

The First Rodeo



Pete didn't start out as a cowboy. He grew up on the streets of New York City. He saw his mother waste away and finally die of consumption. He felt helpless and ashamed; he kept thinking I should have done something. The doctors couldn't help her, how could a little kid? But, it stilled gnawed on his heart. He had watched his father go to his factory job every morning and come home dog tired but smiling every evening. Now he couldn't remember what his dad's smile looked like.

Then he didn't come home. Pete watched the clock; his had never been this late. He wasn't a little kid anymore. Practically grown, he went to look for his dad. There were people standing all around watching the factory burn, some crying, some with their hands over their mouths. He recognized no one, but he heard snatches of conversations.

“How did it start?”

“Don't know, somebody said there was an explosion.”

Jesse Hulse

The parish priest helped him with the funeral. Then he found himself walking home to nothing. The drab apartment was unbearable with nobody else in it, and sleep eluded him. The morning sun allowed him to see but somehow did it without making it any brighter. Suddenly, he realized he had just decided the question he didn't know he didn't know he had asked. He had to leave the city, and he had to do it now.

He filled an old carpet bag with some clothes, gathered the few things he cared about, his dad's pocket watch, a picture of his mom, and a broach she had loved. He took the little bit of money in the place, and headed toward the train station. It turned out to be enough to get him to Saint Louis where he found a wagon train headed for the Oregon territory. There were 34 wagons and with sheer determination and a bit of New York fast-talk he convinced the wagon master to give him a job to pay for his passage. The little money he had left went for a push cart and a few provisions, including an extra pair of shoes. He almost didn't buy those shoes; they were expensive, but in five months of walking he wore his first pair completely out and his new pair were about gone too.

The plains were beautiful when they started, a sea of flowers that seemed to go on forever. More than a month later he was still walking, but the cool spring days were beyond memory. Sweat ran down Pete's face; his shirt was wet with sweat that mixed

Jesse Hulse

with the dust the oxen kicked up. There were occasional rivers, but the refreshment of a wash was hardly worth the problems and sometimes danger of river crossings.

Was the Oregon country just a myth? Were the stories of rich land an adventure he'd heard true? There were good things about the trip. The buffalo herds he saw were something that, if he hadn't seen them, he would have thought somebody was funnin' him or outright lying. But walking day after day through this ocean of grass was making him think New York might not have been as bad as he thought.

Then he started to see some mountains on the horizon, his first glimpse of the Rockies. As the days went on, they slowly got closer and a lot bigger. He put on more clothes as they picked their way through the mountain passes. It wasn't long before he was wearing all the clothes he had, and he was still blowing in his hands to warm them. The peaks above them were white. It was rugged now, but another couple of months would see the way completely blocked with snow.

With the Rockies behind them, the rugged mountains gave way to rolling hills covered with hundreds of miles of sagebrush. If you got away from the Snake River, the land was dry and barren. He hoped this wasn't all land had in store for him.

Jesse Hulse

He pushed his cart with everything he owned down the incline of a pass in the Blue Mountains. The Willamette Valley, that paradise of which he dreamed, was still over two hundred miles, but he went around a bend and stopped dead in his tracks. The cool breeze coming up through the pass rustled the trees and seemed to play an overture for his ears only. Below him lay a green fertile valley between two mountains that looked like they were staring each other down in a ten-thousand-year poker game. This is what he had come for, and yes, it was worth it.

The wagon train stopped on the bank of the Grande Ronde river to replenish their water and wash clothes in the river. When they moved on the next day, Pete wasn't with them. He walked around the little settlement at the side of the river asking for work. His spirits got lower with every rejection; nobody had work for a youngster with a pushcart and no experience.

He walked out of town not knowing where to go, just trudging aimlessly. The afternoon sun beat down on him. Sweat ran down his back and his mouth was parched as he reached a farm a few miles out of town. The owner thought he was about the sorriest young man he'd ever seen, dusty and barely walking, and he took pity on him. "Where you going kid? There ain't nothin' for miles that direction."

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Pete sighed, “I don’t know where to go. Just left a wagon train because I’d never seen anything as pretty as this valley, but I’m beginnin’ to think it was a mistake.”

The older man leaned against the log corral, “It is a pretty country, I did the same thing ten years ago.”

Hoping against the odds, Pete asked, “I see you’ve got some nice lookin’ horses. You need a ranch hand?” Pete hadn’t had any real experience with horses, but his desperation and the mountain air worked together to give him a shot of courage. The rancher looked him over and figured he’d take a chance on the tenderfoot; he gave him something to eat and showed him a bunk where he could sleep.

On the first day at the ranch, the foreman asked Pete if he knew much about horses. Now Pete knew better than to lie, but for some reason, he said, “Would I be here if I didn’t.” He figured it wasn’t really a lie because it was a question, and everybody knows that you can’t lie with a question. If that foreman misunderstood him that wouldn’t be his fault.

Of course, the foreman had seen other greenhorns, and he knew exactly what it meant so he said, “Well young man, since you know just what to do, throw a saddle on that old stallion over there and show me what you’re made of.”

Jesse Hulse

That stallion had never been ridden. People had tried, but nobody could stay on him for more than a few seconds. Pete didn't know that, but the foreman did, and so did everybody else on the ranch which is why people started walking toward the corral. They came to watch the fun and the fun, and it started as soon as Pete tossed the saddle on the horse's back. The horse gave a little jump and a kick. The jump threw the saddle about six feet in the air, and the kick landed a hoof right in the middle of Pete's chest. Sprawled out in the dirt, Pete was in more pain than he'd ever experienced, and with the wind knocked out of him. Round one went to the horse

Pete hurt in places he didn't know existed, but he knew everybody was watching, so as soon as he could get air in his lungs he got up acting like nothing had happened. He couldn't keep the grimace on his face, but he hoped he looked determined rather than hurt and scared. He picked up the saddle and tossed it up on the horse real pretty. Well, the horse tossed it back off even prettier. Pete was trying to think of some way to make that saddle stick to the horse, but nothing was coming to his head. Finally, he just stood in front of the horse and looked him in the eye. Not just a little look mind you, but an all-out stare.

Neither horse nor man blinked for what seemed an eternal moment. Pete thought, if horses have a soul, I'm looking into the center of his. What happened during that stare Pete could never

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put into words, but he understood that horse, and the horse seemed to understand him. For the first time in his life, he stood still for someone to cinch up a saddle.

With the saddle on, Pete was ready to ride. It was true the horse had gained a sort of respect for this peculiar young man, but letting him ride was pushing it a little too far. Pete hopped up into the saddle, and the horse hopped into the air. They were off.

The ranch hands that were watching didn't quite understand how Pete stayed on, but he did. The connection he had with the horse seemed to let him anticipate every move. Those watching said later it was like watching an energetic dance with the horse and rider responding to each other.

Pete found he had an unexplained connection with horses and became kind of a legend in the valley. People would bring the wildest horses they could find and then bet that he couldn't ride them. Pete was doing pretty well for himself, and some folks started calling him the Unthrowable Cowboy.

A man in the next valley heard about Pete, and he thought he might make some handsome money. He had a horse name Eee-Ohh. That was his name because whenever anybody was fool enough to try to ride him, they said, "Eeeeeee," on the way up, and, "Ohhhhhh," as they hit the ground. It had never taken that horse more than one jump to get rid of a rider.

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When that man brought his unrideable horse, the betting got pretty heavy. People came from all over the country to see the show. Organizers sold tickets and built a special chute to hold the horse long enough for the rider to get on.

The day came and the unrideable horse came busting out of the chute with the unthrowable cowboy on top of him. He jumped and he kicked, but he couldn't get that man off. For about half an hour he tried, and then the horse finally gave up. Pete rode him around in front of the crowd, and someone said, "I can't believe he rode Eee - Ohh." Well, a new sport was born, and the name stuck. The best cowboys gather every year to see if they are as good as that greenhorn that rode Eee - Ohh.