Adventures on the American Frontier

COWBOYS and Cattle Drives

Revised Edition

Edith McCall

Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York

Contents

Charlie Goodnight

Blazing the Goodnight Trail

Charlie Goodnight woke up early one morning in the fall of 1845. He looked for the last time at the hole in the woodshake roof of his Illinois cabin home—the hole that his stepfather had been meaning to mend for more than a year. He saw a thin line of gray light coming through the hole, and he curled up into a tighter ball to sleep until his mother called him. He could hear her stoking a fire in the old range down in the kitchen.

He remembered then.

"Texas!" he cried. He reached across to another curled-up shape under the old quilt and gave it a poke. "Hey, Elijah! Wake up! This is the day we start for Texas!"

That was the day Charlie Goodnight's life truly began, although he was already nine years old, for Texas and he were to grow up together in the cattle business. It was the first day of many that Charlie was to spend on the back of a horse from morning until dark, and even into the night.

By day's end on the first day on the trail to Texas, Charlie's thighs and back ached. He had ridden the family's white-faced mare, Blaze, all day with neither saddle nor blanket to ease the ride. But he didn't mind because they were twelve miles closer to Texas. The family was going there because Hiram Dougherty, Charlie's stepfather, had heard so much

talk of the new state of Texas that he could no longer see anything good about his farm on the edge of the Illinois prairie.

"Things grow tall in Texas," the talk went. "Corn and men, too. And they're practically giving away farmland. Any man can get rich there without half trying."

That sounded good to Hiram, who had never enjoyed hard work. On that fall day, when the oak leaves were turning red and brown and the hickory burned golden in the woods, Hiram happily clucked at the horses as he held the reins from the seat of one of his two covered wagons. Beside him was seven-year-old Cynthia Goodnight and his wife, who had been the Widow Goodnight for a year before she had married him. Elijah, thirteen, drove the second wagon, with his sister Elizabeth, who was eleven, riding beside him. Charlie, on Blaze, kept the cows moving along behind the wagons, with no idea that he was doing a job at which he would spend much of his life.

At that time, there wasn't a bridge anywhere across the Mississippi River. When the family reached the river after a few days, they had to wait at the gently sloping riverbank until it was their turn to load wagons, people, and animals onto a ferry to get across.

As they waited, Charlie peered eagerly at the other shore. "Lije, look at all the steamboats," he remarked to his brother. "St. Louis must be about the biggest city in all the world!"

From the ferry, they could hear the shouting and singing of the men who worked on the riverfront docks loading and unloading boxes and bales from the steamboats and stacking the decks with wood for the boiler furnaces. Beyond the

slope of the riverfront rose rows of buildings, some twice as high as any the Goodnight children had ever seen. Beyond the buildings were tree-covered hills.

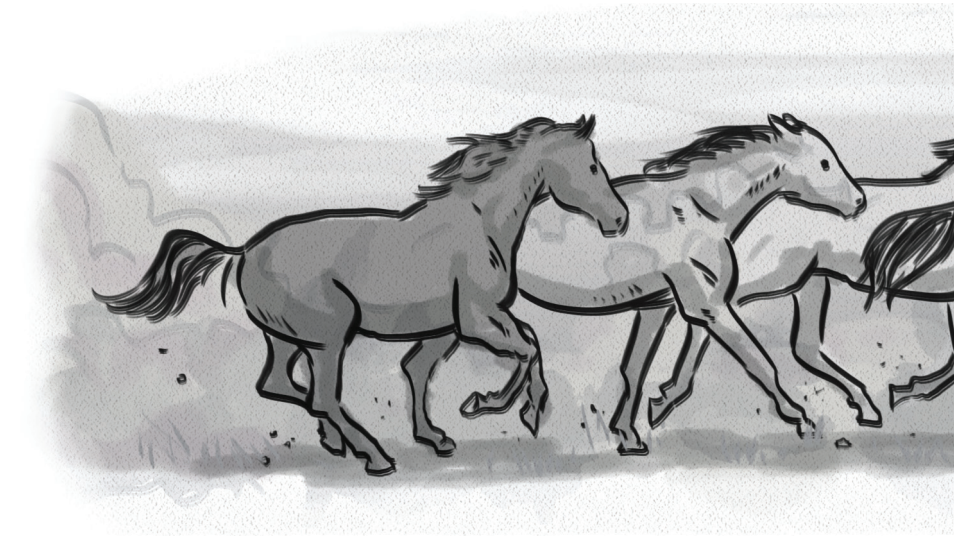
Once safely on the other side of the mighty Mississippi, Charlie and his family journeyed day after day over the new, rocky road to Springfield, Missouri. The road led over and around hills and down into valleys with rivers and creeks.

The fall rains had not yet come, and the streams were low enough for the animals to cross easily. Once in a while they had to go through water up to the wagon beds. Then the horses, dripping and snorting, slipped and slid as they pulled the heavy wagons to the top of the other bank. Going downhill, the wagons often skidded dangerously as they rolled too fast for the teams.

After about two weeks, the family arrived in Springfield, a frontier town not yet fifteen years old. It had a large, grassy public square, with a little scattering of cabins nearby. The Goodnights camped near the new, two-story brick courthouse that stood in the center of the square.

"Why not stay in Springfield, folks?" the locals asked them. "There's fine prairie land around here, a new mill is being built, and mail comes in regular-like. Besides, there's an awful lot of rough road between here and Texas!"

But Hiram's head was too full of stories about the easy life in Texas. Later, when the wagons almost fell apart on the mountain road through Arkansas, he wished he had stayed in Springfield. When at last they came to the floodplain of the Arkansas River and crossed it on a ferry at the settlement called Little Rock, people again urged them to stay.



"The worst of the journey is over now," Hiram argued. "As soon as we get the wagons patched up, we're going on to Texas."

With new iron hoops to hold the creaking wheels together, the travelers headed southwest once more. At last they reached the Red River that marked the boundary between Indian Territory, as Oklahoma was called, and Texas.

"Hooray!" shouted the boys. "We're in Texas at last!"

But on they went, still to the southwest, until they finally reached the Trinity River at Dallas. Dallas was only a trading post then, with a couple of cabins nearby and a ferry to get across the river.

When Charlie's family topped the rise on the other side of the river, Charlie called out, "Lije, look at the buffalo!" He pointed up the river, where hunters on horseback were shooting buffalo. With the help of their dogs, they had cut off part of a herd, and they picked off the frightened animals one after another. The great shaggy beasts fell with a thud, bellowing loudly as they kicked and struggled to rise before death came to quiet them.

It was all exciting to Charlie. He had heard that the great wild beasts came to Texas as winter brought snow to their summer feeding grounds. They seldom came as far east as the Trinity River, however, now that so many people were settling on land in that part of Texas.

Next Charlie saw a herd of wild mustangs streaming gracefully along a ridge on the horizon. The mustangs were sturdy horses descended from those that had escaped from the Spanish explorers, perhaps as many as three hundred years earlier. Charlie looked down at steady old Blaze and thought how exciting it would be to ride a wild horse like one of those. Maybe he could catch one someday.

"Will we live near here?" he asked Hiram when they made camp that night. He was pleased with Hiram's answer.

"Not much farther to go," Hiram said. "The ferry man told me about a good farm we can rent for the season. It's down on the Brazos River."

Two days later they found that farm, but the family did not stay there long. There was trouble between Charlie's mother and his stepfather when Hiram showed no interest in

planning how they would make a living. So Charlie's mother took the four children and a new baby that had come and moved farther up the Brazos without Hiram.

They settled about fifteen miles west of Waco, and Elijah and Charlie became the men of the family. They went to the neighbors' farms to work, even though they weren't very big or strong. But as time went on, their slender bodies became as tough as young hickories.

One day Elijah came home on Blaze, holding the bridle reins with one hand and his rope with the other. He was leading a frisky young colt.

"Want it, Charlie?" he asked. "Somebody shot its mother, and I found it standing by her body. No sight of the rest of the herd of mustangs. It's going to take a lot of care, but it might make a nice horse for you someday."

Charlie's eyes glowed. "You bet I want it, Lije! Thanks!"

Charlie spent the next few days repairing the old corral so that his young horse could not escape. It had a look of wildness in its eye, and at first it would not let either boy get near it. But Charlie had a way with animals, and before long the colt was coming to him to get the cow's milk he brought it.

Charlie spent time with his colt, gentling it and brushing it, but he looked forward to the time when it would be old enough to break to ride. That day came two years later. Charlie had no saddle, so he led the horse to the corral fence, climbed to the middle rail, and eased himself onto the horse's back. But suddenly, faster than he had gotten on, he was sitting on the ground, looking up at his horse.

"This won't do," Charlie told the horse. "You can't go bucking me off, or I'll never be able to ride you!" He got to his feet, dusted off his jeans, and swung himself up onto the mustang's back again.

Immediately he found himself sitting on the ground of the corral again. Dust billowed in clouds around him, and the mustang was looking over the fence as if nothing had happened.

"We'll see who's going to be boss in this corral," the boy said. It took him ten more tries, but the last time, he jumped off the horse instead of falling off. He was learning how to feel the horse under him get into position to buck.

Bruised and sore, Charlie went back to trying to ride his mustang the next day. After about a week, he could ride the horse out of the corral, down the road, and back home.

Elijah was watching the day Charlie took his horse out of the corral. "Looks like you've got yourself a horse, Charlie," he said when Charlie returned.

Safely back inside the corral, Charlie pulled to a stop. He patted the horse's neck and replied, "Yes, sir! This is my riding horse from here on. He knows who's boss now."

Just then the horse turned his head as if he understood what Charlie had said. Quick as a wink, his heels were in the air. In the next second he had rocked back and was standing almost straight up on his hind legs. Charlie, taken by surprise, slid to the ground.

Elijah laughed, and Charlie, looking up at his horse and seeing the animal's mouth wide open in a loud whinny, was sure that the horse was laughing at him, too.

"Why, you scamp!" Charlie said as he dusted himself off. He had noticed for several days that the horse looked around before throwing him, as though to make sure he was not tossing the boy against a fence. "It's a game, is it? Well, now, we'll see if I can just stay on your back like I was glued to it."

Charlie worked with the horse until he could ride him anywhere. He and the spirited mustang moved together as though they were one. As Charlie bent low over the horse's neck and let him run freely, he remembered the day he had first seen the herd of wild horses and longed to feel the joyous freedom of the mustangs. Now he felt it, and all the wide world of Texas seemed his.

Elijah was learning to herd cattle for some of the neighboring ranchers, but he preferred tilling the land on his mother's farm and tending the dairy cattle. "You can ride better than I can, Charlie," he said. "I'll see if Mr. Loving will let you take my place so I can help Ma here at home."

Charlie was fifteen years old, but he was small—he weighed less than ninety pounds. But he was so good with horses that a neighbor had him break and train a racehorse for him. Charlie then rode the horse as its jockey in a race. He had come in first. Mr. Loving was glad to have an expert rider, small though he was, and soon Charlie was herding cattle for him.

One day, as he headed home for the night, Charlie heard the pounding of hooves and saw a cattle stampede coming toward him. He spurred his horse and headed off the cattle, turning them so they would start circling back. It was a

method that cowboys used to end stampedes. As a reward, the cattle owner gave him a homemade saddle.

"Now you look more like a cowboy," Mr. Loving said when Charlie rode in the next day on his new saddle. "It worried me that you rode bareback."

"Why?" asked Charlie. "I don't fall off anymore."

"No, but I wondered what you were going to hang your rope on when you herd cattle to market for me and have to take some gear with you," Mr. Loving explained.

Charlie laughed, but he was glad to know that he was good enough as a cowhand to help drive cattle to market. That was the whole point of raising cattle—to get them to a place where they would be bought for meat and for the cowhide.

By that time it was clear that cattle raising was to become one of Texas's most important industries. Cattle had come into the state long before, when Texas had been part of Mexico. They were Spanish cattle, of all colors—from coal black to spotted red and white. The first cowboys in Texas were Mexicans who were taught at the Spanish missions to tend the cattle. They were called *vaqueros*, and much of what Charlie was learning now had been passed down to American cowboys from the *vaqueros.*

A few years went by, and Charlie left Mr. Loving's ranch to go west, herding cattle alongside a freight wagon train. He learned how to tell when water was near, how to read tracks, and how to take care of himself in the wilderness.

His mother had married again, and Charlie had a new stepbrother, Wes Sheek, who was also interested in cattle.