releases the gate, erected on the jackknife bridge principle, and it swings up and out of the way of the automobile. When the automobile drives off the platform, the gate comes back down into position, presenting a livestock barrier. Dunn declares, "It will work in any kind of weather. It has only to be set and then doesn't have to be tampered with. Of course, the motorist has to slow up before going through the gate."

Dunn says, "If automobiles are following each other closely through the gate, there is no danger of the barrier falling on top or directly in front of a car. The weight of the following automobile keeps the gate raised. You don't have to get out of your car in snow or rainy weather and wade through mud and water to open the gate. It opens for you. This same principle may be used on walking and yard gates, but built on a smaller scale."

Dunn also says that several ranchers in Western Kansas are interested in the swinging gate and are asking him to build them on their farms.

Newspaper Obituary
MILDRED "MILLIE" IRENE (PLATZ) DUNN
(Died 8 Feb 1948)



MRS. DUNN DIES AT THE HOME OF DAUGHTER

Mrs. Millie Dunn, a resident of this community for the past twenty years, coming here from Kendall, Kansas, passed away at the home of her daughter, Mrs. Leah Durham, on 8 Feb 1948. The cause of her death was cancer, of which she had been afflicted the past eight years.

Millie Irene Platz was born in Alma, Kansas, on 8 Oct 1887, and departed this life at Syracuse, Kansas, on 8 Feb 1948 at the age of 60 years and four months.

She was the sixth of twelve children born to Mr. and Mrs. Menelious Platz. Her parents, one sister, and two brothers preceded her in death.

She became a member of the South Methodist Church of Tecumseh, Oklahoma when she was seventeen years old and remained a faithful member of this organization throughout her remaining life.

She united in marriage to Phinas E. Dunn. (*later divorced*) To this union were born six children, five of whom are left to mourn her departure. They include Emmett Dunn of Salida, Colorado, Milton Dunn of South Gate, California, Mrs. Ruby Carter of Syracuse, Mrs. Leah Durham of Syracuse, and Mrs. Betty Dishon of Monte Vista, Colorado. Also, six sisters, two brothers, and seven grandchildren survive.

Funeral services were held at the Methodist Church, on Wednesday, 11 Feb 1948, at 2 p.m. The Rev. Pomeroy officiated. The interment was at the Syracuse Cemetery.

Newspaper Obituary
PHINAS EARL DUNN
(Died 19 July 1953)



DUNN (Los Angeles) – Phineas (Phinas) Earl Dunn, 61, died Sunday at his home. He was born in Eldorado, Missouri.

Surviving is his wife, Jewell: two sons, Charley M. Dunn of Garden Grove, California, and Emmett M. Dunn of Climax, Colorado: three daughters, Mrs. Ruby Carter of Syracuse, Kansas, Mrs. Betty Dishon, and Leah Dunn of Wichita, Kansas.

Also surviving is his three brothers: Charles E. Dunn, George E. Dunn, and W. A. Dunn: three sisters, Mrs. Faye Swords, Mrs. Frankie Kaesler, and Mrs. O. E. Miles.

Services will be at 2 p.m. today in Honold Brothers Mortuary Chapel, Garden Grove, California, with Rev. Robert R. Washer officiating. The interment will be in Westminster Memorial Park