EUGENE MANLOVE RHODES: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MAN AND HIS WORK

By

BRENT KENNETH ASHABRANNER

Bachelor of Science

Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College

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EUGENE MANLOVE RHODES: AN INTRODUCTION

TO THE MAN AND HIS WORK

Thesis Approved:

Cecil B. Williams
Thesis Adviser

William B. Leake

D. C. McIntosh
Dean of the Graduate School

PREFACE

I am sure that few candidates for advanced degrees have had a more "natural" field of investigation than I have had in the life and literary works of Eugene Manlove Rhodes. One of my main interests in literature has long been in the literary heritage of the Southwest. Also, I have for a good many years written for publication stories set against a background of the Southwest in the early days of the range cattle industry. Nothing could be more logical, therefore, than that in choosing a subject for a Master's thesis I should turn to the writings of the man who holds a unique place in the affections of lovers of Southwestern literature and a respected place in the critical judgment of those authorities in American literature who are acquainted with his works.

My task was made more difficult but infinitely more exciting by the facts that Rhodes is little known to the general reader and that, to my knowledge, no extended critical study of his work and of the man in relation to his work has ever been written. Because of these facts, I felt that it would be unwise to undertake a specialized study of some aspect of Rhodes's writing such as his style or his

characterization of the Southwestern cowboy. It seemed to me (and to my thesis adviser) that, until the groundwork had been laid with a general study that could serve as a guide to new readers interested in Rhodes and in his position in American literature, highly specialized studies of his work could serve little useful purpose.

This introductory study of Rhodes has so interested me in him as a man and as a writer that I have begun work on a critical biography of him. From a purely personal point of view, therefore, this thesis project has been a significant success that promises to affect my writing plans for a long while to come.

I wish to give especial thanks to Dr. Cecil B. Williams of the Oklahoma A. and M. English Department faculty for help that has extended beyond the limits of this study and for his constant encouragement of my interest in the literature of the Southwest and of my interest in writing. I also wish to thank Mr. William B. Leake of the Oklahoma A. and M. English Department faculty for valuable suggestions concerning this study and for help in securing all of Rhodes's novels.

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CHAPTER I

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH[1]

In the summer of 1881 Colonel Hinman Rhodes, late of the Twenty-eight Illinois Volunteers, arrived at the Mescalero Apache reservation in southern New Mexico with an appointment as Indian agent. In the years following his discharge from the army at the close of the Civil War, the Colonel had tried farming, first in Nebraska, later in Kansas, but the results had not been satisfactory. He had, therefore, used his influence as an ex-army officer to secure this appointment which, if the financial returns were not munificent, at least offered a steady income. With Colonel Rhodes came his family, consisting of a wife and two young sons, one of whom, Eugene Manlove, with a slight speech impediment and a permanently injured right eye, was at the age of twelve off to a rather unpromising start in life.

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[1]No formal biography of Rhodes exists, but four years after his death his wife, May Davison Rhodes, published The Hired Man on Horseback (Boston, 1938), a book of reminiscences about the cowboy author. It is principally from this book that I have drawn the material for this brief biographical sketch. For the sake of the overworked ibid., however, I have in this chapter footnoted only material gleaned from sources other than The Hired Man on Horseback. Any statement concerning Rhodes not footnoted can be verified in Mrs. Rhodes' book. Direct quotations, regardless of source, have of course been footnoted.

Be it said to the credit of Colonel Rhodes that he did not grow rich in his position of Indian agent. At a time in the nation's history when many white men unscrupulously accumulated fortunes in the Indian service, the Colonel discharged his duties with strict honesty and homesteaded on the side to piece out a scanty livelihood. The result of this lack of family fortune was that Eugene Manlove, thirteen years old and responding vigorously to the rugged Southwestern life, took a job as horse wrangler[2] for the William C. McDonald ranch near Carrizzo, New Mexico. Young Rhodes worked hard at his new job, sent his pay home to his parents, and quickly graduated to the more honorable occupations of cowboy and bronc buster.[3]

From the first it was apparent to his friends that Rhodes was a paradox. He loved a life of action, and in his work as a ranch hand came to know the mountains and deserts of southern New Mexico with a familiarity that led to lifelong affection. He was, to use an idiom of his day, always "spoiling for a fight," either friendly or otherwise, and he was so heedless of his personal safety whether in play, work,

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[2]A wrangler is a herder of saddle horses, whose duty it is to have the herd available when needed by the cowboys in their work. For a discussion of the menial nature of the wrangler's position and the valuable training offered by this job for higher types of ranch work, the reader is referred to Ramon F. Adams's Western Words (Norman, 1944), p. 180.

[3]The work of the cowboy, in general outline at least, is probably familiar to almost every American. For a discussion of the unusually hazardous nature of a bronc buster's duties, however, again see Adams, Western Words, p. 19.

or combat that he was often picturesquely referred to as "that there loco blossom" by Tom Tucker, foreman of the V Cross T ranch in southern New Mexico.[4] And Agnes Morely Cleaveland in her book of ranch life reminiscences recalls of Rhodes that she had heard of a "'locoed cowpuncher down 'round Engle' who enjoyed a reputation for 'ridin' anything that wears hair and goes on four legs,' but who was a bit cracked."[5]

The reason for this latter opinion of Rhodes, which seemed to be rather generally held, was also the basis of the paradox he presented to those who knew him. For "Gene," a man of action in a rough frontier country that put its chief premium on physical accomplishment, was also a voracious reader and, what was worse, a "scribbler"--although this latter inclination did not develop until he was past his mid-twenties. To most of his associates, these were strange activities which, while not exactly frowned upon, served to set him apart from his fellows as being a bit odd.

Almost everyone who has written anything about Rhodes has some story to tell about his reading habits. Mrs. Cleaveland mentions that he always carried in his saddle roll a big scrapbook containing stories, essays, and poetry which he had clipped from various sources; these pieces of writing he read, reread, and studied by the light of the

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[4]Eddy Orcutt, "Passed By Here," Saturday Evening Post, CCXI (August 20, 1938), 21.

[5]No Life for a Lady (Boston, 1941), pp. 278-279.

campfire while on roundup.[6] And J. Frank Dobie tells of how Rhodes would read while riding horseback and sometimes fail to note for half an hour or so that his horse had come to a standstill against a fence or gate.[7] Most amusing (and the least believable), however, is the anecdote related by Eddy Orcutt in his memorial to Rhodes, written the year of the cowboy author's death. According to Orcutt, Rhodes was one day riding with friends through some unusually rough country and as usual was busily turning the pages of a book. Suddenly his horse slipped and pitched him headlong down a steep embankment. His friends rushed to him and helped him to his feet.

"Did he hurt you any?" his friends asked.

"Well," said Gene, "he lost my place."[8]

Regardless of the accuracy of such stories, the fact remains that Rhodes did have a consuming interest in literature. The literary quotations and allusions in his writings reveal a man who was equally at home with Shakespeare or Shelley, Emerson or Poe, The Bible or the "Winnie-the-Pooh" stories of A. A. Milne.

At the age of seventeen young Rhodes abandoned cowboy life temporarily and took employment as an army scout and guide. Geronimo, the notorious Apache chief, had slipped the confines of his Arizona reservation with a large band of

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[6] No Life for a Lady, pp. 278-279.

[7] Introduction to The Best Novels and Stories of Eugene Manlove Rhodes (Boston, 1949), p. xv.

[8] "Passed By Here," 21.

angry and defiant followers and was marauding eastward into the Territory of New Mexico. Throughout the years 1885-86 the army hunted the wily Indian. It was Rhodes who guided the blue-clad soldiers through the maze of southern New Mexico mountain ranges and across the trackless stretches of semi-desert. This was high adventure for a lad not yet out of his teens, but with characteristic humor Rhodes in later life deprecated his part in the Indian wars.

"When Geronimo heard that I was guiding the army in southern New Mexico," Rhodes said, "he wisely stayed west of the Rio Grande."[9]

When Rhodes left the army service in 1886, he returned to ranch work for two years and then with $100 in his pocket set out for Stockton, California, and the College of the Pacific. Although he had had very little elementary schooling and no high school training, Rhodes passed the entrance examinations handily on the strength of his past reading. He stayed two years at the College of the Pacific, taking a program of general studies with special emphasis on courses in literature, and it was only the impossibility of financing further study that made him return to New Mexico with his schooling incomplete. He always remembered his two years of college as a satisfying and rich interlude in his life.

In New Mexico once again Rhodes, now twenty-three, made a modest beginning in ranching for himself by homesteading

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[9]May Rhodes, The Hired Man on Horseback, p. 23.

a watered tract in the rugged San Andres mountains and running a few cattle on shares. It was a hard life. With only one or two helpers he built the necessary ranch buildings, strung fence, and tended the cattle in the vast mountain wilderness. It was a job that every day began well before sunrise and did not end until well past dark. Because he had homesteaded all of the water supply, Rhodes actually controlled an empire; and had his land been properly stocked, he would have made a fortune. But without funds and unable to find anyone willing to back a venture in the wild San Andres adequately, he never rose above the status of 'little' rancher, which, by implication, meant a poor one.

In spite of the long working hours and the physical hardships, however, Rhodes began his first experiments in creative writing during his ranching days. These early efforts took the form of verse. While many of the pieces of this period are only a few cuts above doggerel, they reveal in their rough fumbling for the right word, the most effective phrase, the beginnings of the literary artist. Prose writing, at least for publication, he did not attempt at this time.

One of Rhodes's poems, printed in some obscure and now nameless magazine, chanced to be read by Mrs. May Davison Purple, a young widow living in Apalachin, New York, and she wrote Rhodes a brief note of appreciation. After several months passed and she had forgotten the incident, one day a letter from Rhodes arrived. He had been on roundup when she

sent her note, he explained. Then he went on for twenty hand-written pages to talk about New Mexico, himself, and literature. This was the beginning of a long correspondence between the two, a correspondence which developed romantic overtones, and culminated in 1899 with Rhodes's announcement that he was coming East with a cattle train and planned to come to Apalachin to see her.

Rhodes's arrival in Apalachin serves in several ways to illustrate the paradoxes of his personality. He was scuffed and bruised as the result of participating in a free-for-all fight in Niagara Falls, and, his clothes being in a state of disrepair, he had stopped in New York City to buy a new suit. Trustingly taking the salesman's word about the quality of goods, he made his purchase and went on, only to find the suit showing its cheapness and poor workmanship before he reached Apalachin. With a rueful smile and the clever twisting in meaning of a famous quotation (a device which he used brilliantly in his later writing), Rhodes dismissed the matter.

"I was a stranger," he said, "and they took me in."[10]

When Rhodes and May Davison Purple met, he gave her the two presents he had brought her from New Mexico: one a copy of Rudyard Kipling's Seven Seas, the other a pearl-handled pistol! The book and the gun--no two gifts could have told more about the dual nature of the man's personality.

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[10]May Rhodes, The Hired Man on Horseback, p. 4.

Rhodes and Mrs. Purple were married on August 9, 1899, about two weeks after the former's arrival in Apalachin. Rhodes returned to New Mexico alone a short time later and did miscellaneous work through out the following winter besides looking after his ranch-homestead. In the spring his wife joined him in New Mexico. During this first winter after his marriage Rhodes wrote and sold his first short story. The sale was made to the magazine Land of Sunshine, then edited by Charles F. Lummis,[11] and enriched Rhodes in the amount of ten dollars.

Rhodes's work on his ranch left almost no time for writing, however, and not a great deal, indeed, for his newly-arrived wife. After getting her settled in a small adobe house in Tularosa, the town nearest his ranch, Rhodes left immediately for spring roundup and was gone for three weeks! Mrs. Rhodes recalls that she had scarcely any women visitors during her first months in Tularosa because Gene, as she put it, "was considered wild," and the Tularosa women were a bit uncertain about associating with a woman who would marry such a man.[12]

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[11] Charles F. Lummis, successful journalist, editor, fictionist, historian, philologist, and an important chronicler of the Southwest in his own right, took an immediate interest in the young cowboy-writer's work. He encouraged Rhodes in the latter's formative years of authorship and remained an honest and helpful critic of Rhodes's work throughout his lifetime.

[12] Rhodes's wildness apparently never reached serious proportions, but because he loved to box (he whipped six men at one Thanksgiving celebration), was passionately fond of baseball, enjoyed a free-for-all fight, and was a masterful poker player, he was frowned upon by the pillars of the community.

In December Mrs. Rhodes moved to her husband's ranch and remained there for six months before returning to Tularosa to give birth to the first child by her marriage to Rhodes.[13] Alan Rhodes was born on June 12, 1901,[14] and this event seemed to definitely ignite in Rhodes the desire for literary expression. Although still operating his ranch and frequently making the long ride between it and Tularosa to be with his family, he found the time to begin his first short story efforts, and a dozen or more of these early attempts found their way into such magazines as the early McClure's and Out West.

In 1903 Mrs. Rhodes returned to New York for a visit with her parents but because of family difficulties was unable to return to New Mexico.[15] Rhodes remained in New Mexico during the following three years, but finally in 1906

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[13]Mrs. Rhodes had two children by her first marriage, both quite young at the time she married Rhodes. When she came to New Mexico, she brought one of the children with her and left the other with her parents in New York. Mrs. Rhodes does not explain the reason for this action in The Hired Man on Horseback.

[14]Rhodes was in the nearby town of Alamogordo, marooned by a flood, when his son was born. The newborn child became desperately ill and was not expected to live. Since no trains were running, Rhodes commandeered a locomotive, fired up, and ran it the perilous miles to Tularosa, although the track was under water the entire distance. The episode had a completely happy ending: Alan Rhodes rallied and grew healthy, and the railroad officials did not seem disposed to make an issue of the "borrowing" of their locomotive.

[15]Actually, Mrs. Rhodes never explains in The Hired Man on Horseback why she did not return to New Mexico, and the reader only assumes from a hint dropped here and there that the reason had to do with her father and mother. The following statement (page 94) is as near as she comes to an explanation: "Patiently he Gene waited in New York until I would be free to go with him back to New Mexico ."

he sold his ranch in the San Andres and joined his wife and family in Apalachin, New York. New Mexico legend has it that Rhodes left the state with two posses at his heels; and while this seems to be a decided exaggeration, it is a matter of record that a warrant for his arrest was issued shortly before his departure for the East. It seems that he had indulged in the old range custom of always butchering someone else's beef when in need of meat. Unfortunately Rhodes performed the deed in the presence of a newcomer to the West who did not know the "custom" and who promptly reported the act to the owner of the cow who apparently did not hold with the "eat the other man's beef" philosophy, at least when the beef was his own.[16] A warrant was issued charging Rhodes with larceny, and it is interesting to note that it carried the additional charge against him of "inducing" a state's witness to leave the jurisdiction of the court. This witness was the man who had originally reported

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[16]In the following brief scene from his short novel Once in the Saddle, Rhodes touches amusingly upon the practice of eating the other man's beef:

> "You eat your own beef, I see," remarked Pliny at the supper table.
> "Yes," said Ford apologetically. "Uncle Jim he said that was the best way."
> "Some do," said Pliny.
> "Yes, but how could you tell? Is my fair young face so pure and eloquent as all that?"
> Pliny poured himself a cup of steaming coffee; he broke a hot biscuit and reached for the bowl of jerky.
> "Far from it. I pounded up the jerky to make this gravy, and it was tough and stringy. Fat tender yearlin's is what you kill when they're other people's stuff."

the butchering incident, and, according to Eddy Orcutt, Rhodes's means of "inducing" consisted of a sound pistol whipping.[17]

Rhodes arrived in Apalachin, New York, on April 23, 1906 and did not return to his beloved New Mexico for two decades, although he was constantly homesick for the land of his boyhood and young manhood. He, to quote Mrs. Rhodes, "dreamed almost nightly of being back there and herding cattle and horses."[18] It snowed on the night of Rhodes's arrival in Apalachin, and he once made the remark that he never did really live in New York, that he just went back and got snowed in for twenty years.[19]

It is probable, however, that this uprooting from the environment and people which were to be his literary subject

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[17]"Passed By Here," p.48.

[18]The Hired Man on Horseback, p. 94.

[19]Despite his longing for New Mexico, Rhodes saw beauty in the East. The following description of the fictional Abington, New York, in Copper Streak Trail is actually, according to Mrs. Rhodes, a description of Apalachin:

"The hills send down a buttress to the north; against it the Susquehanna flows swift and straight for a little space, vainly chafing. Just where the high ridge breaks sharp and steep to the river's edge there is a grassy level, lulled by the sound of pleasant waters; there sleep the dead of Abingdon.

"Here is a fair and noble prospect, which in Italy or in California had been world-famed; a beauty generous and gracious--valley, upland and hill and curving river. The hills are checkered to squares, cleared fields and green-black woods; inevitably the mind goes out to those who wrought here when the forest was unbroken, and so comes back to read on the headstones the names of the quiet dead: Hill, Barton, Clark, Green, Camp, Hunt, Catlin, Giles, Sherwood, Tracy, Jewett, Lane, Gibson, Holmes, Yates, Hopkins, Goodenow, Griswold, Steele. Something stirs at your hair-roots--these are the names of the English. A few sturdy Dutch names--Boyce, Steenburg, Van Lear--and a lonely French Mercereau; the rest are unmixed English."

matter speeded, indeed may have been mainly responsible for, his success as a writer. The separation in time and distance surely added to his understanding and appreciation of the country and people he had left and unquestionably lent a nostalgic beauty to many of his pages. Also, the fact that Rhodes had much more time for his writing in the East than he had had as a rancher in New Mexico doubtless contributed to his success. And finally, perhaps most importantly, Rhodes's removal to New York brought him into contact with Henry Wallace Phillips, a well-known contributor to The Saturday Evening Post.[20] Phillips took an interest in Rhodes and invited him to his home on Staten Island, where the two wrote stories together for six weeks. "...Phillip's aid, encouragement, and instruction," says Mrs. Rhodes, "were beyond price."[21] As a matter of fact, Rhodes, who later became an outstanding Saturday Evening Post contributor in his own right, made his entry into that magazine with two stories[22] written in collaboration with Phillips and published in 1907.

With this promising start in writing accomplished, Rhodes took up farming on land belonging to his wife's parents, and for many years lived the life of a writer-farmer. He built a large house on the farm and was often paid visits

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[20] Mrs. Rhodes does not explain the circumstances of their acquaintance.

[21] The Hired Man on Horseback, p. 92.

[22] "The Numismatist" (March 2, 1907) and "The Punishment and the Crime" (April 20, 1907). Another collaborative effort by Rhodes and Phillips, a story entitled "Check," appeared in the Post in 1908. In the meantime Rhodes had sold to the magazine fiction on which Phillips had not collaborated.

by outstanding writers and editors of his day, this to his great delight, because he dearly loved to talk about writing and writers, especially his favorites among the great English masters.

From the standpoint of volume of writing, the years 1909 and 1910 were among Rhodes's best. He wrote both short stories and novelettes which dealt almost entirely with the Southwest and Southwesterners, and his work found millions of readers among the audiences of such mass-circulation magazines as The Saturday Evening Post, Cosmopolitan, and Redbook and such smaller journals as Pacific Monthly, Sunset, and Everybody's. During the 1909-1910 period The Saturday Evening Post alone carried seven of his novelettes and short stories.

After this period Rhodes settled down to a fairly steady, though by no means prolific, literary production, which lasted for the next six years. The entrance of the United States into World War I and the enlistment of his son Fred brought an almost complete halt to Rhodes's writing activities. He felt the War intensely, lost all power to write, and farmed almost day and night.[23] Finally, at the urging of the government, he did turn to writing home front propaganda, but during the War years he could bring himself to finish but one story, a novelette entitled "No Mean City," which was published in The Saturday Evening Post.

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[23] May Rhodes, The Hired Man on Horseback, p. 127.

Rhodes's preoccupation with the War is shown by the fact that the story dealt with an attempt to sabotage Elephant Butte Dam in New Mexico.

After the War Rhodes did manage to resume his writing activities, and while in the opinion of one critic at least his stories improved in quality over his earlier ones,[24] there was a decided falling off in his quantity of production. There were many reasons for this reduction in the volume of his writing, but perhaps the most important was the great amount of time and energy he used up in fighting for causes dear to him personally but not rewarding to him as a writer. This was not a trait that developed suddenly after the War, of course. He had, for example, labored long and hard by means of article-writing and correspondence for the admission of New Mexico into the Union as a state--this after his coming to New York. But he did not lessen these "outside" activities as the years went by. He spent a great deal of time and energy in 1923, for instance, proving the unsoundness of an article in The Literary Digest which criticized the accuracy of Emerson Hough's North of '36. And he never ceased to think about and try to help his friend, Albert Beacon Fall, who was convicted of bribery (unjustly, Rhodes was convinced) in the Teapot Dome scandal.

Another serious distraction for Rhodes was financial troubles. He made rather large amounts of money but simply

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[24] This is the opinion of Bernard De Voto, as expressed in The Hired Man on Horseback, p. xli.

could not manage to stay out of debt. The principal reason for this was that he was too generous and kindhearted. To quote Mrs. Rhodes: "Gene was always reluctant to press a debtor, but he would go out and move heaven and earth to raise money to loan a friend, even to borrowing it himself in order to pass it on."[25] Rhodes himself was indifferent to money, but his creditors were not. He finally went to California to try to sell his stories to the movies, but he simply did not have the temperament to succeed in Hollywood. Instead of making money to ease his financial obligations, he only lost more time and money.

In 1926, after the death of Mrs. Rhodes' parents, Rhodes and his wife returned to New Mexico. It is interesting to note that in this year Rhodes wrote "Paso por Aqui," which is considered by most critics of Rhodes's work to be his finest piece of writing.[26] The Rhodeses were given warm and affectionate welcomes wherever they went in the state. New Mexico's Governor Dillon issued a mock pardon to Rhodes for the cow butchering incident of twenty years ago, and Rhodes settled down after a while in his old home town of Tularosa to begin work on what he hoped would become his best book. This was to be an informal history of the early cattle days in New Mexico and was to treat of all his personal experiences and of the scores of his cattlemen and

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[25] The Hired Man on Horseback, p. 135.

[26] Dobie, Introduction to Best Novels and Stories of Eugene Manlove Rhodes, p. vii.

cowboy friends. It was to be called Oldtimer in New Mexico or The Silent Past.

The book, however, was not destined to be completed.[27] Financial difficulties did not permit Rhodes to devote enough time to it, and in June 1928 he suffered a severe heart attack. After this Rhodes's health failed rapidly, and he became tormented by bronchitis.

Finally, in 1931 Rhodes and his wife went to California in the hope that the ocean breezes would lessen the bronchitis from which Rhodes now suffered constantly. Rhodes had written only a few stories during his five-year stay in New Mexico, and he and his wife were now in almost desperate financial circumstances. Mrs. Rhodes tells of taking their last thirty-four cents at one time to mail a manuscript. She adds:

> Not all the California sunshine could brighten the knowledge that we were old and broken and practically penniless. Could we have had the money Gene so generously loaned to his friends, and which they didn't pay back, we would have been in comparatively comfortable circumstances.[28]

Rhodes simply did not have enough strength to do much writing during the final years of his life, but his illness caused no falling off in quality. It must be at least in part The Trusty Knaves (1931), The Proud Sheriff (1932), and Beyond the Desert (1934), that Bernard De Voto had in mind

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[27] Nor has the fragment ever been published except for excerpts in The Hired Man on Horseback.

[28] The Hired Man on Horseback, p. 240.

when he spoke of the superiority of Rhodes's stories written after 1920 to those written before that date.[29]

Rhodes died of a heart attack on the morning of June 27, 1934. In accordance with his long-standing request, his body was taken to the summit of his beloved San Andres Mountains in New Mexico for burial. The marker placed on his grave dug in the white gypsum bore only the simple inscription:

"PASO POR AQUI"
EUGENE MANLOVE RHODES
JAN. 19, 1869 - JUNE 27, 1934

Such a brief outline of facts as that of the preceding pages cannot begin to do justice to the rich and complicated personality that was Eugene Manlove Rhodes. But perhaps it has suggested that he was, to use the words of J. H. Jackson, "a kind man, a cantankerous man, a generous, lovable, crotchety, fearless, intensely individual human being."[30]

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[29] See footnote 25 on page 15.

[30] "Rhodes of the Real West," Saturday Review of Literature, XVIII (October 15, 1938), 18.

CHAPTER II

RHODES'S NOVELS

The casual reader of Rhodes's stories is likely to come away from the experience with the feeling that, despite a sparkling style and an unfailingly conscientious despiction of rangeland details, Rhodes is, after all, just another writer of "horse operas." Do not his plots almost without exception concern themselves with the lawless aspects of the West? Do they not feature violent action? Are not his heroes rugged individualists? His villains unrelieved blackguards? His heroines paragons of virtue? Is not the myth of Western camaraderie exalted repeatedly?

The answer to all of these questions is "yes," and yet the fact remains that in all that Rhodes wrote he was true to the spirit and the history of the West as he knew it. Rhodes's fidelity to realism in recording the details of cattle country existence is generally admitted.[1] That his works have an even more meaningful realism is asserted by Bernard De Voto in his most important statement about Rhodes:

...the pattern of thought and feeling in his books is that of the era he wrote about. It is the record of the deposit

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[1]See Chapter IV of this work.

which experience in the range country left on the minds of those who underwent it. I am willing to let that define realism in fiction.[2]

A review of some of Rhodes's most important novels and a brief review of certain aspects of Western development will make De Voto's assertion more meaningful. This review should also establish beyond all doubt that while Rhodes may have written social history, this was merely incidental. The man was first and last a storyteller, a romancer. His stories are strong in plot and full of complications and adventure.

The Little Eohippus[3] was Rhodes's first full-length novel,[4] and in many of the cattle country attitudes that it expresses as well as in its stress on plot complication, it is as typically Rhodesian as anything he ever wrote. The Little Eohippus, as are most of Rhodes's stories, is set in south-central New Mexico, a land of mountains, of desert and semi-desert, and of the fertile valley of the Rio Grande. While there is farming in the river valley, it is a minor enterprise. This is cattle country.

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[2]Introduction to May Davison Rhodes's The Hired Man on Horseback (Boston, 1938), p. xxxiii.

[3]This was the title of the story when it first appeared as a serial in The Saturday Evening Post in 1914. It was published in book form under the title of Bransford in Arcadia (New York, 1914).

[4]Rhodes's stories are not easy to classify according to length. None of his novels can be considered long, the top limit being about 75,000 words. Others range between 15,000 and 20,000 and can probably safely be called novelettes. Still others are in the 20,000 to 50,000 word range, and to call them novelettes or short novels is probably simply a matter of preference. The Little Eohippus is approximately 50,000 words long.

Jeff Bransford is a cowboy working for the traditional "forty and found." He accidentally encounters Miss Ellinor Hoffman, an Eastern girl visiting friends in this region, when he has a minor riding mishap near the spot where she is preparing to enjoy a solitary picnic. They are immediately attracted to one another, and Miss Hoffman intimates that if Bransford would like to see her again, he should attend the masquerade ball being given the next night at the Lake ranch as a going-away party for her and some other young ladies staying there.

Lake, rancher, bank owner, and man of influence, is an enemy of Bransford (reason not given), but Bransford attends the party uninvited nevertheless. He fathoms Miss Hoffman's disguise, makes his own identity known to her, and they disengage themselves from the party to walk alone in the garden and talk. Miss Hoffman, an accomplished coquette, manages to make the unsophisticated Bransford thoroughly miserable. At the unmasking hour Bransford beats a quick retreat and in his haste leaves behind a noseguard (he came dressed as a football player!).

At some time before the break-up of the party (the time is definitely established), Lake's bank in the town of Arcadia some few miles distant is broken into and robbed of $30,000. A noseguard is found at the scene of the crime, and when it is learned that Bransford attended the masquerade ball attired as a football player but disappeared from sight long before the end of the party, he is accused of

the robbery, arrested, and given an immediate preliminary hearing.

Now nothing would be simpler than for Bransford to reveal that he has a perfect alibi: he had not left the party but had been walking in the garden with Miss Hoffman when the crime was committed. Bransford, however, is loath to cause the young lady even the slight embarrassment of having to admit that she was alone for an hour in the garden with a man! He resolves, therefore, that he will clear himself without using the alibi by uncovering the real criminal or else spend the rest of his life in Mexico (if he is lucky enough to escape a hanging noose). With this decision made, he escapes from the room in which his preliminary hearing is being held and begins his efforts to reach the Mexican border. A large part of the story deals with these efforts, and the climactic episode is a chase with the posse in which he is assisted by a young "boy" who turns out in the end to have been Miss Hoffman, who decided not to return East in the face of Bransford's trouble.

Bransford reaches Mexico, and his friends at home clear him by uncovering the real robber--Lake himself, who burglarized his own bank for the insurance money involved. Bransford returns home; Miss Hoffman is still there, and the implication is that their marriage will soon take place. As an interesting final bit, Bransford reveals that he owns a copper mine in Arizona which nets him "all the way from five to ten thousand clear per each and every year" (he has been

working as a cowboy simply because he enjoys the life and is building up a little ranch on the side). This revelation is significant because it means that he can support Miss Hoffman in the manner to which she has been accustomed--a very important point in the cowboy code of reverence toward women.

It is easy enough to criticize the plot of The Little Eohippus, as it is most of Rhodes's plots. If Bransford had revealed his whereabouts at the time of the robbery, his problem would have been solved. But it was unthinkable to Rhodes that Bransford should take the easy way out at the expense of even minor embarrassment of a lady. And besides, such action would have been inconsistent with Rhodes's concept of the self-reliant nature of the cowboy. Bransford resolves at once that if he cannot handle his own problem, he will suffer the consequences. In connection with this, it may be a dramatic weakness that Bransford's predicament is finally solved not by his own efforts but by those of his friends, but it is definitely in line with Rhodes's belief in the camaraderie of the West, the friend's rallying to the aid of a man in trouble.

The episodes and situations in The Little Eohippus are, as in most of Rhodes's stories, admittedly romantic and fanciful: Bransford's escape from the courtroom, his being assisted in eluding the posse by Miss Hoffman in disguise, his own use of disguise to dupe his pursuers in another episode, and so forth. The critical reader can only be reminded again that Rhodes was a storyteller. While there is

realism in many aspects of Rhodes's work, he drew his concept of story from the romancers of literature--from Blackmore, Stevenson (whose work he admired above all others), Conan Doyle, O. Henry, and their like.

Rhodes's next novel was Copper Streak Trail.[5] In this work of some 55,000 words Rhodes used characters which seem to be distillations of earlier ones and prototypes of those to follow in later writings: the garrulous, shrewd old Southwesterner whose abundant speech contains a rich vein of wisdom; the young newcomer to the Southwest, eager companion of the oldtimer, who proves himself a man; the loyal friend who risks a fortune or his life to do a favor. In addition, this novel contains an excellent cross-section of Rhodes's reflections on society and, while not in abundance, some of his most effective descriptive work.

Copper Streak Trail is the story of a fabulous copper strike in Arizona. Pete Johnson, an oldtimer who has spent his life ranching and prospecting in the Southwest, and Stanley Mitchell, a young man from a wealthy Eastern family, stumble onto a hill of extremely high-grade copper ore worth literally millions, a "warty, snubby little gray hill in an insignificant cluster of little gray hills" in the barren,

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[5]Two other books by Rhodes, Stepsons of Light (Boston, 1921) and West Is West (New York, 1917), preceded Copper Streak Trail (Boston, 1922) in print as books. Copper Streak Trail appeared as a serial in The Saturday Evening Post in 1917, however, and Stepsons of Light did not appear in that magazine until 1920. West Is West is a rather loosely tied-together collection of Rhodes's writings, most of which had had previous magazine appearance.

isolated country near the Mexican border. Mitchell has come West to make his own fortune, and it appears that with this find he will have no difficulty in achieving his goal; but almost immediately complications appear. A gang of greedy men headed by Mayer Zurich, a wealthy merchant-banker in the little desert town of Cobre, discovers Pete and Stan's secret, and immediately they begin to make trouble for the two men and attempt to trail them to their discovery. Pete and Stan, however, have no intention of locating on their strike until they have interested Eastern capital in it, for they know that if they locate prematurely, they will have a fight on their hands with Zurich and his gang.

A closely integrated subplot which runs through the novel concerns the estrangement of Stan from a wealthy old uncle in New York because of a misunderstanding between the two about a girl that Stan is engaged to. Also involved in the subplot is the scheme of a cousin of Stan's to further blacken Stan with the wealthy uncle and to ruin him generally by hiring Zurich to make all manner of trouble for him. The chief motive for this seems to be a sort of Iagoian hate of Stan's youth, position in life, and good looks.

An important part of the story deals with a trip of Pete's to Stan's home town in New York to interest capital in their mine and to attempt to discover who is directing Zurich to make trouble for Stan. (Stan cannot make this trip himself because he is in jail after being framed in a robbery.) Pete is remarkably successful, even to the point

of ironing out the difficulty between Stan and his uncle, who sends his representative back with Pete to look into the mine venture.

The final section of the novel--after Pete's return to Arizona--moves at a fast pace. Pete clears Stan of the robbery charge, and the two of them together with a trusted friend of Pete's and the representative from the East start for the copper hill. Jackson Carr, another friend of Pete's, is to meet them at a given point in the desert with a wagon-load of water and supplies. Zurich has had Pete carefully watched, and almost immediately he and three of his confederates begin pursuit of Pete and his party.

Pete and Stan and the other two in their group hold their lead on Zurich, however, but when they seem to have victory in their grasp, fate suddenly deals them a stunning blow. They come upon Jackson Carr, horseless, stumbling with fatigue. During the previous night, they learn, his wagon team strayed away from camp. That morning Carr had sent his young son Bobby to bring them in, but hours passed, and Bobby did not return. Carr set out on foot to look for Bobby, knowing that some misadventure must have befallen him in this trackless, waterless desert. Bobby himself had carried no water.

Without even a second's hesitation Pete Johnson casts aside all thoughts of a fortune in copper and begins giving directions for a hunt for Bobby Carr.

"But your mine?" said Carr. He pointed to a slow dust streak that passed along the north. "I saw you coming--two

bunches. Ain't those fellows after your mine? 'Cause if they are, they'll sure find it. You've been riding straight for them little hills out there all alone in the big middle of the plain."

"Damn the mine!" said Pete. "We've been playing. We've got man's work to do now. No; there's no use splitting up and sending one or two to the mine. That mine is a four-man job. So is this; and a better one. We're all needed here. To hell with the mine! Come on!"[6]

The stage is now set for one of the most amazing character reversals in literature. While Pete and the others are looking for Bobby, Zurich and his men push on to the copper hill and file their location notice. On their return they encounter Frank Boland (the Eastern representative) who has been left behind so that Carr might use his horse in the search.

"...There was a boy lost, or hurt--I don't know which" [Boland tells Zurich and the others]. "But it's all right now. They lit two fires. That was to be the signal if there was nothing seriously wrong. I let the boy's father take my horse--man by the name of Carr."

"And the others? That was Pete Johnson, wasn't it? He went after the boy?"

"Yes. And young Mitchell and Joe Benavides."

Zurich glanced aside at his companions. Dorsey's back was turned. Jim Scarboro was swearing helplessly under his breath. Tall Eric had taken off his hat and fumbled with it; the low sun was ruddy in his bright hair. Perhaps it was that same sun which flamed so swiftly in Zurich's face.

"We might as well go back," he said dully, and turned his horse's head toward the little huddle of hills in the southwest.[7]

The morning following Bobby Carr's rescue, Pete and the others decide to visit the mine site to confirm what they already know--that Zurich and his men have already established their location notice. They find the notice as they

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[6]P. 311

[7]Pp. 315-316.

expect to, but the final paragraph of it is not as expected:

> And the same shall be known as the Bobby Carr Mine.[8]
>
> WITNESSES
> Jim Scarboro
> William Dorsey
> Eric Anderson
> C. Mayer Zurich
>
> LOCATORS
> Peter Wallace Johnson
> Stanley Mitchell

There is a note folded into the location notice. It reads:

> Pete: We did not know about the boy, or we would have helped, of course. Only for him you had us beat. So this squares that up.
> Your location does not take in quite all the hill. So we located the little end piece for ourselves. We think that is about right.
>
> Yours truly
> C. Mayer Zurich[9]

While the ending of this novel may be criticized on the grounds that it is totally inconsistent with the established character of the men involved, there is no denying the effectiveness of it. Furthermore, it provides an important commentary on Rhodes's faith in human nature (see Chapter V of this work for further discussion of this point) and particularly on his concept of the effect of Southwestern traditions and mores on human nature.

Copper Streak trail has an additional importance in that it contains in the person of Pete Johnson the finest character portrayal that Rhodes had achieved at the point in his writing career. With the possible exception of that charming rogue MacGregor in West Is West, all of Rhodes's

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[8]p. 318.
[9]p. 318.

previous characters had been subordinated to story complications; but Pete emerges as a fully realized character, and reader interest centers at least as much in the nature of the man himself as in what he does or in what happens to him. He completely dominates the story insofar as character interest is concerned.

Stepsons of Light, Rhodes's next novel, is a crime story involving a murder and the attempts of the murderers to pin the deed on an innocent cowboy. The plot in its sentimental treatment of the women characters, in the winking at the mandates of the law by a jail keeper in order to further the ends of justice, and in the complete ability of the cowboy to cope with his predicament illustrates Western attitudes and beliefs which Rhodes understood well. The final section of this novel is made up of a trial scene--a brilliant combination of suspense and hilarity--which bitingly spoofs the formal pretensions of the courtroom and the men who perform there, the attorneys-at-law. The novel is leisurely paced with a slow introduction of all of the characters, a long digression in which Rhodes discusses realists and romanticists and casts his lot with the latter, and a rather considerable detailing of roundup activities and cowboy manners.

Once in the Saddle,[10] a short novel of some 30,000 words, contains passages of humor, description, and dialogue

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[10]Boston, 1927. This novel ran serially in The Saturday Evening Post in 1925.

as good as anything Rhodes ever wrote, but it also reveals better than any of his other works the extent to which he sometimes failed in the mastery of his plots. The story opens with Pliny Mullins, a foot-loose cowboy-gambler, currently in the money, settling down in the little foothills town of Salamanca for the purpose of entering competition with a local mine owner. This tycoon quarters his imported foreign labor in shoddy, cheerless houses at exorbitant rent and requires them to trade at the company store. Pliny, in some way not made entirely clear, plans to start an independent community to offer to the miners pleasant homes and reasonably priced food. The mine owner tries a series of tricks to discourage Pliny from his plan but is unsuccessful.

Plinky Ford, nephew of an old friend of Pliny's, owns a ranch near Salamanca, and Pliny rides out to visit him and also to warn him that Malloch, the mine owner, has learned that something is wrong with Ford's homestead claim and apparently has designs on the Ford ranch. Upon investigation they discover that Ford's uncle had had the place surveyed incorrectly and that as a result the young rancher has been living on and improving land to which he has no legal claim. Pliny and young Ford decide that perhaps the land record can be amended and that, if not, Ford can desert-claim his present place and homestead the tract which has been actually recorded in his name. The mistake, therefore, becomes a nuisance and an inconvenience but nothing more.

Following this episode the story shifts to Ford's point of view. The young rancher joins one of Malloch's ranch hands for patrol duty in the rugged hill country, the purpose being to keep sheep from crossing into cattle grasslands--a regular occurrence after heavy rains. On this expedition Ford is accidentally killed in a spill from his horse, and the story then becomes a study of treachery and retribution. Cal Pelly, the man with Ford, decides to leave the dead man where he has fallen (knowing that he may well never be found), take Ford's horse and clothes, and rob the mine payroll which is coming in that day, believing that the crime will be placed on Ford.

Pelly carries out his scheme and thinks he has successfully made it appear that Ford has ridden to the railroad many miles away and boarded a freight train. Pelly then circles back to Ford's cabin, and while he is in the process of burying his loot, he is surprised by Pliny Mullins, who has been hiding in the cabin, expecting just such a move by Pelly. The story ends with the implication that Pelly will hang for the murder of Ford (a rather harsh fate even for such a scoundrel) because heavy rains have wiped out all signs which might have led Pelly back to the body to prove that death was accidental.

The story is obviously badly put together. Rhodes takes up one story line, gets the reader interested, and then drops it. Pliny's plan to go into competition with Malloch is unconvincing because it is never made clear how

he intends to do it: the long episode of the incorrectly surveyed homestead seems pointless in view of young Ford's death (this death, incidentally, befalling a merry, sky-larking youth, as it does, is a stunning jolt to any unity of effect the story might aspire to). And the final portion dealing with the robbery and capture is really unrelated to the rest of the story. It is, in fact, in large measure a psychological study of Pelly's remorse! (It seems, incidentally, that Rhodes could have done better than to name his three main characters Pliny, Pinky, and Pelly.)

The fact that Once in the Saddle is even readable, as indeed it is, and never dull is splendid testimony to what Rhodes could do with words in description and dialogue, with individual episodes, and with character portrayals.

By strange contrast Rhodes in the following year wrote "Paso Por Aqui," which, as previously mentioned, is considered by many critics to be his masterpiece. The words of the title have become almost inseparably linked with Rhodes's name, and the story was made into a successful motion picture called Four Faces West in 1948.

The plot of "Paso Por Aqui," a novelette of some 18,000 words, is simple and unadorned. Ross McEwen, a cowboy who has committed armed robbery, spends a desperate forty-eight hours eluding several posses; he finally manages to outwit his pursuers and when he has only a few miles to go to reach the protection of the Mexican border, stumbles unexpectedly, and in a state of near collapse, upon an isolated desert

ranchhouse in which he finds a Mexican family helpless and at the point of death from el garrotillo, the strangler--diptheria.

With the simple statement, "I am here to help you," McEwen abandons his flight and begins his ministerings to the stricken family. Constantly for several days he discharges faithfully his self-appointed duties, even though delirious most of the time because of his own over-powering fatigue. Finally help arrives (McEwen had been signaling with a brush fire at night) in the form of a doctor and nurses from Alamogordo, together with Sheriff Pat Garrett. Garrett immediately recognizes McEwen as the bandit he has been looking for but sees with equal promptness the job the fugitive has been doing. The sheriff, then, taking the administering of justice into his own hands, helps McEwen to the escape that he voluntarily gave up to save the lives of the Mexican family.

Bernard De Voto has concisely summed up the importance of "Paso Por Aqui" for one who would understand the beliefs and loyalties that made Rhodes think and write as he did:

> ...McEwen had passed this way, and what he had done here was good and not evil, was done unhesitatingly and courageously, with manhood. He had done what had to be done, not considering himself....He had been true to the need, the admiration, the ideal of the little people, the people on whose side Gene Rhodes had enlisted. They were the ordinary citizens building the commonwealth, living together. They were simple people and it followed that their virtues were simple: courage, loyalty, fortitude, helpfulness, sympathy, humor, endurance: the ability to disregard themselves when facing the need of others, the ability to work with others, an unconquerable decency and dignity, an unthinking but basic assertion of the worth of human life. They might be,

as McEwen was, speckled with qualities not well thought of in themselves, but if the metal which they showed in the testing-fire was the right one--what matter?...Those virtues were what enabled society to exist and endure in the cattle kingdom. That is the important thing for literary criticism, not that Rhodes was making an affirmation of democracy.[11]

Rhodes's next two novels, The Trusty Knaves[12] and The Proud Sheriff,[13] again draw on crime for their basic situations. The former is heavily spiced with racy humor so characteristic of Rhodes and is a good example of the camaraderie of Southwesterners that Rhodes believed in: a small group made up of a rancher, a miner, an Eastern greenhorn, and an outlaw form a self-appointed committee to break up a syndicate of thieves. This story has remained one of Rhodes's most popular and has been reprinted in Best Novels and Stories and also in a recent Dell Publishing Company pocket book edition. The Proud Sheriff is Rhodes's only attempt at what might be called a detective story. The narrative line concerns the running to earth of an unknown murderer who has killed a small-town merchant for unknown reasons, and as a mystery it is interest-holding but not especially challenging. Rhodes has integrated into this story a minimum of description and range detail, but it is saved from being a rather flat novel by an amusing and colorful main character, Sheriff Spinal Maginnis. In Maginnis,

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[11]Introduction to The Hired Man on Horseback, pp. xxxvii-xxxviii.

[12]Boston, 1933. Published serially in The Saturday Evening Post in 1931.

[13]Boston, 1935. Published serially in The Saturday Evening Post in 1932.

Rhodes creates the ideal lawman from the Westerner's standpoint; and through this character Rhodes once more emphasizes the cattleman's concept of law in his society.

Beyond the Desert,[14] Rhodes's final novel, was written in 1934 under stress of great financial need when he was a sick man, a dying man, in fact; yet there is in its pages no inkling of the adversities under which it was produced. The plot structure is closely knit, the descriptive virtuosity missing in The Proud Sheriff is back again, and the story seems in many ways to be a final summing up and restatement of Rhodes's faith in the decency of the little people and in their ability to overcome the forces of evil through cooperation.

Beyond the Desert has no one "main" character, but the central problem of the story belongs to Bud Copeland, who becomes involved in a desperate fight to save his ranch from greedy men. Unknown to Copeland the water on his mountain ranch in the hidden valley of Olvidada is the only water in the region fit for servicing locomotives, all other water available being so alkiline that it will hopelessly foul the boilers of the engines. As a matter of fact, the proposed railroad which is to cut through this mountain and desert region of New Mexico has not become an actuality because no one knows about the quality of the water on Copeland's ranch--no one, that is, except Anson Hunter, a

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[14]Boston, 1934.

geologist employed by the railroad company to look for soft water in the area.

Hunter goes to Jake Fowler, rich merchant-banker-rancher of the country, who has a mortgage on Bud Copeland's ranch. Together with Bat Cremony, deputy sheriff and Fowler's right-hand man, they make a deal. The bottom has temporarily fallen out of the cattle market, and it is almost a certainty that Copeland will be unable to meet his mortgage obligation on time. The deal is this: Hunter will betray the railroad company by not telling them about the good water on Copeland's place; Bat Cremony by rustling and other depredations will make it an absolute certainty that Copeland cannot pay his mortgage; and Fowler will foreclose on Copeland the day the mortgage is due. The three will then lease the Copeland water to the railroad for a tremendous fee and split the proceeds.

All goes as planned for a while. But Copeland comes to town to see about getting an extension on his mortgage which will be due in a few months. Fowler refuses the extension, but in his eagerness to acquire possession of the Sprawling H (Copeland's ranch), he makes Copeland a liberal offer for outright sale. Copeland, with long family attachment to his mountain spread, refuses to sell. While Copeland is in town, Bat Cremony, together with a few hand-picked men, raids the Sprawling H, driving off a large number of cattle, scattering the rest, and burning the ranchhouse.

This resorting to violence proves in the end to be the undoing of the Fowler-Cremony-Hunter alliance. Bud Copeland's friends rally about him in an instant. There is Easy Shane McFarland, who even before the raid has offered to sell his desert ranch and go partners with Copeland in order to meet the Fowler mortgage. There are John Marble, Copeland's mountain neighbor-rancher, and Marble's old friend, Dan Corby, who is just passing through on a cattle-buying expedition but who stays to take a hand in Copeland's trouble on general principles. And there are "Gradual" George Walker, an ex-employee of Bat Cremony who quit when he saw the latter try to mistreat a horse, and "Lithpin Tham" Clark, who backed down Cremony in the horse-abuse episode and therefore is considered to be a man who "will do to take along" in spite of the fact that he has a shady past of tin-horn gambling and possibly other unsavory activities.

With this redoubtable crew (how Rhodes loved to assemble such a group in his stories!) nothing is impossible. A little reasoning based on Fowler's eagerness to get possession of Copeland's ranch puts them on guard against the Fowler-Cremony combine, and after this they begin to methodically destroy their opposition. After rounding up as many of Copeland's scattered cattle as they can find, they split up. Copeland and John Marble go to town to try to get a lead on who the raiders were, and the rest go looking for Copeland's rustled cattle.

In town Copeland and Marble find the weak link in the enemy's chain when Anson Hunter offers Copeland his sympathy for the burning of his house. Copeland and Marble had been very careful not to mention to anyone in town that the house had been burned in the hope that someone would make such a break as this. Now the villains' structure has begun to crack; and as Hunter "comes unravelled" when the pressure is put on him, it is soon lying in ruins about them. Cremony is wounded in a gun battle as he tries to escape, and the three of them--Fowler, Cremony, and Hunter--are held for trial. Dan Corby advances Bud the money to meet his mortgage, but money is really no problem anyway since the truth about the water on the Copeland ranch is now known. Bud Copeland's rustled cattle are recovered in a warmly sympathetic episode involving Lithpin Tham's knowledge of outlaw hiding places and his reluctance to reveal this evidence of past shady existence, now that he has been accepted as a part of such a forthright company of men. In his revelation, however, he only grows in their estimation.

The critical examiner of Rhodes's novels and stories must have some insight into the development of the West and the nature of its social structure if he is to reconcile them with De Voto's statement, previously quoted, that Rhodes's fiction accurately reflects the traditions and attitudes which experience impressed upon the pioneers of the Southwest. No detailed discussion of Western history

can be made here, of course, but a few points as they specifically relate to Rhodes's work must be mentioned.[15]

To begin with, it should be remembered that the development of the American West (which De Voto defines as all land west of the one hundredth meridian[16]) did not follow the consistent pattern of earlier conquests of the frontier in which the pioneers first settled the land and were then followed by such agents of civilization as bankers, real estate speculators, and various other kinds of money lenders. Because of the great scarcity of water in the West (no navigable streams and scant rainfall), money had to supply those means of development which nature's bounty had given other regions. Railroads had to be built to take the place of rivers; wells had to be dug and windmills erected to supplement rain; countless miles of barbed wire had to be strung because this was not a land of small, lush pastures, easily fenced.

When the settlers arrived in the West, the bankers or their representatives were there to lend them money for farming or ranching equipment; the railroad land agents were there to sell them land that the United States government had given to the railroads. These money-lenders (sometimes they were well-to-do merchants) and railroad agents were

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[15]In the following discussion of the development and social structure of the West, I am greatly indebted to Bernard De Voto's splendid essay "The Plundered Province" which is included in his book Forays and Rebuttals (Boston, 1936).

[16]Ibid., p. 48.

also there to levy all that the traffic would bear in interest rates. Ten per cent was the best to hope for; twelve per cent was common; eighteen per cent was not rare, and sometimes two per cent per month was asked and got. Under such conditions settlers were, of course, constantly in debt, and foreclosures of mortgages were tragically common. It is probably no exaggeration to say that the real villain of the West so far as most settlers were concerned was not the Indian or the rustler or the drought but the man behind the interest rate! That Rhodes was very much aware of what high interest rates had done to the west is shown in the following observation by Easy McFarland in Beyond the Desert:

"....Tell you what--all the wars, cyclones, floods, fires, earthquakes and shipwrecks haven't caused as much misery, all told, as 6 per cent. I say this on best authority--I guessed it out myself. That is 6 per cent, but 10 per cent is blue ruin."[17]

It is no accident, therefore, that in many instances the main villains in Rhodes's stories are bankers, financiers, or wealthy merchants who lend money in the hope of foreclosing mortgages. That he paints such men in an unrelieved shade of black may be an artistic flaw in character portrayal; but in expressing his own consuming resentment of these men, he was doubtless expressing the common feeling of the West in the time of which he wrote.

Lesser villains in Rhodes's stories are likely to be officers of the law who are in league with the money-lenders.

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[17]p. 19.

This tendency of Rhodes to portray the general class of lawmen unsympathetically (there are individual exceptions, of course, such as Spinal Maginnis in The Proud Sheriff) and the distrust of and defiance of the law in general that Rhodes's characters exhibit can, like his selection of banker villains, be explained by a quick glance at another aspect of Western development. Because of the completely unrealistic provisions of the Homestead Act, the Western cattleman was faced with two alternatives--break the law or go bankrupt. He wanted to exist; so he of course broke the law. From the standpoint of grazing a herd of cattle or sheep on the submarginal Western land, 160 acres was a joke, and so was 640 acres, the figure which Congress eventually authorized for desert claims. Under another law Western homesteaders were required to grow trees on their land, something, as Mr. De Voto points out, that God had not attempted.[18] But the cattleman was breaking the law if he did not grow trees. The noted historian Walter Prescott Webb says:

> ...the pioneers made the adaptation, defied and evaded the law, and set up in the Great Plains an extra-legal system of landholding which caused many of them to be looked upon as criminals and perjurers....Practice, or custom, first worked out a new land system in the Great Plains, and law cautiously followed after.[19]

Very often the action in Rhodes's plots concerns the breaking of the law by decent men. Rhodes's attitude on

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[18] Forays and Rebuttals, p. 61.
[19] The Great Plains (Boston, 1931), p. 387.

such action is expressed clearly in the following comment by one of his story characters: "...a man that keeps a foolish law is only a fool--but a man who doesn't break a wicked law is knave and coward, or both, and fool besides."[20]

When a lawman in one of Rhodes's stories is presented sympathetically, he is often very much aware that he cannot serve justice and carry out the letter of the law at the same time. Thus we hear a deputy sheriff say: "'Tis an old stratagem to call oppression law, and resistance to oppression, lawlessness."[21] And we hear this exchange between Sheriff Spinal Maginnis and a friend who is questioning his tactics:

Friend: "But to keep back vital evidence? You are supposed to be a servant of the law, ain't you?"

Maginnis: "Supposed is right. Me, I sort of aim to deal out justice--which isn't exactly the same thing."[22]

The burning individuality which marks almost all of Rhodes's cowboy and rancher characters again finds a plausible explanation in the conditions of range country life. These men were, after all, pioneers of a new type of American frontier, and they extracted a living from a land that was stern indeed. These facts alone were enough to assure a strong degree of self-reliance. In addition, however, the scarcity of neighbors that was a certainty because ranches simply could not be located close together and the fact that

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[20] West Is West, p. 161.
[21] Best Novels and Stories, p. 308.
[22] The Proud Sheriff, p. 76.

the nature of a cowboy's duties would often mean that he must spend days, weeks, or even months by himself could not help adding tremendously to his sense of self-sufficiency. Finally, there was the fact that every man in the cattle business was completely responsible for his own decisions and actions. The rancher who held his cattle in the hope that the price of beef would rise next season, the trail boss who had to decide whether or not to take a herd across a swollen river, the cowboy who had to decide ownership of a calf, had only himself to blame if his judgment should prove wrong. Under such conditions individuality could hardly do other than flourish.

Existing side by side with this individuality, however, there was a strong spirit of camaraderie and cooperation, and Rhodes has probably captured it more effectively than any other writer about the West. This spirit was no myth born of sentimental memories and taken over by fiction writers, but a very real thing. Cooperation was necessary for survival. Without community round-ups, participated in sometimes by as many as a dozen ranches, ranchers would have gone bankrupt through loss of stock. With the great scarcity of water in most places, the most cooperative forms of sharing were essential. And with a property as mobile as cattle, constant organization was necessary to prevent wholesale theft.

While such forced cooperation no doubt led to some conflicts, it also brought about a spirit of fellowship. But

the spirit of camaraderie is more easily explained on another basis. Rhodes himself has set it forth in the novel that he called his favorite.[23]

> It is a singular thing that with the Bar Cross were found the top ropers, crack riders, sure shots--not only the slickest cowmen, but also the wisest cow ponies. Our foremen were "cowmen right," our wranglers held the horses, our cooks would fry anything once. But you know how it is--your own organization--firm, farm or factory--is doubtless the best of its kind. No? You surprise me. You have missed much--faith in others, hope for others, comradeship.
>
> It is laughable to recall that men of other brands disputed the headship of the Bar Cross. Nor was this jest or bravado; the poor fellows were sincere enough. Indeed, we thought this pathetic loyalty rather admirable than otherwise....
>
> The Bar Cross men smiled, knowing what they knew. That sure knowledge was the foundation of the gay and holdfast spirit they brought to confront importunate life. No man wanted to be the weak link of that strong chain; each brought to his meanest task the earnestness that is remarked upon when Mr. Ty Cobb slides into second base; they bent every energy on the thing they did at the joyful time of doing it....
>
> In that high eagerness of absorption, a man "working for the brand" did not, could not, center all thoughts on self; he trusted his fellows, counted upon them, joyed in their deeds. And to forget self in the thought of others is for so long to reach life at its highest.[24]

Even more than Rhodes's heroes and villains, the women in his stories are probably in need of being related to the pattern of Western social ideals. Without exception his heroines are virtuous, innocent, radiantly pure, and lovely, and their suitors stand in hushed and reverent awe before them. Even Bernard De Voto, while explaining this phenomenon of Rhodes's stories, could not help wondering "why an artist who could differentiate the colors of grasses under

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[23] May Rhodes, The Hired Man on Horseback, p. 161.
[24] Stepsons of Light, pp. 17-19.

a five-mile-distant wind never bothered to observe what a woman looks like."[25] The following quotation epitomizes Rhodes's attitude toward women in his stories, though it is only fair to add that the passage comes from his first published story when he was making his initial attempts at self-expression.

> What shall I say of her here, the brown-eyed maid for whom this deed was done? Naught of her beauty; though there were those for whom earth held no fairer sight. But that, in the light of her pure eyes all evil things slunk away ashamed; that the beautiful soul behind the fair face encompassed her about with womanly sweetness, with kindly charity and cheerful hope...[26]

While it is almost a certainty that Rhodes was influenced by the heavy strain of romantic sentimentality in popular fiction during the formative years of his career, the fact remains that his romantic presentation of women was true to Western ideals of chivalry. That these ideals constituted a social myth is doubtless true, but that the myth was very much in existence cannot be denied. De Voto has this to say about it:

> These inconceivably feminine girls supersaturated with sweetness and offensively chaste accurately represent a sentiment of the cattle country which was part of and essential to its adaptation. That had no relation whatever to, no bearing on, the girls a cowboy visited in town on Saturday night. They expressed a necessary social ideal of the cattle country, and you may see how such energies work out in any treatise on sociology.[27]

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[25] Introduction to May Rhodes's The Hired Man on Horseback, p. xviii.

[26] "The Hour and the Man," Out West, XVI (January, 1902), 44.

[27] Introduction to May Rhodes's The Hired Man on Horseback, p. xxxiii.

Two factors combined to produce this ideal. One was the great scarcity of women on the Western frontier as compared to the male population, and the other was the fact that a cowboy's work often separated him from any feminine company for months at a time. These facts may not make Rhodes's heroines any more palatable to the present-day reader, but they should at least make them more understandable.

Rhodes was a narrative technician of strong but uneven ability. The choice of material for his plots was always a story teller's choice--melodramatic, romantic, and adventurous--and his plots themselves were intricately planned and full of complication interest, but there was still sometimes a place in them for strong character portraits. And always, with complete consistency, Rhodes's plots were built upon and reflect factors inherent in the social structure of the cattle kingdom: the necessity for assuming responsibility for one's own actions, the equal necessity for cooperation and loyalty, the concern with justice rather than the strict enforcement of statutory laws, the prejudice against money lenders, and the veneration-of-women myth.

The complete record of the beliefs, the fears, the loves, and the hates of the men who pioneered in cattle raising can be found in the plot complications of Rhodes's stories.

CHAPTER III

RHODES AS A LITERARY STYLIST

Among those literary people who have made critical pronouncements on Rhodes, there is one point of common agreement: He was a literary stylist of high degree and great success. As a matter of fact, the highest praise that has been accorded Rhodes has concerned the way he said what he had to say.

Bernard De Voto has perhaps had the most to say about Rhodes's style, and he has said it eloquently. To him Rhodes's writing is notable for its restraint and simplicity, but his simplicity is "no more naive than Huxley's and no less artless than Swift's."[1] And his dialogue is the best spoken by Western characters since Mark Twain.[2] In praise of Rhodes's ability to describe the Western scene, however, De Voto is most specific:

> ....it is...his rendition of the Western country that I for one most sincerely and enviously admire. Perhaps one must have grown up in the mountains and tried to put their feel and appearance into words, in order to appreciate fully the sureness of Rhodes's pen....I think of one small scene, one of many, no more than two or three paragraphs: the moment when the dark changes at a camp high on the slope of a mountain, the stars still bright, the cook already at his

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[1] Introduction to May Rhodes's The Hired Man on Horseback (Boston, 1938), p. xlii.

[2] Ibid.

fire, the night-wrangler coming in with the mount. Rhodes's hero wakes to that tremendous unreality, and in five inches of type the thing is done so that your very bones and lungs ache with remembered rock and cold, your eyes with remembered darkness where the roof-pitch of the world falls away below you, and remembered wood smoke is sharp in your nostrils and drifts between you and the dimming stars--when some now dead squatted before the fire drinking coffee from tin cups and bringing in the day. Yes, the man wrote prose.[3]

This is high praise from a man whose critical opinion is respected in literary circles, and it is by no means an isolated opinion. J. H. Jackson, discussing Rhodes's style, has this to say:

> Rhodes had an ear for language; he had a passion for the right word; he had the selective eye and the kind of memory that photographs a scene and keeps it in some psychic card-index ready to use when needed. Given these talents it is not surprising that...he made the days of the cattle kingdom come alive in terms of art.[4]

J. Frank Dobie, like De Voto, comments very favorably on the dialogue of Rhodes's characters: "The culmination of the art of writing as Eugene Manlove Rhodes practiced it, so it seems to me, is in this talk."[5] And Charles F. Lummis in writing to Rhodes about the latter's novel West Is West expressed himself very pointedly about the quality of the speeches of the characters in that work: "You have done a very extraordinary thing. Very uneven, in places hazy. Not entirely pulled together in a final Drawstring. A novel made up of episodes. But you have made the Best talking book that ever came out of the mouth of the West."[6]

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[3] Ibid., p. xliii.
[4] "Rhodes of the Real West," The Saturday Review of Literature, XVIII (Oct. 15, 1938), 18.
[5] Best Novels and Stories (Boston, 1949), p. xiii.
[6] May Rhodes, The Hired Man on Horseback, p. 151.

That Rhodes himself was extremely aware of style is attested to by the following comment which he made while expressing his theories on writing to Professor Walter Prescott Webb of Texas University.

> The only advice to beginners which seems to bear the acid test is this. Read your story aloud three times. Once to yourself. You will find errors of omission and commission that way which might otherwise escape you, particularly the stiff, the stilted, and the hifalutin. Next, read aloud, always aloud, to a sympathetic auditor, who will make helpful suggestions. Last, read aloud or have it read aloud to you by someone who is either hostile or indifferent to your point of view. That will bring out the faults, if any. Better still, it will show if you have not made your premises and statements clear.[7]

The chief factors of success in Rhodes's style have been mentioned in the foregoing comments: (1) his high descriptive ability and (2) his mastery of dialogue. The key to Rhodes's descriptive ability was his power of observation. No detail of landscape was too unimportant, no sound or action too insignificant, no quality of nature too trivial, no human characteristic too mean to be noticed and mentally recorded by this man who loved the Southwest deeply. Twenty years of separation from it served only to sharpen the edge of his recall when he wrote about the desert and mountain country of his youth and of the people and creatures who inhabited it.

By the careful selection of details, he could in a paragraph or two capture the immensity, the sheer bigness, of the country he wrote about:

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[7] Ibid., pp. 160-161.

The world was palpably a triangle, baseless to southward; walled out by iron, radiant ramparts--a black range, gateless, on the east; a gray range on the west, broken, spiked, and bristling. At the northern limit of vision the two ranges closed together to what seemed relatively the sharp apex of the triangle, the mere intersection of two lines. This point, this seemingly dimensionless dot, was in reality twoscore weary miles of sandhills, shapeless, vague, and low; waterless, colorless, and forlorn. Southward the central desert was uninhabitable; opinions differed about the edges.

Still in Arizona, the eye wearied; miles and leagues slid together to indistinguishable inches. Then came a low line of scattered hills that roughly marked the Mexican border.

The mirage played whimsical pranks with these outpost hills. They became, in turn, cones, pyramids, boxes, benches, chimney stacks, hourglasses. Sometimes they soared high in air, like the kites of a baby god; and, beneath, the unbroken desert stretched afar, wavering, misty, and dim.

Again, on clear, still days, these hills showed crystalline, thin, icy, cameo-sharp; beyond, between, faint golden splotches of broad Sonoran plain faded away to nothingness; and, far beyond that nothingness, hazy Sonoran peaks of dimmest blue rose from illimitable immensities, like topmasts of a very large ship on a very small globe; and the earth was really round, as alleged.[8]

Or he could on an infinitesimally smaller canvas paint an unforgettable word picture of an old cattleman's face:

His hair, thinning at the temples, vigorous at the ears, was crisply white. A short and lately trimmed mustache held a smile in ambush; above it towered such a nose as Wellington loved.

It was broad at the base; deep creases ran from the corners of it, flanking the white mustache, to a mouth strong, full-lipped and undeniably large, ready alike for laughter or for sternness.

The nose--to follow the creases back again--was fleshy and beaked at the tip; it narrowed at the level bridge and broadened again where it joined the forehead, setting the eyes well apart. The eyes themselves were blue, just a little faded--for the man was sixty-two--and there were wind-puckers at the corners of them. But they were keen eyes, steady, sparkling and merry eyes, for all that; they were deep-set and long, and they sloped a trifle, high on

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[8]Copper Streak Trail (Boston, 1922), pp. 48-49.

the inside corners; pent in by pepper and salt brows, bushy, tufted and thick, roguishly aslant from the outer corners up to where they all but met above the Wellingtonian nose.[9]

The success of much of Rhodes's description can be attributed to his unfailing sense of the importance of the use of sensuous detail. Dawn breaking over a camp, for example, is not merely seen; it is seen, heard, and smelled:

> The morning was shaping up well. Glints of red snapped and sparkled in the east; a few late stars loitered along the broad, clean skies. A jerky clatter of iron on rock echoed from the cliffs. That was the four hobbled horses, browsing cheerfully, rejoicing in the freshness of the dawn. From a limestone bluff, ten feet behind the bed, came a silver tinkle of falling water from a spring, dripping into its tiny pool.
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> ....Pungent, aromatic, the odor of wood smoke alloyed the taintless air of dawn. The wholesome smell of clean, brown earth, the spicy tang of crushed herb and shrub, of cedar and juniper, mingled with a delectable and savory fragrance of steaming coffee and sizzling, spluttering venison.[10]

Or when a drought that has for months gripped the desert country is broken, the seemingly dead land comes to life with sound and movement:

> ...morning broke clear and golden, the warm sun kindling through a disordered rout of clouds that streamed in broken squadrons across the east. The sky was washed and clean, the hills sparkled and shone; the valley air was thronged and swirling with music and mingled echoes, the sound of falling waters from the hills, high darting lyrics of rejoicing bird song; and through all, above all, beyond all, ubiquitous, swelling, sinking, unceasing, in rolling rhythmic hymn, the frogs thanked God.[11]

Rhodes's detailing of the Southwestern scene did not stop at the mere reporting of externals. Everything he wrote about this country was filtered through a viewpoint

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[9] Ibid., p. 7.
[10] Ibid., pp. 49-50.
[11] Once in the Saddle (Boston, 1927), pp. 93-94.

of sympathetic understanding of its effect on the people who inhabit it. And, as always, it is the bigness of the land, the far reach of the sky, the hot brilliance of the sun that the people respond to:

> It was a queer country. There were days when the circling mountains were near and clear, sharp and shining, where a thousand facets threw back the sun, every dimple and wrinkle showing plain, each gorge and cleft black and beckoning; when every wandering ridge and ground swell of the great plain was cameo-clear, and you were a brisk upstanding man who rode, prancing and mettlesome, on affairs of weight and consequence; a sprightly person, interesting to yourself and to others.
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> But this was not one of those days. When Farr was an hour on the short cut from Line Camp to Target, the air fell hot and still, the far-off ranges made an unangled, wavering blur, blue beyond a trembling, sun-shot haze of dancing dust motes. The ridged and rolling plain was sea-flat now, smudged, undimensioned, vague and dim; and Elmer Farr saw himself a meaningless midge, creeping unnoticed beneath a brazen sky.[12]

Inseparably linked with Rhodes's power of observation as a contributing factor to the success of his descriptive writing was his ability, first, to see something unique in whatever he undertook to write about and, second, to use ordinary words in an unordinary way to express that uniqueness. These are, indeed, very great abilities. Ford Madox Ford has called the latter "the supreme quality of the written art of the moment."[13] The first was what De Maupassant was talking about when, in summarizing the teaching of Flaubert, he wrote:

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[12] The Trusty Knaves (Boston, 1933), p. 221 in Best Stories and Novels.

[13] Introduction to The Modern Library edition of Ernest Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms (New York, 1932), p. xvi.

...In everything there is still some spot unexplored, because we are accustomed to look at things only with the recollection of what others before us have thought of the subject we are contemplating. The smallest object contains something unknown. Let us find it. In order to describe a fire that flames, and a tree on the plain, we must keep looking at that flame and that tree, until to our eyes they no longer resemble any other tree, any other fire.
This is the way to become original.[14]

In claiming these abilities in a writer, one can only submit evidence from his work and let it stand on its own merit for others to judge. Rhodes, describing a desert sink, wrote of it thus:

...Red sunrise brought them to it; a dead lowland of crumbling and rotten soil, starved and poisoned, leprous, blotched with alkali, without grass, without vegetation save for a morbid, fleshy and hateful jelly-growth known as Dead Man's Hand: leafless, flowerless, without even thorn or spine to the gnarled and crippled fingers.[15]

This is Rhodes's description of an old mine shaft:

...in that gap there was a house, sagging and weather-gray; and near that house there sprawled an old mining dump, melting into the hill, reclaimed now by grass and wild poppies and firefly bush; and on that dump there was a windlass; exactly like a riddle....the ghastly house was a skull, with eyeless sockets where windows had been, and an open door between; bleached and gray, the windlass posts stood out against the sky line, spectral and startling.[16]

Rhodes loved words and gloried in their use,[17] but he seldom wasted them. Time after time he conveys his fresh impressions in scarcely more than a score of words. In describing a courageous man facing death from a rifle trained

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[14]Introduction to Pierre and Jean (New York, 1928), p. xvi.
[15]West Is West (New York, 1917), p. 78.
[16]The Trusty Knaves, p. 286.
[17]This surmise is my own, but it is supported by the well-known Southwestern writer, Erna Fergusson. See her "Western Nostalgia," New Mexico Quarterly, XX (Spring, 1950), 112.

on him, for example, Rhodes wrote: "...the clear eyes did not waver, and there was no shadow in them. The man was beautiful."[18] And he set down his impression of the last few minutes before the break of day in this manner: "Reeling, the white wrack of stars fled down the west, save where a grim rear-guard, rock-stubborn in the rout, still held the dawn at bay."[19]

Each of these passages clearly illustrates Rhodes's ability to effectively give a word other than its usual employment. White splotched alkaline soil is "leprous"; an old ore dump is "melting" back into the hill on which it stands; a man looking without fear at death is "beautiful"; the white stars are "reeling," and they did not "sink" in the west or "disappear" in the west as a more pedestrian writer might have had it; Rhodes's stars "fled down" the west. This awareness of the increased power of words when given fresh employment is in the final analysis perhaps the most important factor in the success of descriptive writing. Rhodes gained early and never lost that awareness.

As noted earlier in this chapter, Bernard De Voto has expressed his greatest admiration for Rhodes's descriptive writing; J. Frank Dobie has indicated that he regards most highly the dialogue that Rhodes's wrote for his characters. It would of course be pointless and fruitless to attempt to

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[18] The Trusty Knaves, p. 287
[19] West Is West, p. 346.

prove that Rhodes was better at description than dialogue or vice versa, but it is probably safe to say that he endeared himself most to lovers of the American West and performed his greatest service to literature through his rendition of Western speech.

To support this generalization it is necessary only to give illustration of the absurd burlesquing of the Western vernacular that, atabout the time Rhodes began writing, was being presented to the reading public as authentic Western speech:

> "This yere ondersized miscreant ain't ha'nted about Wolfville more'n four days before he shows how onnecessary he is to our success. Which he works a ha'r copper on Cherokee Hall. What's a ha'r copper? I'll onfold, short and terse, what Silver Phil does, an' then you saveys...[20]

Or even more impossible:

> "...Dave ain't no two days alike. One time he's that haughty he actooally passes Enright himse'f in the street an' no more heed or recognition than if Wolfville's chief is the last Mexican to come no'th of the line. Then later Dave is effoosive an' goes about riotin' in the s'ciety of every gent whereof he cuts the trail....What with them silences and volyoobilities, sobrieties an' days of drink, an' all in bewilderin' alternations, he's shore got us goin' four ways at once."[21]

De Voto has called this incredible exhibition "a vaudeville argot assembled from Bret Harte's inventions and the comic press."[22] One might also observe that with its emphasis on comic mispronunciations, fondness for and misuse of big

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[20]Alfred Henry Lewis, Wolfville Nights (New York, 1902), p. 20.

[21]Ibid., pp. 89-90.

[22]Introduction to Mrs. Rhodes's The Hired Man on Horseback, p. xlii.

words, and ludicrous attempts at formality, dialogue such as that quoted much more closely resembles the early efforts of Southern local-colorists to reproduce Negro dialect than it does the speech patterns of Westerners, past or present. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the absurd talk put into the mouths of Western characters by Alfred Henry Lewis and his fellow practitioners was believed to be authentic by people who did not know the West and its inhabitants.[23]

In the writing of dialogue, Rhodes did three things superbly well: (1) he made the talk of his characters ring true with a kind of earthy naturalness that was appropriate to the men he wrote about; (2) he fully captured the salty freshness of cowboy vernacular with its unusual figures of speech and shrewdly effective understatements; (3) most important perhaps, he unfailingly caught the spirited humor which underlies much cowboy speech.[24] Fortunately, each of these accomplishments of Rhodes served as an effective antidote to much of the previous misrepresentation of cowboy and Western dialect.

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[23]It is a sad fact that the writings of Lewis are still given an undeserved position in American literature by men who should know better. Thomas H. Johnson, one of the editors of Literary History of the United States (New York, 1949), makes the following statement: "Authentic fiction of the southwestern frontier are the stories of Alfred Henry Lewis ("Dan Quin," 1857-1914), the first of whose six volumes of Wolfville stories is Wolfville (1897)." P. 322, Vol. III, Bibliography.

[24]For an excellent treatment of the humorous aspect of cowboy speech, see Ramon F. Adams's Cowboy Lingo (Boston, 1936).

"Son," [says Aforesaid Bates in discussing a bad drought] "you only been here four or five years. You ain't seen nothin' yet. Not that it is really dry now--not to say dry. Why, we had a rain in April--don't you remember?--and it clouded up again in July. It's early yet....[25]

Talk such as this sounds natural. It is the way men might talk, and to achieve the effect of verisimilitude should be the constant goal of the fiction writer.[26] J. Frank Dobie in making a similar observation about the naturalness of Rhodes's dialogue quotes this passage from The Trusty Knaves:

"You give me that gun!" thundered Marshal Yewell.
Lewis took a square of plug tobacco from his pocket, scrutinized it, selected a corner and gnawed a segment from it. "You keep your voice down, brother," he said, restoring the mutilated plug to its pocket. "If you bellow at me any more I'm liable to prophesy against you. You just turn your mind back and see what happened when people crowded me into foretelling. When you got any communications for me, I want 'em sweet and low, like the wind of the western sea....[27]

Rhodes's dialogue is often at its best in earthy naturalness when someone is making a comment on Western customs or practices, as in the following case in which Aforesaid Bates reflects on the two methods of roping and what they reveal about the men who use them:

"...Well, the Tejanos, and them that holds with Texas ideas, they use a short rope and they tie it hard and fast

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[25]Eugene Manlove Rhodes, The Little World Waddies (Chico, Calif., 1946), p. 8.

[26]This observation has been made by such noted and dissimilar writers as Robert Louis Stevenson and John Steinbeck. J. Frank Dobie has commented that Rhodes's dialogue constantly fulfills this ideal. See the introduction to The Best Novels and Stories of Eugene Manlove Rhodes, p. xiii.

[27]Ibid., pp. xiii-xiv.

to the horn of the saddle. Now the California man and his neighbors, they use a long rope and take their dallies. Then if they get in trouble they let the dally come off. It's a heap safer, only a man loses a thumb or two once in a while. But the Texas man, he's done fixed himself so he can't let go. When he pulls on his boots for the day, he makes up his mind at the same time. There ain't goin' to be no half way measures. What he drops his loop over is his, or he's its.

"I'm not sayin' there ain't lots of times the boys would be glad to turn 'em loose if they could. But there's no way to do it. Something's got to break. And that habit influences them in other things besides ropin'. It ain't only a habit. It's a religion, sort of. He may get new light on the subject, just when you're dependin' on him. But when you're in trouble bad--needin' help, and it now--that's the time when you're glad to see a tie-fast man shakin' out a loop."[28]

This is a long passage for dialogue, but it does not seem strained or artificial, nor does the following fairly lengthy speech in which a rancher describes the careful treatment given cattle during a severe drought:

"Men and brothers, fellow citizens, gentlemen and boys--you ought to have seen that work. In two months we didn't rope a cow or trot a horse. We never moved a cow out of a walk, a creeping walk. We never moved a cow one foot in the wrong direction. We moved 'em late in the evenin', on into the night, early in the morning; we spoke to 'em politely and we held sunshades over 'em all day. We never slept, and we ate beans, flies, dust, patent food and salt pork. I ate through four miles of sidemeat and never struck a shoulder or a ham...."[29]

All one can say after reading such passages as these is that if cowboys and ranchers do not talk as Rhodes has them talk, what a pity!

When it came to reporting the cowboy vernacular, Rhodes, as a lover of the fresh, vivid, and witty in the use of words, must have been in his element. In reading his stories,

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[28]The Little World Waddies, pp. 15-16.
[29]Ibid., p. 83.

one constantly has the feeling that Rhodes is simply setting down snatches of long remembered conversation with cowboy and rancher friends. "He is sort of watering at night, just now..."[30] says one of Rhodes's characters in speaking of a man who is on the dodge from the law. Says another in referring to a tough little cowboy, "When you go to break Charlie See you'll find he is a right flexible citizen..."[31] Of an unpleasant character it is said that "he resembles himself a heap,"[32] and a particularly clumsy man is "thumbhandsided."[33]

The cowboy vernacular that Rhodes's characters speak is of course heavily salted with expressions reflecting their way of life. "I'll contrive to make strap and buckle meet some way..." says Johnny Dines in talking about squaring himself with the sheriff on a ticklish point of law. And Bud Copeland in Beyond the Desert comments on a money lender's suspicious offer to buy his ranch in this way, "It lacked a hell of a lot being a piker play, too, if anybody should drive up with a horse and carriage and ask you--considerin' that he practically has the immortal cinch on me..."[35] But the cowboy's range of words and expressions is not confined to the limits of his environment. Sometimes the most freshly descriptive word possible seems to be plucked from

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[30] Stepsons of Light (Boston, 1917), p. 40.
[31] Ibid., p. 246.
[32] West Is West, p. 147.
[33] Copper Streak Trail, p. 58.
[34] Stepsons of Light, p. 49.
[35] Beyond the Desert (Boston, 1934), p. 43.

thin air to express some action. The literal definition of the word may not fit, yet there is never any doubt about the meaning. "...we'll wash our hands and faces right good, catch us up some fresh horses out of the pasture, and terrapin up the road a stretch,"[36] says one of Rhodes's characters. And another on observing the laborious absorption with which a boy plods through a Stevenson romance comments that "He reads mortal slow."[37] "Dad Wilson will be anxious," says Andy Hinkle in The Proud Sheriff. "And if so be he's not right pleased, he's liable to appear to you. Stick a gun in your belly and tell you to open up your jail...."[38]

Finally, it is chiefly through use of dialogue that Rhodes achieves the spirited effect of humor which permeates almost every story he wrote. It is an effect which is consistent with and expressive of the confidence and optimism of the West. And it is an effect which makes his work immensely readable. The humor in Rhodes's dialogue, which has already been reflected in the foregoing quotations, ranges from obvious cowboy bantering:

> "Why says Easy McFarland you long, loose-jointed trifling, worthless, horse-stealing, whiskey-drinking, poker-playin' ignorant, no-account Son of the Middle Border--"
>
> "You needn't speak kindly to me," said Bud. "I ain't sick."[39]

to pithy comments on man's moral frailty:

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[36] Stepsons of Light, p. 77.
[37] The Proud Sheriff (Boston, 1935), p. 122.
[38] Ibid., p. 75.
[39] Beyond the Desert, p. 7.

"The largest number of honest men that was ever got together in one bunch," said Pete, "was just an even eleven. Judas Iscariot was the twelfth. That's the record. For that reason I've always stuck it out that we ought to have only ten men on a jury, instead of twelve. It seems more modest, somehow. But suppose we found ten honest men somewheres. It might be done. I know where there's two right here in Arizona, and I've got my suspicions of a third--honest about portable property, that is."[40]

And a moment later Pete adds: "I could get a little money myself down at Tucson. Them two honest men of mine live there. We used to steal cattle together down on the Concho--the sheriff and Jose Penavides and me."[41]

The humor in Rhodes's dialogue, as might be suspected, often stems from cowboy practices and beliefs. It is generally known, for example, that the cowboy looked down on the farmer; in the following passage Johnny Hopper, cowboy-turned-farmer, laments his treatment at the hands of an erstwhile rancher friend:

"Charlie See, he's my friend. Done me many'sh the good turn. Charlie's a good fellow. Splendid fellow!" Hopper gloomed upon Candy with a hostile eye. "Charlie, he comesh down to my house and eats my fresh lettuce out of my garden, and young onions, and eggsh, and milk to drink, and cream in his coffee. And then he rolls a smoke and leansh back, and he says to me 'Johnny, could you spare me a few geranium slips?' Nicesh way for a friend to talk!"[42]

But even lower in the social scale than the farmer is the sheepman. "Then you bought a bunch of sheep" says Pete Johnson to Stanley Mitchell in Copper Streak Trail. "Son, you can't realize how great-minded it is of me to overlook that slip of yours!...."[43]

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[40]Copper Streak Trail, p. 76.
[41]Ibid., p. 78.
[42]The Little World Waddies, p. 26.
[43]Copper Streak Trail, p. 59.

Understatement as a form of humor is used effectively by Rhodes. Thus run the comments of two ranchers on a recent crime wave in and around the town of Target:

"...Have you maybe noticed of late any queer goings-on in this happy valley of ours?"

"I have so. Leaving to one side the normal amount of clerical errors in the branding business. Granger takes up a homestead for himself on the Temporal. His house burns down. Another long lad settles at Carizo, and his house burns up. Freight cars looted on the Target side tracks. More freight cars robbed at the same place. Ore stolen from freight wagons in Target. Drunks rolled at Target. Reemarkable hands held at Jim's Gem against prosperous visitors from the East. Mines salted for prosperous visitors. And so on down the line."

"Johnny," said Farr, "I do believe they have been doing it on purpose."[44]

The humor in the passages quoted above and, for an outstanding example, in the hilarious courtroom scene in Stepsons of Light clearly represents the spirit of comedy for which the cowboy has become so well known.[45] In the final analysis it may be that Rhodes's greatest single achievement was to capture completely the cowboy's zestful sense of fun and humor. The method of capture was dialogue.

A high descriptive ability and the capacity to reproduce in speech the spirit of a distinct cultural group were the qualities that Rhodes combined to produce what S. Griswold Morley has called "one of the most solid and distinguished styles written by any North American novelist."[46]

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[44] The Trusty Knaves, p. 223

[45] For a good discussion of cowboy humor see Mody Boatright's Folk Laughter on the American Frontier (New York, 1949).

[46] "Cowboy and Gaucho Fiction," New Mexico Quarterly Review, XVI (Autumn, 1946), 259.

CHAPTER IV

RHODES AS A RECORDER OF THE WESTERN SCENE

If Rhodes's novels and stories possessed no narrative appeal at all, they would still be of interest to a good many readers interested in Western Americana, for Rhodes was unfailingly conscientious in recording the characteristics of the men who worked with cattle and in depicting their daily activities. As Bernard De Voto has said, the whole record of the cattle kingdom is to be found in the pages of his novels.[1] And while Rhodes was first and last a story-teller, the fact that he was also a reliable social historian greatly contributed to make his work more interesting and readable. His unforced, almost casual detailing of the Western scene tremendously added to the color of his fiction.

The authenticity of detail in Rhodes's stories has never been questioned but has been praised by more than one competent authority. Walter Prescott Webb, for example, says that Rhodes stands next to Andy Adams in fidelity to the lore of the West.[2] And Hurst Julian, who described

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[1] Introduction to May Rhodes's The Hired Man on Horseback (Boston, 1938), p. xxvii.

[2] The Great Plains (Boston, 1931), p. 463. Adams was a Texas cowboy-writer whose The Log of a Cowboy is generally considered to be the finest picture of cowboy life ever written.

himself as a cowboy temporarily hospitalized by the natural accidents of his calling, published an article in The Saturday Review of Literature in which he asserted that after reading some three thousand books and stories dealing with cowboys and the cattle industry, he had found but three writers who did not misuse the terminology of the range. These three were Will James, Ernest Haycox, and Eugene Manlove Rhodes.[3] While this list could undoubtedly be extended (there is no reason why it should not include Owen Wister, for example), it still helps to place Rhodes among the select few who have written accurately of an area of American life which has undoubtedly had more nonsense written about it than any other.

As a recorder of what he had known and experienced as a cowboy and rancher, Rhodes did two things very well. He set forth a clear picture of the attitudes and characteristics of the men who worked with cattle, and he presented a wealth of detail on the nature of these men's work and general activities. Of course people other than cowboys and ranchers appear in Rhodes's stories (there are miners, law officers, merchants, gamblers, for example), and the pictures of them are often interesting and vivid. But still the cowboy-rancher characters predominate, and the point of view is always that of the man who makes a living from cattle.

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[3]S. Griswold Morley, "Cowboy and Gaucho Fiction," New Mexico Quarterly Review, XVI (Autumn, 1946), 258.

At the outset of this discussion it should be made clear that Rhodes well knew that there was no such thing as a universal characteristic or quality which applied to all cowboys without exception.

> "...take the typical cowboy" [says Jeff Bransford in Good Men and True]. "There positively ain't no sich person! Maybe so half of 'em's from Texas and the other half from anywhere and everywhere else. But they're all alike in just one thing--and that is that every last one of them is entirely different from all the others. Each one talks as he pleases, acts as he pleases and--when not at work--dresses as he pleases...."[4]

This statement does not mean that most cowboys did not think alike about many subjects and respond alike to many situations. They did, of course. It does mean that the cowboy's love of individuality was strong (a general characteristic, this!); and it also is recognition of the fact that, for example, while most cowboys were loyal to "the brand" (see Chapter II, page 43 of this work), there were certain to be some men who would have no feelings of loyalty whatsoever toward the ranch they worked for.

The purpose of this discussion is not to present a complete picture of the Southwestern cowboy and rancher as seen by Rhodes; it is rather to illustrate that such a picture can be recovered from the body of Rhodes's fiction. Rhodes's elaborations of several cowboy and rancher characteristics have already been discussed in previous chapters, such as, for example, their dual traits of individuality and

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[4]"Good Men and True," in Best Novels and Stories (Boston, 1949), pp. 49-50.

cooperativeness, their penchant for colorful speech, and their ingrained distrust of legal authority. Other illustrations which establish beyond doubt the value of Rhodes's work as social history relating to cowboys and ranchers are easily furnished.

Sometimes with no more than a single line of dialogue Rhodes would reveal some significant attitude of the Southwestern cattleman.[5] The cattleman's disdain for the farmer has already been mentioned in Chapter III. In Copper Streak Trail Pete Johnson directs a friend who is helping him to disguise his wagon so that it will look as if he is either going out to cut wild hay or to dry-farm. "I'll hay it," says the friend.[6] Not even the pretense of farming for him!

The cowboy's dislike of bragging led him to considerable reserve in discussing his own merits and those of his possessions. Rhodes catches the spirit of this reserve very neatly in the following exchange:

> "Ya-as," said Pete. "Here comes your caballada. Likely looking horses, Jack."
> "A leetle thin," said Carr.[7]

The hospitality of the range shows up often in Rhodes's writings. It was almost unwritten law that ranch owners should feed without cost any passerby needing food. The reasons for this custom were inherent in the physical and

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[5] I am here using the word "cattleman" as a convenient term to encompass both rancher and cowboy. Actually, the word is ordinarily used to designate a person who raises cattle.

[6] Copper Streak Trail (Boston, 1922), p. 132.

[7] Ibid., p. 125

economic set-up of the West. Because of the great distances between towns and ranches, a rider on horseback might travel for a whole day without encountering more than one place of human habitation. If he was without provisions of his own, it would be necessary for him to eat at that place or go hungry. Secondly, the nature of ranch work inevitably meant large numbers of unemployed cowboys during the slack winter season, and it was necessary to feed them if workers were to be available for heavy spring and fall range activity. An unemployed cowboy drifting from ranch to ranch and accepting the free hand-out of meals was said to be "ridin' the grub-line."[8] Finally, to charge for a meal (even when a person had money to pay) in which the main item, meat, very often cost nothing would have been considered niggardly. It might be added, a man's horse was entitled to the same hospitality as his rider.

Pete Johnson in Copper Streak Trail comes gratefully upon a camp after a long, hot ride across the desert:

> "Yes; horse camp," said the tall man. "Now you water the black horse and I'll dig up a bait of corn for him. Wash up at the trough."
>
> "Puesto que si!" said Pete.
>
> He slipped the bit out of Midnight's mouth, pushing the headstall back on the sleek black neck by way of lead rope, and they strode away to the water pen, side by side.
>
> When they came back a nose-bag, full of corn, stood ready near the fire. Pete hung this on Midnight's head. Midnight munched contentedly, with half-closed eyes, and Pete turned to the fire.
>
> "Was I kidding myself?" he inquired. "Or did somebody mention the name of grub?"

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[8]Ramon F. Adams, Western Words (Norman, 1944), p. 128.

"Set up!" grinned the tall man, kicking a small box up beside the slightly larger one, which served as a table. "Nothing much to eat but food. Canned truck all gone."[9]

And even Bat Cremony, black villain of Beyond the Desert who has a minimum of consideration for his fellow man, recognizes his obligation to feed the hungry drifter. He says to Lithpin Tham Clark after the latter has asked for water for his horse: "Damn' likely! We have to feed every bum that comes along, I suppose, rag, tag, and bob-tail. But I'm not hauling water for other men's horses...."[10]

It develops, however, that Cremony is wrong. Tham is so outraged at the man's breach of humane conduct that he draws a gun on him and says:

"My horth, now, he ith going to drink your hauled water, and he ith going to drink it thlow, and he ith going to drink again. Thut up! And if you move a finger or thay juth one word--That mouth! Clothe it! Let a horth thuffer, will you?"[11]

Cremony's cook is so disgusted with his employer's conduct that he immediately sides with Tham even though he knows that it means his job and perhaps other trouble for him:

The cook moved over to Cremony. The cook's eyes were dancing, and he held a stout length of mesquite root in his hands. "As I understand it, stranger," he said, "you're forcing me to get Bat's gun? And if he makes one break, I'm to hit him over the head with this chunk? And then he's to hook up his team and gradually leave us? And I'm to watch him while he starts, so you can water your horse undisturbed--is that it? All right--but I want it distinctly understood that I do it under compulsion, under

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[9]pp. 11-12.
[10]p. 56.
[11]p. 57.

protest, in fear of my life. I don't want to be shot protecting an overgrown, nickle-chasing, white-livered, small-souled this-and-that who wouldn't give water to a starved horse."[12]

Even when a ranch house was left unoccupied for a period of time the owner did not forget the obligatory courtesy of feeding the weary passerby. Thus Bransford in The Little Eohippus finds this sign tacked on a ranch house door:

> Gone to Plomo. Back in two or three days. Beef hangs under platform on windmill tower. When you get it, oil the mill. Books and deck of cards in box under bed. Don't leave fire in stove when you go.
>
> Gene Baird
>
> N.B.--Feed the cat.[13]

This minor detail of the Western code of conduct--range hospitality--has been dwelt upon at length because it is typical of the way in which Rhodes constantly makes use in his writing of his knowledge of the cow country and its people and customs. There are scores of other social characteristics and human and occupational traits that he treats in similar detail and with equal consistency from story to story.

No item of behavior which is truly typical of the cowboy is too small for Rhodes's attention. The cowboys in Rhode stories talk to their horses, for example, because that is what cowboys did. (The reasons for their doing so are obvious: the lonely nature of their work and their horses.) Fortunately, however, Rhodes does not use this fact as a device for briefing the reader on a story's

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[12]pp. 57-58.
[13]Best Novels and Stories (Boston, 1949), p. 126.

background--an expository device that has been used in countless bad Western stories. When a Rhodes cowboy talks to his horse, it is usually in moments of stress when one or both face some difficult problem, but never is there the feeling that Rhodes is using this talk as an artificial means of giving information to the reader.

Another point that Rhodes brings out is that the cowboy did not talk to just any horse he rode but only to one he knew and had confidence in. While fleeing a posse, McEwen in "Paso por Aqui" is forced to abandon his own horse and take a fresh one which soon proves himself a good horse:

> He had talked freely to Miel, but until now he had been reticent with Porch Climber, who had not yet won his confidence. At this unexpected reverse he opened his heart.
>
> "Another good land gone wrong," he said. "I might have known it. This side of Salt Creek is only half-bad country, so of course it's all settled up, right where we want to go. No one lives east of Salt Creek, not even sheep herders. And we couldn't possibly make it, goin' on the other side of Salt Creek with all that marsh country and the hell of the White Sands. Why, this is plumb ridiculous!"[14]

In Beyond the Desert Within Tham Clark and his horse are engaged in a long, dry ride across the desert, but Tham is counting on their getting water at Magnesia Spring. When they arrive, however, they find that a dead cow is in the spring and the water polluted beyond drinking. Tham looks the situation over and speaks to his horse about it as a matter of course:

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[14] Ibid, p. 18.

"Buck, I know one horth and one man that ith goin' to thee thorrow. We've got to puth on to water. But from now on I'll thpell you. I'll walk two or three mileth and then ride two or three mileth, even Thephen. Thith will be one bad day."[15]

And when Spinal Maginnis, the proud sheriff of Sierra County, discovers that he is riding into a trap set by the man he is looking for, he is bound to talk the situation over with his horse Sleepycat:

"Hawse, we been wishing this smart guy would make a break. He's made it. Shall we go home and get under the bed? Or shall we ride into the trap, unsuspectin', and see what next, and how about it?"

Sleepycat jingled the bridle reins and scuffed his feet.

"All right, then. Have it your own way. But I'm not the only one that's taking a chance. Them fellows might mishandle you a heap carryin' out their nefarious schemes... Don't blame me! You went into this with fair warning and your eyes open."[16]

Just as the whole picture of cowboy customs, mannerisms, and characteristics can be recovered from Rhodes stories, so will the reader find that his descriptions of the activities and the physical properties of ranching and living on the range are complete and authentic. Rhodes did not simply catalogue the routine of everyday ranch existence as other writers have done for other regions and occupational groups.[17] He was too much the romantic--he loved a zesty plot too much--to practice realism in this way. The main action in his stories usually does not stem from some basic range situation such as a cattle drive or a round-up or the

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[15]p. 44.
[16]p. 109.
[17]Hamlin Garland, for example, or more recently, A. B. Guthrie.

tending of a line cabin but rather from a robbery or a murder or an attempt at financial chicanery. But nevertheless, since the characters in Rhodes's stories are cattlemen, the details of their workaday existence are integrated naturally into the fabrics of the plots.

> Cole Ralston[18] rose up in a red windy dawn: he cupped his hands to his mouth and called out lustily: "Bed!"
>
> All around, men roused up in the half darkness and took up the word, laughing as they dressed: "Beds! Beds!"
>
> The call meant that the wagon was to be moved today; that each man was to roll bedding and tarp to a hard and tight-roped cylinder, and was then to carry it to a stack by the bed wagon.
>
> The cook bent over pots and pans, an active demon by a wind-blown fire; here already the bobtail ate their private breakfast, that they might depart in haste to relieve the last guard--now slowly moving the herd from the bed ground, half a mile away.[19]

And for four pages Rhodes goes on to describe the details of starting another day of round-up activity. In West Is West Rhodes devotes long passages (including two entire chapters: "The Shipping Pens" and "The Cutting Ground") to the activities of the range cattle business. In the following excerpt Rhodes records lively action at the shipping pens and comments on it through the eyes of John Sayles, a newcomer to the cattle country:

> "One Box W, three V Cross T's, Square and Compass, one K Y--let 'em go!" The inspector's quirt slapped sharply on his boot leg; six steers slid along the fence like stealthy ghosts; the inspector's horse turned back unbidden. These three things took place simultaneously. A fourth was on their heels. "Tally!" The word cracked like a whip.

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[18] It is interesting to note that the name of Rhodes's foreman boss in Rhodes's days as a cowboy on the Bar Cross Ranch was Cole Railston.

[19] Stepsons of Light (Boston, 1917), p. 116.

Stree and Horsethief Fisher, tally keepers, snapped it together.

Tails aflaunt, the steers streaked down the stockyards lane, between the heavy timbered twelve-foot fences; they flipped round a corner with a kick; a heavy gate closed behind them; a rider started from ambush and choused them on to the waiting-pens.

The inspector paced soberly back with Cole Ralston, The V Cross T boss, who "pushed 'em through." Near the gate, they crowded the inner fence, under the dangling feet of spectators and amateur tally keepers. A bunch broke from the pen, shied, kicked and scurried down the lane, two abreast, dust-hidden. The inspector did not move.

"One S S Bar, one H A M, one Hook-and-Ladder, one N 8, two V Cross T's"--"Tally."

A horse slipped on his side in the cutting pen, and rose, bucking; the herd charged for the open gate of the lane. Emil James and "Dallas" McCombs thrust their horses into the living flood and it swirled back for some magic of word and waving hats. The leaders crushed down the lane; Ralston "strung 'em out," so they dribbled by in a charging column rather than as a locked phalanx. The inspector raced beside them, barking crisp italics.

"H G T, two V Cross T, two Double Ess Barr, S L Y, four V Cross T, N 8, K Y, Half Circle Cross, 76, N U N, V Cross T, one Spur--let 'em go! MO-ORE STRAW!"

"Tally!"

John Sayles gasped. With all his eyes he had caught but one brand as this wild mob thundered by--the familiar N 8. That was on a steer he knew by flesh marks. This last stage of the cow-work, like all the preceding phases, was a revelation of concentration, snap, and marvelous efficiency.[17]

Activities involving the training of horses must have been especially easy for Rhodes to detail because in his day he was a top man in the business of breaking horses for riding purposes. In fact, Jack Thorp once declared that Rhodes was the best bronc buster that he had ever seen in New Mexico or Texas.[18]

The mouse-colored horse desisted from his exercises, snorted loudly, ran on the rope experimentally, whirled at

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[17] West Is West (New York, 1917), pp. 143-44.

[18] The Fabulous Frontier, p. 149. Thorp, now deceased, was an old-time cowboy and cattlemen who did a good deal of writing about his range experiences.

the rope's end, and faced his captor, head up, but slightly a-tremble. Johnny walked toward him slowly, patiently, coiling the rope as he went. With low and soothing speech he put out his hand toward a black nose; after two slight flurries, was able to pat that nose, to rub the dark head gently. "His name is Smoky, I think," said Johnny softly, and without turning his head. His left hand, holding the coiled rope, slipped up and moved slowly to the saddle horn, his foot was in the stirrup. Johnny held the hackamore reins taut, and patted the quivering neck. "Come, boy! "C-chk!" Smoky made two cautious sidewise steps, three--"19

Scores of examples similar to those above, all pointing up the fact that Rhodes's stories are rich in the lore of the cattle country, could be supplied. One may find in these stories the detailed description of a particular kind of wagon, of a twenty-mule team in action, of a Western style poker game, of a ranch, of the way cowboys dress, and of a myriad other facets of existence in the days when the range cattle industry flourished.

Harry E. Maule has stated that many connoisseurs of stories of the West consider Rhodes the best of all writers who have used or are using this background and material.[20] It seems safe to assume that a major reason for this high standing of Rhodes is that in his stories the cattle country of the Southwest comes alive in a wealth of well-integrated details, the authenticity of which have never been questioned.

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19 The Trusty Knaves in Best Novels and Stories, p. 235.

20 Great Tales of the American West (New York, 1945), ed. with introduction by Harry E. Maule, p. xiv.

CHAPTER V

RHODES'S PHILOSOPHY

"I have lived in exactly that place and time I would have chosen from all recorded history."[1]

Gene Rhodes was not a profound thinker, nor did he pretend to be one.[2] He did not evolve deep-browed and original concepts of man's relationship to the universe and to his fellow men. He was, however, a shrewd observer of the human scene, and some of his comments on it make worthwhile reading. Most important, he believed in man's inherent ability to progress toward a better life, and he believed so firmly in the essential dignity of man that he was bitterly sensitive to injustice and oppression on any level and at any time. These two facts did much to shape the tone of all that he wrote, and (as will be shown later) they adversely affected his literary reputation.

In a penetrating analysis in the final chapter of his book The Confident Years,[3] Van Wyck Brooks has pointed out that everywhere in literature and in life there are two conflicting points of view. One is negative; it holds that men

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[1]From a letter by Rhodes written in the year of his death. Quoted by Eddy Orcutt in "Passed By Here," Saturday Evening Post, CCXI (August, 1938), 50.

[2]J. Frank Dobie, Introduction to Best Stories and Novels of Eugene Manlove Rhodes (Boston, 1949), p. xx.

[3]New York, 1952.

are innately depraved: it denies that the masses can intelligently govern themselves, can use wisely a marked degree of liberty, can form a brotherhood of man. The other viewpoint is optimistic; it holds its brief for the natural goodness of man; it contends that man can advance, is advancing, toward a better condition of life, and it affirms the right of the individual to be free to pursue that goal.

Rhodes was wholeheartedly in the camp of the optimists, and in this position he carried on the main tradition of American letters. Brooks says:

> It was precisely in this faith that America came into existence, affirming the capacity of men to govern themselves, and the main body of American tradition, as literature expressed it, exhibited this faith to the beginning of the First World War....This faith accompanied an expansive sense of equality and human brotherhood that was generally to distinguish America from Europe.[4]

That Rhodes had faith in man is demonstrated in almost every story that he wrote. In his short stories and novels men band together to overcome evil; freedom and liberty are cherished and fought for; individual interests are subordinated to group interests for the betterment of the group and the individual. Rhodes was not Pollyanna. He knew that there was evil and selfishness in the world, but he was not defeated by this fact. He gave to that charming rogue MacGregor (who is the most eloquent of all Rhodes's characters) the words that might have been his own credo:

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[4] The Confident Years, p. 585.

"...Oreeginal sin is just merely a fact--no truth at a'! Folks are aye graspin' at some puir halflin fact and settin' it up to be the truth. It takes at least three trees to make a row, and it needs at least three facts to make a truth. Mankind is blind, foolish, and desperately wicked--yes, take it from me that am an old ruffian. But mankind is also eencurably good--wise and strong and splendid and kindly and brave--in your time of sorrow and danger you will find it so--and there's another glaring fact for you! With endless rain earth would drown, wi' endless sun it would be a cinder: look about you now, see what sun and rain and evil and good have wrought together, grass and flower and bud and fruit, the bonny world and the bonny race o' men! World and man, the machine Works! And there's the third fact for you, lassie, and the weightiest fact. We are a Going Concern: we pay a profit to our Owner!...[5]

Rhodes had a passionate dislike for the sterile philosophy of despair expounded by so manywriters of his own day, and he had no use for ultra-esthetes and pseudo-intellectuals who usually preached the dogmas of defeat.[6] "Have we," asked Rhodes, "toiled twice twenty centuries to be rid of impudent priests, arrogant aristocrats and imbecile kings, only to be pestered by sophomores?"[7] In Stepsons of Light Rhodes makes his most blistering attack upon these purveyors of hopelessness and "realists" who specialize in evil.[8] "Whatsoever things are false, whatsoever things are dishonest, whatsoever things are unjust, whatsoever things are impure, whatsoever things are of ill report; if there be any vice, and if there be any shame--they think on these things. They gloat upon these things; they wallow in these things."[9]

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[5] West Is West (New York, 1917), p. 19.
[6] Orcutt, "Passed By Here," p. 50.
[7] Ibid., p. 50.
[8] Rhodes digresses from the story line for ten pages (62-72) to have his say thoroughly on this subject.
[9] p. 66.

Again it should be emphasized that Rhodes was not a blind sentimentalist. That he knew man and society were far from perfect is made abundantly clear throughout his writings, as witness the following quotation:

> But there are three things man cannot do, and four which he cannot compass: to see, to think, to judge, and to act--to see the obvious; to think upon the thing seen; to judge between our own resultant and conflicting thoughts, with no furtive finger of desire to tip the balance; and to act upon that judgment without flinching. We fear the final and irretrievable calamity: we fear to make ourselves conspicuous, we conform to standard, we bear ourselves meekly in that station whereunto it hath pleased Heaven to call us; the herd instinct survives four-footedness....our wisest fear the scorn of fools. So we walk cramped and strangely under the tragic tyranny of reiteration: whatever is is right; whatever is repeated often enough is true; and logic is a device for evading the self-evident. Moreover, Carthage should be destroyed.[10]

Nevertheless Rhodes had faith in man's ability to improve himself and his lot. One of his characters observes that man is now good in emergencies and that when he learns that "all life is emairgency and tremblin' peril," then will he come into his own.[11]

Rhodes's hope for and belief in man led him to a burning hatred of injustice and oppression because he knew that these twin evils could only retard human progress and were major threats to man's freedom. Rhodes was sensitive to injustice not only as it affected him personally but also as it affected mankind in general,[12] and his rancor was not

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[10] Copper Streak Trail (Boston, 1922), p. 182.

[11] Ibid., p. 265.

[12] See J. Frank Dobie's discussion of this point in the Introduction to Best Novels and Stories of Eugene Manlove Rhodes, pp. xix-xx.

confined to injustices of his own day. It is significant on this point that Rhodes's one venture into biography was a narrative dealing with the life of the Seventeenth Century Spanish adventurer Don Diego Dionisio de Penalosa who, in Rhodes's own words, was "first in America to strike a blow for freedom, first to dare the Inquisition."[13] Rhodes disliked the Puritans because at the outset of the witch trials they didn't "load up a blunderbuss with scrap iron and declare a referendum....One page of thoroughly dead magistrates would have stopped that foolishness. And it would have been the brightest page of history."[14]

Rhodes's reaction to what he considered the unfair conviction of Albert Beacon Fall has already been discussed in Chapter I. J. Frank Dobie tells us that Rhodes wanted to organize the entire West against aspersions cast upon its manhood and womanhood by Stuart Henry.[15] And the characters in practically all of Rhodes's stories wage constant war on the oppressions caused by ill-administered law and the greed of unscrupulous men. Such struggling against injustice is the trade-mark of the Rhodesian hero, and perhaps the single best example is Pliny Mullins' battle against the

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[13] West Is West, p. 110. The biographical sketch of Penalosa originally appeared as Chapter IV of West Is West; the chapter was entitled "Barnaby Bright." It appears under the title "Penalosa" in Best Novels and Stories of Eugene Manlove Rhodes.

[14] William A. Keleher, The Fabulous Frontier (Santa Fe, 1945), p. 145. The quotation is from a letter written by Rhodes in 1933.

[15] Introduction to Best Novels and Stories of Eugene Manlove Rhodes, p. xix.

oppressive treatment of the mine workers by the ruthless mine owner in Once in the Saddle.

In Copper Streak Trail Rhodes's anger at the exploitation of the weak by the strong in our society boiled over, and he wrote his most passionate statement on the general subject of oppression and injustice:

> Underfed and overworked for generations, starved from birth, we drive and harry and crush them, the weakling and his weaker sons: we exploit them. We crowd them into our money mills: we deny them youth, we deny them rest, we deny them opportunity, we deny them hope, or any hope of hope; and we provide for age--the poorhouse. So that charity is become of all words the most feared, most hated, most loathed and loathsome; worse than crime or shame or death. We have left them from the work of their hands enough, scantly enough, to keep breath within their stunted bodies. "All the traffic can bear!"--a brazen rule. Of such sage policy the result can be seen in the wizened and the undersized submerged of London: of nearer than London. Man, by not taking thought, has taken a cubit from his stature.[16]

Observations such as the foregoing do not mean that Rhodes was on the side of the defeatists in literature. The defeatist is not angry at the plight of man because he is resigned in his belief that it cannot be improved. This description does not fit Rhodes. An old friend once remarked of him, "He has the evenest temper I have ever known--he is always mad."[17] Rhodes was always "mad" because he saw on all sides evidence that men were not fulfilling the promises of the democratic dream. He believed that this fulfillment was possible, and he was therefore angry at anyone or anything which "did violence to his faith."[18]

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[16]Pp. 183-184. There is considerably more to this passage.
[17]Orcutt, "Passed By Here," p. 53.
[18]Ibid., p. 50.

It would seem, then, that while Rhodes did not add anything new to the body of philosophic thought, he did carry on an important tradition in American literature. "The promise of America," says Brooks, "was that what ought to be will be."[19] The whole body of Rhodes's writing was a demonstration of the way this promise might work out in the lives of decent men.

Brooks has indicated that faith in the democratic principles declined sharply as a popular literary credo after World War I, and both De Voto and Dobie have commented that this fact was injurious to Rhodes's literary reputation. De Voto's comment on this point is particularly interesting:

> ...the historian must conscientiously point out that, during the 1920's when the important part of Rhodes's work was done, it was not fashionable in American literature to assert the tenets of democracy nor to affirm the dignity of common life and the worth of native American ways and values. His work ran exactly counter to the main stream of fiction and criticism during that museum decade, which may be another reason why criticism ignored it. And not his fiction only. He hated the disparagement of the ordinary man and of the American heritage that was the current coin of our literature. He made violent war on it and its authors, though mostly in obscure places since there were few magazines, no magazines of discussion, that cared to give the other side a hearing. Some of that sword-play is magnificent, and all of it would seem strangely prophetic and of this moment if revived now. It will be a pleasure to collect in a book some day and, for the instruction of the young, to display Rhodes's place in the small company of literary men who would not slander America during a time when slandering it was a highway to money, reputation, and the approval of the elect.[20]

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[19] The Confident Years, p. 609.

[20] Introduction to May Rhodes's The Hired Man on Horseback (Boston, 1938), p. xxxviii.

The foregoing discussion has established that Eugene Manlove Rhodes's remark that he was no novelist at all but just a teller of tales[21] is at best an understatement. It is true that he was primarily a story teller in that his stories treat chiefly of romantic and adventurous situations, and at the same time he integrated into his novels and stories a great amount of detail concerning everyday life and the business of raising cattle in the early-day Southwest. And even his story situations and the actions of his characters in most cases arise out of attitudes and characteristics indigenous to the Southwestern pioneer. For these reasons Rhodes's writings are valuable as social history over and above their value as entertaining reading.

Rhodes is also raised above the rank of mere story teller by virtue of a painstaking craftsmanship of style built around an eye for detail, an ability to capture the spirit of the cowboy vernacular in dialogue, and a faculty for choosing the most effective word to say what he wanted to say. It is on the triumph of his style that all commentators on Rhodes's writings are agreed.

Finally, Rhodes sacrificed immediate critical attention as a writer by refusing to succumb to the philosophy of despair which seemed to possess writers on both sides of the Atlantic in the years following World War I. While Rhodes was far from being Pollyanna, he did believe in the

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[21] May Rhodes, The Hired Man on Horseback, p. 161.

dignity of man and in his ability to achieve a state of freedom and happy living in a community of men if given the chance to do so. Rhodes reserved his wrath for the greedy and power-hungry men who would dominate and suppress their fellow men and for the pessimists who, in the words of Eddy Orcutt, "did violence to his faith." In maintaining this position Rhodes carried on in the best tradition of earlier American writers who also believed in the American dream of personal freedom and security for all men.

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VITA

Brent Kenneth Ashabranner
candidate for the degree of
Master of Arts

Thesis: EUGENE MANLOVE RHODES: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE MAN AND HIS WORK

Major: English
Minor: None

Biographical and Other Items:
Born: November 3, 1921 at Shawnee, Oklahoma
Undergraduate Study: Oklahoma A. and M. College, 1939-41, 1946-47
Graduate Study: Oklahoma A. and M. College, 1947-50
Experience: Creative writing, 1941-52; Navy, Construction Battalions and Amphibious Forces in Pacific area, 1942-46; Graduate Fellow in English, Oklahoma A. and M. College, 1949-50; Instructor in English, Oklahoma A. and M. College, 1950--.

Member of Sigma Tau Delta, American Association of University Professors, and Oklahoma Council of Teachers of English.

Date of Final Examination: July 6-7, 1951.

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AUTHOR: Brent Kenneth Ashabranner

THESIS ADVISER: Dr. Cecil B. Williams

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