



Cattlegirl was Respected in Rugged Utah

By Kathy Jordan

The country in eastern Utah around Westwater is rugged and not for the faint of heart.

But it was not too rugged for Florence Harris Fuller, who became a legend as one of the best-known and highly-respected cattlegirls in the West. She owned land in the Westwater area and on the west end of Pinon Mesa.

Some memories that Sylvia Harris Ekker, Florence's niece, and L.H. "Dude" Larsen had of the cattlegirl are contained in an article in the Canyon Legacy Journal of the Dan O'Laurie Canyon Country Museum in Moab. The article was written by Bette Stanton, Larsen's daughter.

Florence was born in Virginia on March 21, 1866, according to the Journal article. The family moved from Virginia to Kentucky before settling in Telluride, where her parents, Nancy and LeRoy Harris, invested in mining. In 1881, when Florence was 15, she headed for Texas.

During the time that Florence was in Texas, her parents had sold their mining investment and moved San Rafael Valley southwest of Green River, Utah, which became known as Harris Bottom.

Around 1885 or 1886, when she about 20 years old, she showed up in Utah, which was still a territory. She had acquired several hundred head of cattle and was accompanied by her future husband, trail boss Bob Fuller. It is possible that she had won the cattle in a poker game.

Apparently cattle weren't the only things of interest that Florence brought with her on her return.

In the Journal article, Sylvia told how she enjoyed going through her Aunt Florence's trunk "full of beautifully-beaded dresses, the kind entertainers wore in those days."

"My family was always hush, hush when it came to talking about 'Aunt Bote.' This simply added intrigue and made 'Aunt Bote' an even more exciting character," Sylvia told Stanton.

Indeed Florence was an interesting character.

Dude Larsen remembered a story about the Wild Bunch (which included Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid) that Florence told him at the 1921 Cattleman's Ball in Fruita.

"Florence related the story of how she knew members of the Wild Bunch and rode with them down into Robbers Roost on occasion. She said she was never with them on any of their capers, but was there one night when a posse was in hot pursuit. Florence claimed she caught a bullet that went through the cantle (projecting rear part) of her saddle and right into her fanny. She said the boys had to dig out the bullet when they reached the Roost."

Larsen said he would never forget how she looked the night of the Cattlemen's Ball. She wore a leather riding skirt with high boots and looked like she had just walked off the fashion page, he told Stanton.

Florence's story about her participation with the Wild Bunch was undoubtedly based on fact. Her parents had opened a freight station in the San Rafael and had become friends with most of the outlaws who would stop by on their way to Robbers Roost after a heist

According to the Stanton article, Florence could play poker, handle a six-shooter and ride, with the best of men. But she liked to dress like a lady and always dressed to the nines. Florence took steps to care for her skin and had a doeskin mask and gloves made to wear when she was rounding up cattle. She was also an accomplished musician and could play many different instruments.

Florence and Bob Fuller married on July 12, 1889, in Grand Junction, and together they developed a large cattle business. According to the Stanton article, Florence paid the highest

wages of any of the ranchers in the area, and it was said that she could always get a poker game going on payday and win most of it back.

After her husband died, Florence and Joe Pace formed the Pace and Fuller Cattle Company, with headquarters in Westwater.

In the fall of 1929 Florence moved to Grand Junction to spend the winter at the Virginia Hotel at Third Street and Colorado Avenue. It was the first winter she had failed to spend on her ranch in Westwater since she began ranching. The winter of 1930 was to be her last. She died at the Virginia Hotel on Jan. 30, 1930.

The obituary that ran in The Daily Sentinel said that Florence had been one of the most important figures of the era in the cattle industry. She handled her business “exactly as a man and working on the range as a man until she had built her business to the point where she no longer had to labor each day.”