

William Riley, M.D.

A Story of the Texas Plain By the Editor

Some years ago in far away Texas, long before the days of the big cities and centers of population, during the time that the Lone Star State was a great cow country, there lived a doctor in the little town of Dallas, named William Riley. Many years he had labored as a pioneer in his profession until his name was known throughout the length and breadth of the countryside. With the passing of the years, Dr. Riley found that his eyes were growing dim and his hand had lost its cunning that was his in the days that had sped by. The young men from the colleges in the East had come with their modern methods and implements to crowd out the old man from his work. In spite of the fact that he was greatly loved, sentiment played no part, when it came to sickness in the home and the practice of the dear old doctor grew less and less until he hardly ever received a call. He thought that if he were to travel southward down toward the Rio Grande he might find some little community where he could spend his last days and practice his profession in a town where there was no doctor, so it came to pass that the old horse was saddled, the little black medicine bag was tied to the pommel and Dr. Riley rode southward, looking for a new world in which to live, a new field of endeavor in which to labor. After many days, he came across a little country store, situated at the Cross Roads. Above the doorway was the word Post Office, on the windowpane was inscribed in amateurish lettering the words "Groceries and Hardware", and the genial old doctor smiled as he mounted the steps. Across the road was a blacksmith shop and up on the hill was a school house; apart from these buildings nothing was in sight but the long, vast, undulating prairies that stretched to the foothills in the distance.

"Any people hereabouts," required Dr. Riley, of the old storekeeper, who welcomed the stranger into the building. "Lots of them," replied the postmaster, grocery man and hardware merchant, with a smile on his face, "Couldn't do business if there was nobody around here. Up in the coulees and the draws there are cowboys and ranchers by the hundreds. What you figure on doing? Seldom strangers come round these parts."

Old Dr. Riley explained his mission and at last a bargain was struck whereby the old doctor became the tenant of an upstairs room and his faithful horse was given a place of shelter in an adjacent barn. The following morning Dr. Riley borrowed the side of a box from the storekeeper below and spent several hours in laboriously painting upon the wood the inscription "William Riley, M. D. His Office Upstairs",

and a hand pointed up the stairway to the entrance of Dr. Riley's office. It was not long before the children became his friends and after a few weeks had gone by, the first Sunday School that part of Texas had ever seen was started in the school house on the hill. The class grew rapidly and presently the parents came with the children. A year went by and Dr. Riley's Sunday school had grown to a Sunday school and a Church, and the cowboys from far and near were attending the services on the Lord's Day. They called him eccentric, but they loved him just the same. No journey was too long, no night too dark, no storm too great but what the old man would brave the elements and travel on his mission of love. Invariably he would administer what medical help he could and then kneeling by the side of the bed, would pray for the blessings of God to rest upon the home. One Saturday night in the middle of winter, the rain was pouring in torrents over the Lone Star State and Dr. Riley, thankful that no call had come in, had gone to bed. He had been reading the word of God and prepared himself for the services of the morrow. He had just fallen asleep when he was awakened by the sound of footfalls upon the stair. A heavy knock came to the door and upon turning the key and opening the door, Dr. Riley saw standing there a man who was drenched to the skin and from whose clothes the water was pouring in a veritable stream. "My little girl's sick—she very sick— wish you could come with me tonight, it's fifteen miles and the rivers are flooded but Doctor, if you'll make the trip, I'll give you anything you ask, my ranch, my home, everything I have, my little girl is worth more to me than everything else." Dr. Riley noticed the appeal on the man's face and the sob in his heart, and instantly he made up his mind to go, as he said, "No need to beg, friend, just glad to go along. Pretty hard night, but duty calls. I'll make the trip alright and we'll pray as we travel that she might be healed."

A few minutes later the old horse with Dr. Riley on its back, was galloping into the teeth of the gale. Deep were the rivers that they swam that night and torrential were the streams that they had to cross. It was the early hours of the morning when the two water-soaked travelers arrived at the ranch house. Aid was quickly given and the dear old doctor said reassuringly to the frightened parents, "Just a bit of a fever, she'll be alright in the morning. No need to get scared, go to bed and get your rest. It's a passing epidemic, lots of children through the countryside have had. You don't mind if I pray, do you? Just a word then I'll be going back." Water dripped from the drenched clothes of the old doctor as he knelt on the board floor of the cabin home. After prayer, he emphasized the fact he could find his way back and would not wait for the break of day for he had to attend Sunday School in the morning and he must get back to his beloved children.

It was the dawn of day and the rain had stopped when the storekeeper heard Dr. Riley climbing the stairs, he heard him close the door and turn the key, then all was silent in the room up above. The time for Sunday school came and the children were worried because Dr. Riley had not yet come. A little girl mounted the stairs and knocked at his door, no reply from within. Louder and louder she pounded, hoping to

wake up the man she thought might be asleep. There was no response to her repeated knockings and at last suspecting something wrong, she ran to tell the storekeeper who lived down below. A few minutes later, a heavy pair of shoulders broke in the door, and they found Dr. Riley seated at his desk, his oiled skin coat was over his shoulders, and his hat was standing in a pool of water on the floor. The pen in his hand was resting on the last page of the account book, and the storekeeper noticed that the last act of the old man's life had been to write across every page the words, "Paid in Full".

They carried him downstairs and the cowboys built a plain wooden box, while others were digging a hole in the ground on the prairie, six feet long and six feet deep. With no preacher to perform the funeral rites, Dr. Riley's body was lowered into the grave. One of the cowboys looked sheepishly around and said, "Boys, seems like we ought not to bury him without a word of prayer, he's the best old fellow that ever came around these parts and you know and I know his teachings have meant a lot in our lives, no parson around here but maybe we can pray. Let's say the prayer he taught us."

So with their wide-brimmed sombreros in hand, they stood by the grave and together they repeated "Our Father, Who Art in Heaven". The prayer was concluded and nearly everybody there was gulping back something that would arise in the throat or wiping the pearl-like teardrops from the eye. At last a young cowboy, who had been wiping his eyes on his sleeve, looked into the faces of the crowd around and exclaimed, 'Far as I'm concerned, I figure we ought to put him up some kind of a monument, something to remember him by. Boys, I ain't ashamed to tell you that I figure on coming here once in a while just to set and think. 'Pears like nobody talked to me like he did, since I saw my Mother back East at home. We're going to miss him boys, the old Doc was a thoroughbred and I figure some kind of a tombstone is the least we can do.'" The words were not out of his mouth when a cowboy jumped up on a nearby pony and dashed madly down the hillside to the bottom of the steps that led to the old office up above. Tearing the sign that had been painted by Dr. Riley's own hand from the post, he came galloping back to the grave and placing the board at the head, he stepped back to let the cowboys read what was on the board. Hats in hand and with tear-stained eyes, they saw the hand that pointed now toward the skies and read the inscription, "William Riley, M. D., His Office UPSTAIRS'.

I do not know just what has become of the man who rode the plains and punched cattle in far away Texas in the days of Dr. Riley, but I have heard on excellent authority that more than one man looks back to the scene by the side of the grave, feeling that the darkness and the coldness of the tomb broke on that occasion into the light of a new and a happy day.