

Jesse James Benton

One of the most intriguing characters I have met in old west history is Benton. He was a cowboy, Indian scout, and he lived with Indians for a while. He was a prospector, owned a dairy in Arizona and became a rancher. Besides all that he claims to have co-authored several old cowboy songs, such as, "Bury me Not on the Lone Prairie." With only six months formal education, he was nearly illiterate and his autobiography, "Cow by the Tail," handwritten at the age of 80, reflects his lack of education, but is fascinating reading.

Jesse James Benton, that's how the old Bible has it written. However, his mother would change it to Jesse Jones whenever she felt the name might cause some embarrassment. In his own words Benton said, "When I was born in 1864, Jesse James were visiting at our house, and he said to my father and mother, 'If you name the kid after me I'll give him five dollars in gold.' Dad was agreeable as he liked Jesse. Mother kept the five dollars for me for five years, but then we spent it."

He was born in 1864 in Estill County, Kentucky, and grew up in the turbulent, post-Civil War era. When he was eight years old Benton says, "We started October 14, 1872, for Texas; thirty-six in number, men, women, and children—sixteen ox wagons. We were a fine-looking mountain people all dressed up in linsey

clothes and hickory shirts and jean pants. Had plenty of good mountain moonshine whiskey and sixteen foxhounds."

Upon arriving in Texas, Benton said that he only wanted two things, "to be a cowboy and shoot an Injun." Both will happen before too long. They settled in Denton County just north of Fort Worth. His father built a cabin near a spring and creek and cleared the land for some farming. According to Benton, the spring became a favorite stopping place for outlaws. Sam Bass and his gang camped there often. Frank and Jesse James visited about twice a year and would give Benton a gold piece.

In 1876 when Benton was 12 years old, his mother and older brother died probably from malaria. The following year his father left home to find a new wife. Benton did not want a stepmother and he joined a cattle drive that was passing near the place.

When he was 16 years old, Benton and three other cowboys encountered a group of Sioux Indians and he had his first chance to shoot an 'Injun.' As they fled for cover his horse was shot from under him. They managed to drive the Indians away, but Benton had an arrow through his wrist, one friend had an arrow in his hip and another was dead. The Sioux had kidnapped a Comanche woman and in the battle she managed to hide and afterwards considered Benton and his friends as her saviors.

Benton's outfit obtained a contract to deliver cattle to Fort Sill, Oklahoma for further distribution to the Comanche in 1881. Benton was selected as the contact man at Fort Sill to handle the details. As a result, he met Quanah Parker and again the lady that he and his friends had rescued. He became a hero to the Comanche people as the lady was the wife of an important chief. His boss was so pleased that he let Benton go on a two month hunt with the tribe. He met and fell in love with a beautiful Indian girl named Taloa. He had decided to become a member of the tribe and marry Taloa, but could never get up the courage to ask her. Then one day he watched a brave display a blonde scalp that Benton was sure belonged to a woman back home and decided that he would leave the tribe and remain single.

All the talk in Texas turned to the opportunities in Arizona and Benton and his pal, Gus White, decided that was the thing to do. On the way they were quarantined in Fort Sumner, New Mexico, because of a smallpox epidemic. They stayed in the Maxwell House and learned the blood spot on the floor of their room was from Billy the Kid when he was killed by Pat Garrett. Benton claims that Billy had been a friend and worked the same outfit in Texas as he did, but he knew him as Billy Leroy.

They left New Mexico and made it on to Arizona. Their first stop of any length was in Show Low. They obtained employment at a ranch owned by Huning and Cooley and thought it was

probably the finest ranch in Arizona. They stayed there all year enjoying the work and swapping stories with Cooley who they called a great story teller.

All the talk of gold and silver in Tombstone made Benton and White decide to become miners. After a month of looking things over in Tombstone they decided they wanted to be ranchers. They headed back north to Show Low and Cooley. There were no ranches available around Show Low and Cooley advised them to go north of Winslow. They found a place in Dove Springs, about 15 miles north of Winslow and built a two room house.

White's family called him back to Texas so he sold his half of the ranch to Benton and headed for home intending to come back as soon as he could. Benton never saw him again, and the ranch didn't "taste the same" and he sold it. He tried railroading for a while and learned to drive a train. After he had wreck one day and derailed the whole train he walked away and went to Wilcox. He put his money in a store safe there and went over to Pearce which was in the beginning of a gold rush. He didn't want to mine, he wanted a business. He discovered that milk was in great demand and no one was supplying it. He went around to several Mormons and bought a bunch of milk cows and started what might be Arizona's first dairy. He took on a partner, expanded the business into a butcher shop and then sold the dairy.

In his travels to buy beef for the butcher shop he discovered the ranch of his dreams up in Tex Canyon in the Chiricahua Mountains. The problem was, it was owned by outlaws, made a perfect hideout, and they didn't want to sell. So he waited and eventually the outlaws were arrested, hired a lawyer, the lawyer got the ranch for his fees and sold it to Benton and his partner. They sold the butcher business and went into ranching.

In his autobiography he writes, "I were married in 1900 to the daughter of a dentist in Benson and my wife come to live on the ranch with me when it were yet wild and uncivilized. We had four fine children, three boys and a girl that grew up their early years on the ranch. My wife had a hard time on the ranch, I guess, for it were not easy for a woman in those days." Two of the boys were named Frank and Jesse. The name of the other son, the daughter, and the wife is never given.

He died in Tucson, Arizona on May 31, 1946 and is buried in the Evergreen Cemetery. An obituary for Frank E Benton Sr. reveals that he is also buried there and that the other brother was named Edward.