

Buck Jones

BONA FIDE HERO

By JOSEPH G. ROSA

Photos Courtesy Author

Author's Note: Most legendary heroes of the Old West were part fact, part fiction, and the movie cowboys were rarely as authentic as their Old West counterparts. But as I was to learn when I started digging into the legend of Buck Jones, his publicity was based on fact. I was able to confirm important details with his wife, Odille, who still resides in Hollywood, and the National Archives in Washington contributed information on his army career.

"KING OF THE COWBOYS"—about a dozen Western movie stars have borne that title since 1903 but, in my opinion, only three really stand out—William S. Hart, Tom Mix and Buck Jones.

Of this trio only Buck Jones was an authentic cowboy. Hart was a Broadway actor of some considerable fame before he entered motion pictures in 1914, but he had never been a real cowboy. Tom Mix, on the other hand, had had some rodeo experience and knew something of the business, but he was not as authentic as his later press publicity made out. Buck Jones, however, had been a cowboy and a cavalryman when the Old West was still alive.

Perhaps his name may not mean much to this generation, yet there was a time when practically every boy in the United States would rather have been Buck Jones than President. His action-packed, full-of-excitement Westerns appealed to youngsters and adults alike. Even cowboys liked his pictures and a Buck Jones feature was sure to draw many off the range on a Saturday night. To millions of fans he was the most beloved of the heroes of gunsmoke and gallop.

Born Charles Frederick Gebhard (sometimes spelled Gebhart) on December 12, 1891, at Vincennes, Indiana, he was only a few months old when his father purchased a 3,000-acre ranch at Red Rock, Oklahoma. Young Charlie Gebhard learned fast. As soon as he was able to walk unaided he was to be found



Buck Jones with his ornately engraved Colt Peacemaker. Enlargement of the gun (inset) is through courtesy *Guns & Ammo Magazine*, October, 1959, Peterson Publishing Company.

toddling toward the nearest corral where friendly cowboys encouraged him to sit a pony. It was not long before he was able to ride, and cowhands began referring to him as a real "buckaroo" which name was soon shortened to "Buck." It was a name he was proud to claim for the remainder of his life.

By his fifteenth birthday wanderlust had seized the boy and he decided to see more of the great Western country before it became fenced in. At that time the best way to do it was to join the Army.

"But he was too young and could only join with his mother's permission," Mrs. Jones told me. "Together they went and lied about his age so he could join."

Buck's mother realized that to refuse permission would only delay the event, so she agreed to the deception. At Columbus Barracks, Ohio, on January 8, 1907, Buck enlisted in Troop G, Sixth U. S. Cavalry, and gave his date of birth as December 12, 1888. This date and that of December 4, 1889 appear in most reference books.

After his initial recruit training, Trooper Gebhard saw some service along the Mexican border. On one patrol he narrowly missed death in a thunderstorm when lightning struck a steel bridge he was crossing. Several troopers riding ahead of him were killed. Later Troop G was ordered to the Philippines, setting sail on September 7, 1907 and arriving on October 9. For the next two years they fought Moro bandits, and in a jungle battle toward the end of 1909 Buck was badly wounded in the right leg just above the knee. He was threatened with the loss of his leg, but recovered to carry a 6½-inch scar for the remainder of his life.

According to army records, Buck left the Philippines on November 15, 1909 and arrived back in the United States on December 14 where he was honorably discharged at the Recruit Depot, Fort McDowell, California, on December 20 "by reason of short remaining term, for the convenience of the government."

His leg was still troubling him and he

Wherever you happened to live, if it had a movie house, the wide, wonderful and dangerous West was only a few coins away—through a narrow door and just past the yellow popcorn! Who can forget Silver? Who can ever forget the man who rode him?

decided to return home. For a time Buck worked on his father's ranch and later for a brief period at the Indianapolis Speedway tracks. There he made a friend of Eddie Rickenbacker, who later became America's World War I aerial ace. Buck returned to Columbus Barracks on October 14, 1910, and was once more recruited into Troop G, Sixth U.S. Cavalry.

During the next two years Buck was promoted to sergeant, but found life too routine. He wanted a change and soon the opportunity for such a move presented itself. By 1913 the United States Army was becoming interested in aeroplanes and Buck, who had a love of things mechanical, decided to apply for a transfer. Writing from Texas City, Texas, on March 19, 1913, he applied for a transfer to the Signal Corps, Aviation Squad. By special Orders No. 75, War Department, April 1, 1913, Sergeant Gebhard was transferred to the Signal Corps as a private, assigned to duty with the First Aero Squadron, Signal Corps.

Buck's dream of being able to fly was swiftly dispelled. Enlisted men were not encouraged to become pilots, and even with the help of his friend, Eddie Rickenbacker, he had no luck. To become a mechanic didn't have any appeal, so disgusted by all the red tape he let his enlistment expire and on October 23, 1913, again became a civilian.

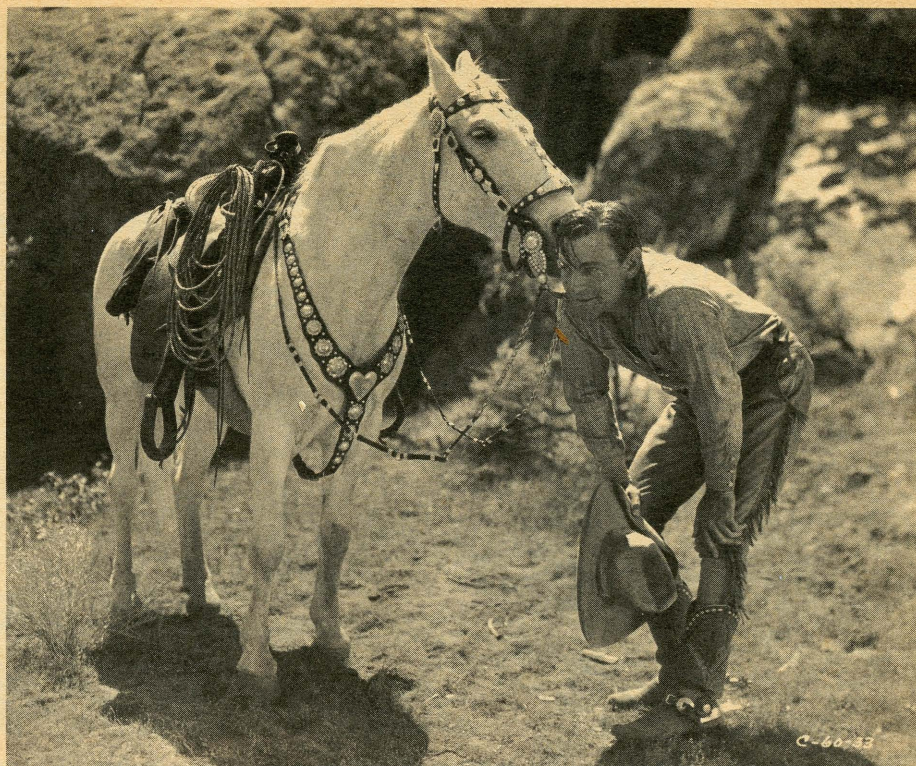
FOR SOME MONTHS he wandered around looking for work and then one day learned that the Miller Brothers' 101 Ranch Show needed hands, so he decided to apply. "I put resin on my chaps to help me hold the saddle," Buck recalled in 1938, "and drove horseshoe nails into the heels of my boots to keep my spurs on. Then I went over and asked for a tryout."

The resin did the trick and he landed a job. He soon came to the notice of Zack Miller and it wasn't long before he became a top rider and roper. By the time the show reached Madison Square Garden early in 1914, Buck had firmly established himself. It was here that he met a girl called Odille Osborne.

"I ran away from home and joined the show," Mrs. Jones told me, "and that's the year I met Buck." Odille had been staying at her aunt's home in Philadelphia while her parents toured in vaudeville. Although she could ride, she was not a very good cowgirl.

Her career might have been short-lived if Buck hadn't taken an interest in her and taught her enough to keep the job. They fell in love and decided to get married, but before the final arrangements had been made, they learned that the 101 was due to leave for England on tour. Having decided not to go they then joined the Julia Allen Show.

When the show played Lima, Ohio, they announced their plans to marry, and the show's publicity agent fixed it so that they would be married in the ring



Buck Jones and his original Silver in a scene from an old Fox movie

with everybody, including the preacher, to be on horseback. On August 11, 1915, Buck and Odille became man and wife.

For the whole of their married life they were a devoted couple, and in the days before motion pictures made him famous, Buck and Odille worked equally hard to keep themselves in food and clothing. When war came to Europe it had a decided effect on show business, so Buck decided that it was time to move on. He got a job as horsebreaker for the British and French Armies at a remount depot set up at the Chicago Stockyards. Buck worked there until America entered the conflict and was then retained for the duration because his qualities as a horsebreaker and rider were recognized as valuable to the war effort.

Part of his job was to select the most suitable horses for cavalry and artillery use. As all the animals chosen were dark, any white or grey horses were turned down. One day a rancher came in with a silver-grey which Buck had to turn down, but something about the horse attracted him. Buck's offer of \$100 for the horse was accepted. He named the animal "Silver" and later he was to ride him to a greater fame than Buck could possibly have imagined.

AFTER THE WAR Buck and Odille joined the Ringling Brothers' Circus at \$50 a week. They bought a car for \$20 at the end of the season, and drove to Los Angeles. It was now 1919 and Odille was expecting a baby. When they reached Los Angeles, Buck rented a small apartment and set out to find work. Soon after the birth of a little girl whom they named Maxine, Buck got work as an extra in Fox pictures, thanks to Scott R. "Scotty" Dunlap, later to become one of Buck's best friends. Work as an extra didn't bring in much money,

but it was regular, and Buck decided to stay around Hollywood for a while in case his prospects improved.

The top cowboy at Fox Studios was Tom Mix who, with his horse Tony, enjoyed immense popularity and was said to have earned \$25,000 a week at one stage of his career. But Mix was a hard man to handle. He delighted in trick hats and fancy suits which would have made even a singing cowboy of the 1940s blush. Yet for all that, he was convincing on screen. Like most of the top stars of the time he disliked doubles, but he realized that some scenes demanded them. And that is how he and the future Buck Jones came to meet.

Legend has it that he and Buck slugged it out on a vacant lot because Mix was jealous of the other's superior riding skill, but it is doubtful if this story is true because by the time Jones was himself a star, the two were firm friends and remained so for the rest of their lives. When Mix was filming "Dick Turpin," Buck crept into the movie as an extra much to the amusement of them both.

People soon began to notice the tall, well-built, grey-eyed, six-foot Westerner. Letters poured in, and toward the end of 1919 Fox put him on contract. Buck Jones' first starring role was in "The Last Straw" with Vivian Rich as his leading lady. The film went on release in the United States in 1920 and a year later was shown in England. The fans demanded more and it was quickly followed by "The Forbidden Trail," "The Square Shooter," "Firebrand Trevison" and many others.

At one point in his career, William Fox tried to take Buck out of Westerns and put him in straight acting roles such as the famous "Lazy Bones," but his fans clamored for more Westerns. The studio

(Continued on page 63)

only my blankets and a small pearl-handled pistol. He looked at the gun and said, "All right, leave everything and I'll let you have the money for fare."

Later that day the Indian walked down to the depot with me and while we were waiting for the train to pull in, he asked me how much money I had coming from Bill Roach.

I said, "\$30.00." Then he asked me if I would like to make some easy money. "Sure," I said.

"Well, when you get your money, buy two cases of whiskey. You can get twenty-four pints for \$11.00. Buy two suitcases and put the whiskey in it but don't put them in the baggage car with your bedroll. Keep them in the smoker with you and drop me a line before you start back and I will meet you at the depot and we will take the whiskey to my place. I can get \$2.00 a pint for it from the Indians. That will put some money in our pockets.

"I have my horse and saddle and I can get you a saddle and horse cheap from an Indian friend of mine who has a little spread in the mountains. Then we will go out in back of Grey Back Mountain. I know where a lot of wild cattle have wandered in the canyons and on part of the desert that don't belong to anyone. We can drive a few head out on some back trails that only I know where they are. I know a butcher who has a small slaughterhouse. He will buy all we can bring him and no questions asked."

I asked him if the cattle didn't belong to some ranch and he said they did at one time, but they were wild now and didn't really belong to anyone. So I agreed to the deal. For a kid of sixteen that was real adventure.

As the train pulled in, we shook hands on it and I boarded and made my way up front to the smoker. I got a seat on the depot side, stuck my head out the window, and waved goodbye to my friend

as the train pulled out. That was the last time I ever saw him.

When I reached Los Angeles I went to collect my money from Bill Roach; but each time I showed up at his office he would stall me. I finally gave it up. One thing he did do for me was to have my bedroll and pistol sent to me from Banning. I believe he would have paid me my wages but I don't think he had it. Selling wild mining stock for a living wasn't too easy.

I really want to thank him for not paying me, for I surely would of embarked on that wild adventure with my Indian friend if he had. In a way, Bill Roach kept us both out of trouble. Instead of sitting here in my home writing this, I might have been on the inside looking out.

Buck Jones—Bona Fide Hero

(Continued from page 21)

tried to change his name to Charles Jones, and then Charles Buck Jones because plain "Buck" wasn't sophisticated enough. Nobody liked the idea, least of all Buck, so back to Buck Jones it went and he legally adopted this name on July 1, 1937.

Some of Buck Jones' leading ladies read like a Who's Who of the Cinema: Winifred Westover (who married William S. Hart), Vivian Rich, Marguerite de la Motte, and the most famous of them all, Carole Lombard, who was just sixteen when she made her film debut with him in "Hearts and Spurs."

In 1926 Buck visited England with his wife and was amazed to learn that over there he ranked in popularity with Tom Mix. Unlike Mix, however, he did not bring Silver, so could not ride up the steps of the Mansion House to meet London's Lord Mayor for lunch as Tom and Tony had!

Back in the United States Buck heard that William S. Hart had decided to retire. Producer trouble and income tax demands were alleged to have been part of Hart's reasons, but another was that although his Westerns were realistic and excellent (even by today's standards), the public didn't want him anymore. They preferred the hard-riding fast-action pictures turned out by Jones and Mix. In fact, apart from Ken Maynard, they had only one serious rival for the next four years. This was Fred Thomson, an ex-wartime chaplain who rode to fame on a large grey Irish Hunter named Silver King. In less than two years Thomson had skyrocketed to fame only to die tragically following surgery on December 25, 1928.

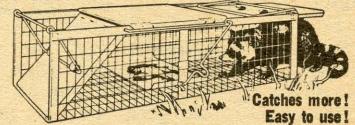
WHEN SOUND MOVIES came in, Westerns went into a temporary decline, and Buck Jones was one of the few who successfully made the transition from silent films to sound. The going was hard, however, so he decided to leave pictures, and formed the Buck Jones Wild West Show. This venture proved a failure, and almost broke he turned back to Hollywood to find that he was very much in demand. Tom Mix's return to the screen in "Destry Rides Again" was not a success, and Mix was destined to make very few sound appearances, one of the last being a serial called "The Miracle Rider." Universal Studios was anxious to find a replacement and chose Buck Jones.

By 1935 Westerns were booming again and Buck was the undisputed "King of the Cowboys." He formed his own production company releasing through Uni-

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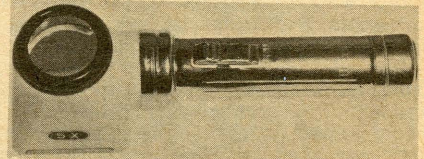


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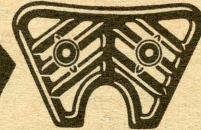
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Wellington, Kansas *(See below)
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Harbaugh Museum,
Wellington, Kansas
11. Soda fountain.
Wichita, Kansas
Historical Museum

*NOTE to 9: The .32 calibre blowgun cane fired a standard .32 calibre bullet. The firing pin was activated and released by a hard burst of air. The cane could be fired by blowing strongly into the funnel-shaped head, or by clapping the palm of the hand sharply against the same funnel.

versal and Columbia, and supervised his scripts to insure that excessive violence would be avoided and that the finished picture would have an appeal for all ages. A Buck Jones Production was simply that.

Unlike Tom Mix, off screen Buck was a quiet, studious person. He rarely wore cowboy clothes in public because he felt it looked as if he were showing off. He lived quietly on his ranch in the San Fernando Valley and was devoted to his wife and daughter. To millions of kids everywhere Buck Jones was the personification of the hero, a fact that may puzzle this generation which has no time for hero-worship. So great was his popularity that when he organized the Buck Jones Rangers, the world-wide membership soon exceeded three million. Silver shared his fame and became a featured player in every picture. There were, in fact, four horses which bore the name, but it was the original Silver that was to remain Buck's special pet even when he retired the horse in 1937.

Anxious never to offend his young fans, Buck Jones devoted his time to writing and producing pictures which would appeal to them. The hero-worship they extended to him meant a great deal. When a small boy named Joe Collins fell from an apartment window in the Bronx, and severely injured himself, he amazed his doctors by stating, "I'm not going to cry. Buck Jones wouldn't cry."

Buck was so touched that he arranged for the presentation of a radio to the boy and personally flew to New York to see him. In fact, the presence of his idol contributed much to the boy's recovery.

Youngsters from all over the United States and overseas fashioned their lives on Buck Jones. Some even ran away from home and went to Hollywood convinced that Buck would put them on the road to fame. Usually the screen star was able to convince them of the pitfalls ahead and put them on the road home to a more normal life.

His own prowess as a sportsman was a strong factor in his publicity. Buck was an accomplished boxer and yachtsman (he took part in several big races with his eighty-five-foot diesel-engined schooner *Sartaria*) as well as a pilot and racing car enthusiast. By 1938 he was at the peak of his fame, and even when the singing cowboy, Gene Autry, came on the scene Buck had little cause for worry.

When Tom Mix was killed in a car crash on October 11, 1940, Buck, saddened by his old friend's death, readily agreed to accept a small part in Universal's mammoth fifteen-part serial "Riders of Death Valley," which was to be dedicated to Mix, and as a special tribute to Buck, part of the theme music was called *Buck Jones' Ride*. Starring with Buck was Dick Foran, Leo Carrillo, Charles Bickford, and Buck's son-in-law, Noah Beery, Jr., who had married Maxine, on March 30, 1940. "Riders of Death Valley" proved to be Buck's last serial, perhaps his most famous being "White Eagle" made for Columbia back in 1933.

In 1941 Buck played two entirely different roles—as a villain in Chester Morris' "Wagons Westward" and the lead in a new series for Monogram called "The Rough Riders." The Rough Riders series is on record as being one of the most successful ever produced in Hollywood. Teamed opposite Colonel Tim McCoy and Raymond Hatton, Buck made eight action-packed pictures. Ironically,

his last film was "Dawn on the Great Divide," released early in 1943.

THE ENTRY of America into World War II meant a busy time for Buck Jones. Along with other movie stars, he combined his numerous radio and personal appearances with bond-selling tours to aid the war effort.

"He sold millions of dollars' worth, and autographed every bond sold," Mrs. Jones recalled.

On November 15, 1942, he left Hollywood and went East on another bond-selling tour. At Philadelphia, on November 26, he was made grand marshal of Uncle Wip's Toyland Parade, and then he was off to Boston.

During the afternoon of Saturday, November 28, Buck visited a children's hospital. This was an unscheduled stop as he had originally intended to go to New York prior to returning home. But he was asked if he would visit the hospital, and immediately agreed. Later in the evening he was the guest of honor at a dinner held at the Coconut Grove night club. The place was crowded with people, many of them youngsters celebrating the result of a college football game.

Suddenly the place was filled with smoke and flames. Someone, later alleged to be a fifteen-year-old boy, had brushed a cigarette against one of the palm leaves which surrounded the walls and it burst into flames. As panic spread and exits became jammed, many were trampled, burned or suffocated. Buck Jones got out unharmed, but immediately fought his way back to help the injured and became himself a victim.

Some 491 people died that night and Buck Jones was one of the 181 critically burned victims taken to the city hospital. For two days doctors fought to save his life, but on the afternoon of November 30, Buck Jones was dead. The tragedy was to shock not only Hollywood, but his fans all over the world.

I vividly recall the morning of December 1, when, as a small boy in England, I listened to the B.B.C.'s morning news and was horrified to hear that Buck Jones was dead. At that moment something of my boyhood also died.

Buck's body was flown back to California where it was cremated. "Buck's ashes were strewn over the ocean that he loved so much by his dearest and best friend," Mrs. Jones told me. "This was his wish."

The full impact of the star's death came to his family some months later when his original Silver, who had pined for him, began to weaken. "I had to put him to sleep in 1943," Mrs. Jones recalled sadly. "It seemed he missed Buck, and stopped eating. We hand-fed him, but he kept going downhill and that was the only thing to do. He was very old for a horse—thirty-four years. The others I kept until I had to do the same. They are all buried on the ranch with markers.

"I still have Buck's silver and gold mounted saddle and all the trappings, including his gold and silver gun and belt. Someday I may give them to my grandson, Buck Beery, if he is still interested in horses—at the moment he has turned to cars."

The revolver she referred to was Buck's Colt single action army model of 1873, the 5½-inch barrel version. Purchased for a Christmas present to Buck in 1925, it was engraved by Edward H.

THE WAY

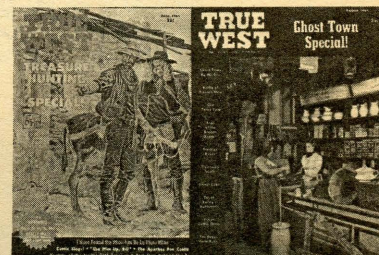
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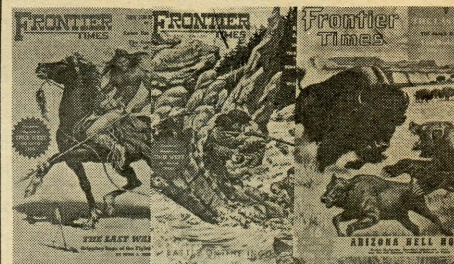
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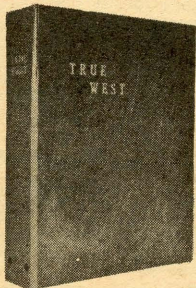
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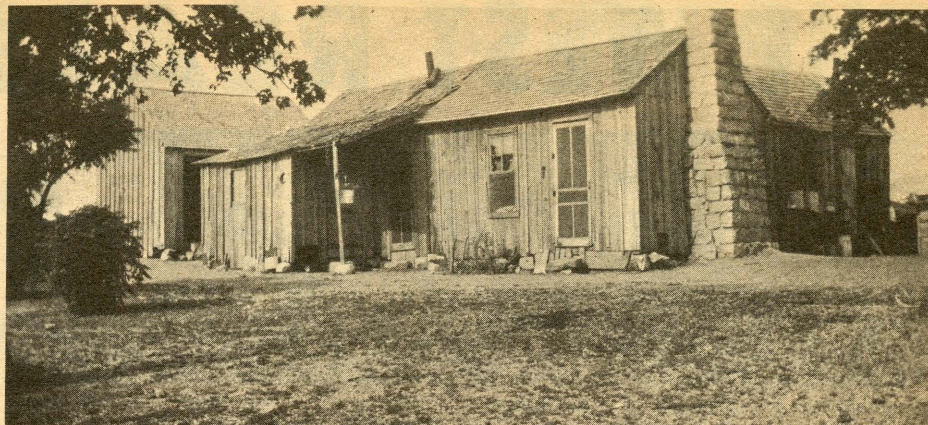
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When the Sems family first moved to the Flying H Bar Ranch, they lived in the weathered house above until Mr. Sems could build a new one.

Bohlin. Serial number 139166 (which dates it about 1891), the revolver has ivory grips inlaid with gold, silver and enamel. On the right-hand grip is a diamond-shaped inlay with "Buck" engraved on it and on the left side a similar inlay engraved "Dell." The remainder of the revolver is engraved with silver inlay. Mrs. Jones told me that she keeps the revolver in a hand-carved leather case which bears the date she presented it to him. The only time Buck used it was for parades and personal appearances.

For Mrs. Buck Jones her husband's memory has never dimmed, because she is constantly reminded of him by people in all walks of life. "I never realized so many people still remembered him," she told me with pride. "He was such a wonderful guy." The Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma also remembered Buck, and Mrs. Jones was asked to present a large framed portrait of him for permanent preservation in its collection.

Buck Jones is far from forgotten. He has earned his place among the immortals of the Old West. True, his Westerns may have followed the Hollywood pattern, but in his way he made a genuine contribution toward keeping alive traditions and memories of the old days and the people who lived back then.

It was fitting that Buck Jones, whose dash, charm and verve endeared him to millions, should die a hero. But the tragic manner of his death inspired perhaps his finest epitaph when W. H. Mooring, the Hollywood correspondent for the English movie magazine *Picturegoer* wrote, "I dare bet Buck Jones didn't go to a night club once in five years. Odd he should have made his last roundup among all the tinsel of city night life. He belonged so completely to the orange grove, the nearby corral and the horses."

Mexican Bullion on the Flying H Bar Ranch

(Continued from page 39)

pletely destroyed without even a photograph being made, as they continued digging. They felt sure this was the entrance to the underground village and treasure, but nothing else was found at that precise spot.

A number of other copper knives, cut from the same type of thin copper sheeting, were found close by, and everything was buried in the same preservative—pulverized oiled charcoal.

By this time digging was taking on

major proportions and my dad could not do it alone. Two other men came to help, Bill Hodge and John Hart. The latter was the father of Sam Hart who had originally brought Mr. Arnold to our place. There were no contracts, only verbal agreements that each would share in the treasure when it was found.

A few months later, Mr. Arnold had a Mexican friend come and survey the work being done, look over the general area, and read the plat rock. He read this exactly like Mr. Arnold had. This Mexican bluntly said that no treasure would ever be found because it was guarded by evil spirits. He left and would have no part in it.

Later and at long intervals between, other Mexicans came. They, too, would read the plat rock exactly as had Mr. Arnold. And all were unanimous in their opinions—no treasure would ever be found because of evil spirits.

Whether or not their predictions or beliefs were true it is difficult to say, but friction arose among the workers. Mr. Arnold and John Hart began carrying heavy revolvers. No one would cooperate with Mr. Arnold who was the only one who held the key to the mystery and the only one who had the knowledge to direct them.

I have always believed if he had been treated differently, perhaps something of more value might have been found. Surely these things were not put there without some purpose.

Friction became so acute that Mr. Arnold left and, with him gone, there was no one to supervise the digging. For a few months, however, it continued at random.

In the meantime Mr. Arnold returned briefly but he was upset and disturbed. He and his wife had secured a divorce, and things never were the same again among the workers or with the digging. Arnold seemed to have almost lost interest. He would show up occasionally and remain for a short period, but he took no active part in the work again.

ON ONE of his brief visits he took me with him to cut some copper "trimmings" out of a tree. We came to one old oak where he stopped, looked and "sighted," then walked briskly to another. He pointed to a mark on this tree and remarked to me, "See this mark? This means to go east ten *varas*."

He stepped off these *varas* which led to another old oak, the mark on which meant so many *varas* south. When he stepped them off we came to another old