

## Book Review by Bill Balfrey

The book I will be reviewing, with permission by the author, is entitled, "Bill Kitt - From trail driver to cowboy Hall of Fame", by D.L. "Jack" Nicol and Amy Thompson, 2009, ISBN 978-0-615-28626-6. Jack is Bill Kitt's grandson.

He was known by "Bill Kitt," which stood for William Kittridge, born 1876, died 1958. It is by far one of the most interesting, best referenced, and written in a clear, but smooth flowing style book that invites the reader to continue reading well past their bedtime. The book is rich with photographs in which all the people are identified. It is a large book, but even the quality of binding is excellent. Not only will this book be of immediate interest to those who are associated with ranching or stock use, but it becomes a classic that affords a barometer of what life was like in the late 1800's and the early 1900's.

Bill Kit was a young cowboy making \$25 a month. He married Maude Kittridge, and as the author states, "She was the perfect partner." Maude passed away in July of 1968. The setting is in Eastern Oregon, in the Silver Lake area, but in my conclusion, we will be talking of ranches covering areas in three states. At the beginning, when it came time to stock-up for provisions, they hooked up a six horse team, and if they choose the Willamette Valley, it meant a trip of nearly 250 miles. A photo of Maude and daughter and a loaded wagon on page 36 has a caption which reads, "...making the annual trip from Silver Lake to Corvallis for supplies. This was a 500 mile round trip". In those days folks didn't simply run to the store.

To this reviewer, what made Bill Kitt special was his ability to envision correctly, the potential that the land offered and the ability to see the project through to conclusion. He never questioned this ability and his judgments always proved correct. He and Maude started out with very little, but when Bill Kitt saw the ability to enlarge, he did so. Maude never questioned his judgments. They both had a total commitment to backbreaking work and a willingness to live life in the beginning without any luxuries. He was a very frugal man all of his life.

By 1902 we find that Bill and Maude had a son and daughter. The Lake County assessor placed Bill Kitt's assets at \$950.00. In 1905 Maude gave birth to another daughter, Vi. In 1908, feeling he needed more money, Bill Kitt moved his family to Corvallis where he bought a livery stable. Bill Kitt worked many jobs, plus buying three places, fixing them up and selling them for a profit. Bill Kitt and family return to the Silver Lake area and he buys 300 head of cattle, branding them with his YJ iron. He moved the cattle to Klamath Marsh. A bit later Bill Kitt leased the River Ranch. This ranch grew excellent hay. Bill Kitt bought up land in the Klamath Marsh, and with his ability to see what the land needed, for example, he built the IRE Dam on the Williamson River and by doing so, added 1,500 new acres under irrigation.

One reads of an outbreak of rabies effecting coyotes, in 1915. These rabid coyotes would attack humans, dogs, horses and cows. While living at Kirk Field they built a large, two story house when suddenly their spring dried up, caused probably by an earthquake. All agreed he could not do it, but Bill Kitt said, with full confidence, he'd move the house across the meadows, the swamp, & the Williamson River to the other side of the valley--this was a three mile trip. He jacked the house up, put it on skids, hooked up all the horses he owned, plus adding other teams and using roller logs, starting moving the house. It took him

two years, but he did it. Bill Kitt was clearly the boss. If workers did as he ordered, he looked after them which included their families. If you didn't follow his orders, he sent you "down the road."

As the years passed by, Bill Kitt was able to buy more ranches. In the mid 1930's his total cattle inventory was 8,233 head. He needed a large hay ranch to support that number of cows. He looked at the MC Ranch owned by the Warner Valley Stock Company in Warner Valley. The asking price in 1929 was \$900,000. More than he wanted or could pay. He waited and in 1935 bought the MC Ranch for \$455,160. The MC became a huge operation! It would require at least a full page to review what Bill Kitt achieved in developing the MC to its full potential. He developed the hay and grain fields. A typical grain harvest was around 180,000 sacks of grain. In 1943, they built a large storage granary that was 80 ft. high with four storage bins holding 400 tons of grain. The author points out "that this capacity provided storage for a few days", p.230. The haying and the cattle operation are even more impressive. As the cattle population grew, so did the need for larger hay fields. We are talking about 11,700 acres of hay meadows. This required eleven John Deere mower tractors and seven John Deere tractors pulling rakes. See p.343 for photos.

The author offers insight into each segment of the ranch required to support their beef industry. Mile after mile of irrigation ditches had to be developed. At this same time a company that was to be called, "Caterpillar," was coming on the scene and the reader is given insight into the reduction of the horse teams as the bulldozers takes over.

Bill Kitt realized he needed to go into developing a "finishing lot" for his beef cattle. On p. 347, there is a photo showing a feeding trough of over a mile long for just the weaner cattle. On p. 367, one finds an impressive photo showing trailing 3,500 head of dry cows to Spring feed. The reader gets to ride with the MC ranch cowboys. This was the age when the boss buckaroo would assign a string of rough stock to each cowboy. Each morning the cowboy had to get the buck out of his horse, before heading out. You had to be a bronc rider to be a cowboy! On the MC Ranch, Bill Kitt developed a horse breeding program and in using the Standard Bred and the Morgan Cross, he found a winner. These horses had to be able to travel 30 miles per day to cover the summer range of almost one million acres. No horse trailers were used. There is an interesting story about Ross Dollarhide who later became boss buckaroo at the MC. When a young man, Ross' saddle disappeared, so Ross came up with a bicycle and hit the road. When he arrived at the White Horse Ranch, he asked for a buckaroo job. From bicycle to a bronc rider is quite a jump. The cowboys, thinking they had a greenhorn, saddled up the worst outlaw horse the ranch owned. When aboard, Ross, "sat straight up like he was riding a rocking chair. This horse was no challenge to him." Ross was given a job. They didn't know that Ross was already one of the top bronc riders in Harney County.

I'm leaving out a review of all the different positions that Bill Kitt held, such as starting a banking business. A full page of review would be required here. It needs to be expressed that Bill Kitt took pride in ownership. This concept, to this reviewer, is or has been lost by the majority by today's population.

At the age of 78, Bill Kitt didn't like the way the MC was being managed, so in 1954, he drove to where his grandson, Jack Nicol, was working in an alfalfa field and said, "Your taking over, I cleaned out the crew"! It's interesting to this reviewer, that Jack was 24 years old at that time. Not only did he take over the running of the huge MC ranch, he did so successfully!

At the time of his death in 1958, Bill Kitt, “owned and operated land in three states, and six counties, including Klamath Lake, and Harney in Oregon, Humboldt and Washoe in Nevada and Tehama County in California.” He owned 19,000 head of cattle, all under only his brand. He raised all 19,000 head! “In all, Bill Kitt’s deeded, leased, and permit lands was nearly one million acres,” p.XIV. Bill Kitt is also in the National Cowboy Hall of Fame! Not bad for a cowboy starting out at \$25 a month wages!

It has been my goal to introduce you to a fascinating book and there-in the fascinating man, Bill Kitt. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did.

I say with a smile, the only bad part of this book, is that it ended at page 450.

Editors note:

Bill Balfrey’s ancestors came to Etna, Siskiyou Co., via the Oregon Trail in either 1851 or 1853--there are documents supporting either date. Bill taught at the College of the Siskiyou for 36 years. He and his wife, Willo, a well known artist, ride saddle mules and spent years packing into the Marble Mtn. Wilderness. They are members of Top of the State Unit of Back Country Horseman of California, of which Bill was vp for 4 years and pres. for four years. He still serves on the TOS Board of Directors. He also serves on the Siskiyou Co. Historical Society Board of Directors.