

The Great Ridge Road

The roads between pioneer settlements tended to follow the ridges. Thus marshes were avoided, the floods of spring were of less concern, and the wind swept away the winter snow. That vantage also gave a view to the far horizon — perhaps to the traveller's destination. Though the old ridge roads had common features, each possessed distinctive traits that gave them individuality. Curving out of Denison and winding away over the hills toward the northwest — to the German settlement and beyond — runs an old highway. A vivid description of the personality of this "great ridge road" by F. W. Meyers is reprinted from his history of Crawford County. — THE EDITOR.

There are many beautiful drives in Crawford County, but somehow none of them appeals to our imagination more vividly than does the old ridge road northwest of Denison. It is a bleak, lonely, wind-beaten old road. Way back in the days of our youth it led into a far-off unknown land called the "German settlement". It used to

be a great mystery to us, coming over the houseless prairies so many miles.

The old ridge road differs from other roads in many ways. It speaks not so much of the present generation as of the past. It was the first pioneer who laid out the ridge road, or perhaps it was the Indian or the buffalo. At any rate it was laid out to follow the path of least resistance. It sweeps gracefully about the hilltops, clinging ever to the summits. It avoids the steep places, skirts the hollows, dodges the corners and looks down on all the country round with supreme arrogance.

The ridge road is the ridge road from the time it leaves Main Street and debouches — that is the proper word for a ridge road — into the valley. Man may gravel it as he will and toy with it and grade it and otherwise abuse it, but the ridge road is the ridge road still.

Let it be distinctly understood that the ridge road does not follow the fences or the telephone poles. The poles and the fences follow the ridge road. The ridge road is no respecter of persons. It had much rather go through a field than around it, and it will run right up to your back yard as soon as to your front one if your house does not have sense enough to meet the situation and face itself about.

Then, too, the superciliousness with which the

ridge road greets the poor, little straight-laced, orthodox section line roads. How it looks at them out of the tail of its eye and flings a flirtatious curve at them from out of its many windings.

It seems to say, "I am the great ridge road. See how I disdain all confines. See how I ride the prairies as the good ship rides the waves. Poor little section roads, I pity you, with your bridges, your culverts, your banks of snow, your wash-outs, your ups and downs. The rain runs off my back in summer and winds are my servants to sweep me clean in winter. I am the great ridge road."

As the ever winding river told the Lady of Shalott all the happenings, sad and gay, of the little world below, so the ridge road tells its tale of sorrow and joy.

It was along its windings that the first pioneers struck out across the prairies. It was along this trail that the German emigrant, tired with the confusion of a new land, choked with the dust of trains, drew his first full breath of prairie air and disappeared, swallowed up in that mysterious German settlement, to return so soon indeed a full-fledged American citizen.

It was on the old ridge road that the long train of wagons came out of the mist, long before the sun rose, each wagon a torture pen to sleek, fat

swine, whose piteous shrieks and squeals and grunts punctuated each rut and declivity in the road, while stolid drivers strode along, beating their arms for warmth or enlivening the way by merry shouts and calls and glad "Good mornings", or a catch of some old German song.

Have you ever seen the ridge road on a circus day? Even the horses are glad when they come out of the everlasting hills, and with a swagger and a swing show their best paces as they strike the ridge. Father relaxes and gives himself up to the luxury of his pipe. There is no need of driving on the ridge road. Mother sits back and nestles baby closer and smiles her greetings to the neighbors. The girls, in white, be-sashed and be-ribboned like so many rainbows. The boys, with shining, apple cheeks, eyes tingling with excitement, fingers counting over the change that is soon to be metamorphosed into red lemonade and peanuts. My, but it is a happy crowd, a pretty picture.

"Good morning! Are you going to the show?" Such a silly, senseless question, but so neighborly and kind, it would be a shame not to evoke the glad reply, "Yes, of course. Are you?" And so they go swinging down the ridge road into town.

There is a cloud of dust at the roadside, a spanking team goes dashing by. It is a brand

new buggy, just as shiny and black as paint and varnish and hard scrubbing can make it.

There is a flutter of a kerchief and a merry shout as Mary and her beau rush by. Father grunts contentedly, the youngsters snigger, and mother, well, mother knows, and mother sighs. Last year Mary rode to the circus with the family and it seems such a little while ago when she was the baby and rode in mother's arms. But there, this is a day of gladness and of joy. See the long line of teams winding on ahead and down into the valley and up the hill to town. We hope none of them will be late for the parade.

The ridge road could tell many stories if it wished. It could tell of slow processions with a big black wagon on ahead. It could tell of rapid flights for doctors needed in the night, of tired farmers peering into the darkness for the bright gleam of home, of little travellers, dinner pail in hand, plucking the wild flowers on their way to school.

But for ourselves we must admit that the gladdest sight has been the lights of Denison gleaming from its home among the hills. Now straight in front, now to the right, now to the left, but gleaming ever like a diamond brooch on the breast of mother earth. What if the winds be sweeping o'er the ridge, what if the rain be cold, what if the

night be dark — it only makes the lights gleam brighter.

There is your journey's end; there await comfort and light and warmth and food; and there await those loving hearts: the wifely kiss, the childish voice. There at your journey's end is all that makes life worth living. Yes, there is no road like the great ridge road as it winds among the hills. It is bleak and drear, but it tells of cheer at the end of your journey's ills. It is vast like life, and its tortuous course tells the tale of mortal toil with its turns and twists and windings, drawing ever near the goal. Out betwixt the stars and the prairies, with God on every hand, there is something about the great ridge road that appeals to the best in a man.

F. W. MEYERS