SHADE’S WELL

By Laura V. Hamner*

"Where is Shade’s well?" was asked. "What is it?" No one could answer. They only knew that there was a well some place in Kansas, somewhere in Oklahoma. No one knew exactly. The writer wishes she had a dollar for every letter written to her, every book she has searched, every library she has visited, all in an effort to learn of Shade’s well.

For many years there was a strip of land bounded by several states, claimed by none. This strip was not a part of Kansas, nor Colorado, nor New Mexico, nor Texas, nor Indian Territory; though it was touched by all of these. It was called "Neutral Strip" or "No Man’s Land." There was no law of force. There were desperados and bad men, but decent people had also ventured in and established homes. These homes were often in the eastern part of the Strip.

One day in 1888, H. B. Fore went to Liberal, Kansas, to buy necessities for his family. By chance he met J. U. Shade, livestock agent for the Rock Island Railroad. They discussed the Rock Island line that had just finished its tracks to Liberal in April of that year. There was a law that forbid loading Texas cattle in Kansas. If the Rock Island got its share of cattle shipments it would have to extend its line into No Man’s Land, and set up shipping pens at the end of the road. For that reason, seven miles of railroad was built to a point just inside the territory line near a place called Tyrone, for a reason unknown. Some say there was nothing at the place but the cattle pens—no station, no telegraph, no homes. One informant says there was a small settlement with a post office and perhaps a store.¹ At any rate, there was not much of a town at Tyrone. In August of 1888, J. U. Shade came down into the Neutral Strip or No Man’s Land to get help from his acquaintance, H. B. Fore.

"There is no use having shipping pens where there is no water," he said to Fore, "so I want to get you to help me locate a well down here where cattle can get water before they get cars to load out on."

* The story of Shade’s Well has been adapted for publication in The Chronicles from the manuscript by Laura V. Hamar, used in her series of broadcasts over Radio Station KCNG, Amarillo, Texas.—Ed.

¹ Tyrone post office was established May 5, 1892, Albert E. Blake, postmaster.
The spot was selected. Then Fore went to Oak City, and hired two young men to dig the well by hand, Bob Tuggle and Tom Rail. The boys set up a tent for sleeping and took their meals with Mrs. Fore, who also fixed a lunch for them every day. Mr. Fore took them to work and brought them back each evening. The well was seven miles southwest of the loading pens and the loading pens were seven miles southwest of Liberal, Kansas. It was known from the first as “Shade’s Well.”

Mr. Shade moved a little house down to the well and began to search for a man he could trust to look after the shipping interests of the Rock Island. Not long after that H. B. Fore went over to the well and found that the house was gone. Just where it went is a mystery unsolved to this day. Another house was moved down, for Shade had found the very man he thought was dependable enough to be given this responsible position, Zachariah Cain, a man of West Virginia who had moved his family to Kansas in the spring of 1886. He had started a home about three miles northwest of Liberal and made a name as a promising citizen of the West. The Rock Island engaged him to take care of the well, to see that all herds were watered while waiting their turn for shipment. He moved down and took up life in the two-roomed house. In March of that year, 1889, H. B. Fore moved into the valley within a half-mile of the well. The next year J. N. Lovelace moved his family in, so Shade’s valley was thickly populated. It had three families living there in sight of each other.

When the cattle began to come in herds in the fall of 1889 seeking the Tyrone loading pens, they found that Shade’s well was seventy-two feet deep with an unusually tall wind mill, rising fifty feet into the air. The well had three tanks, one elevated, the other surface tanks—near a buffalo wallow. This depression made a large lake, or reservoir as they were called in the West. It was fifty feet wide and three hundred feet long and was considered a sensible provision for water for the cattle when they came. A few troughs were also provided. The cattle came in thousands. As soon as they reached the buffalo wallow reservoir they rushed in and many had to be dragged out or else pulled themselves out with difficulty. The cattle drank at the troughs without difficulty. As soon as the season was over, the work of providing better watering facilities began. The reservoir soon dried up or the water seeped away, and the depression was filled in. The well was deepened and a steam pump was installed to pump water during the four months of cattle loading. A string of troughs so long that it looked a quarter of a mile long to one cowboy who saw it for the first time. And more storage tanks were provided. Shade’s well was ready to accommodate its cattle visitors in 1890 and in all succeeding years.

The cattle came. Big herds, little herds, one herd at a time, many herds at once. They came from Oklahoma, New Mexico, Texas,
and Colorado. Mrs. Cain never forgot the flock of twenty thousand sheep that came to be watered while they waited for cars.

Perhaps there never has been known in the cattle history a watering place, like Shade's Well. All about was free grass, grass that only a few years before had been cropped by herds of buffalo. Here, in a waterless land was water a-plenty. No man could have been more capable and faithful in providing water for those thirsty animals than Zach Cain. He not only saw that all waiting herds were kept well watered, but he played no favorites. Every herd had to take its turn. He saw to it that each herd was watered daily. To this day, no one knows how he managed to keep the herds coming and going: from the pasture to the trail boss pre-empted for the period of waiting, to the well and back out of the way of the next herd in its turn; all day long with never a bit of friction, never a complaint from the cowmen. The herd that was nearest the well was the herd that was recognized as the next herd out. A messenger would come on horseback to report that the cars would be in Tyrone in twenty-four to thirty-six hours so that the herds that had priority would be dispatched in time to meet those cars at the loading pens in Tyrone, seven miles away. And the next herd in order of arrival at the well would be moved up near the well. Day after day this went on. Sometimes there were enough cars available so that a herd would wait for only a few hours. Sometimes a herd would have to wait around for days, coming daily to the well and going back to pasture.

The cowmen did not regret this delay. Their cattle had plenty of free pasture and plenty of clean water. While they waited those cattle were taking on weight and would be fat and well watered when they were loaded up. They would bring better prices in Kansas City or in any other market than if they had been loaded at other shipping points.

Shipping season brought busy days to the force at Shade's Well and the country about the well was an exciting scene for those fortunate enough to visit the valley, when the whole landscape was dotted with black blotches of cattle. Some of those dark blotches would be grazing, some moving to the well, some moving back to pasture, but there was always activity at Shade's well. Activity and harmony prevailed. For operations were in charge of Zach Cain, a fair man and a great organizer.

Loading days at old Tyrone were days of thrilling excitement that brought people from everywhere about to watch the expert cowboys get their herds aboard those slatted cars. It was a dramatic scene filled with motion, color and sounds. The leading men in the drama were the cowboys, proud of their trappings, their wide-brimmed sombreros, their jingling spurs, their squeaking saddle leather, their flapping South Texas chaps and their tappederos.
People from Liberal drove out. Men and women mounted the fences and watched in admiration the deft handling of cattle, gasped at what seemed to be a cowboy in a narrow escape who was fully conscious of the impression he was creating and enjoying it to the fullest. Often a girl would pick out a certain actor in the scene and watch his every movement. Soon a cowboy would recognize her preference and take even greater chances of danger or do his work with an extra flourish because he knew that the bright eyes grew brighter and the pink cheeks even pinker, and the soft voice more excited with every dashing movement he made for her benefit. Many a romance was born and ripened here and sometimes an after-season wedding was celebrated at the home of the Cains. That loading pen was the rendezvous of young lovers in the late 'eighties and early 'nineties that made the prosaic business of handling and shipping take on an unwanted glamour.

This went on for years while the Rock Island was slowly extending its tracks to the southwest, but Shade's Well through the 'nineties furnished water for the cattle, serving as an oasis in the dry land adding dollars to the pockets of the cattlemen who shipped cattle at Tyrone and adding dollars to the till of the Rock Island.

Shade's Well, whose very name induced men to choose this shipping place instead of others. Shade's Well, the busiest spot in the land that lies silent and sleeping under the rainless sky during most of the year. Shade's Well, the Rock Island's most effective drawing card in the cattle world. But one cannot leave Shade's Well with so short an account of its tenure of service.

Texas cattle carried fever in those days, and the Kansas law would not permit them to cross the Kansas line to be loaded on the Rock Island so they were loaded at Tyrone in the Neutral Strip. During the cattle shipping season this seven miles was a busy strip of track. When shipping season was over it was never used.

But there was always activity at Shade's Well. There was always something to be done to improve the watering system, or to develop the Cains' holdings. Everyone worked harmoniously. Political changes came to the section. The Territory of Oklahoma was established in 1890, and No Man's Land was adopted by the new government and became the Oklahoma Panhandle. Zach Cain was a hot headed Democrat, and let the world know his sentiments. He was elected commissioner in his district, and rode on horseback to the distant County Seat of Beaver City. Zach Cain filed on the land occupied by Shade's Well and began improving on the land according to the custom of his home state of West Virginia. He planted growing things. In spite of continued droughts, disregarding inclement weather he planted a garden and set out an orchard and made a success of both.
During the years the Cains had lived at the well, their house had grown and changed character. The first improvement in the life in the two-room house provided by Shade was to dig a dugout. This was considered a necessity in Kansas and the Panhandle, for every home had a dugout. Their dugout was half underground and soddy above. Dugouts were cyclone shelters as well as additional rooms for shelter. Cains dugout was a long room divided into three rooms, not by curtains as in many dugouts but with lumber partitions that insured privacy. The floor was not of dirt as was the case in others but was of planks. The walls were papered with newspaper by Mrs. Cain so that the dugout was not only comfortable but clean. There were two bedrooms and a large kitchen and dining-room. The Cains lived in the two rooms above the ground for awhile but they soon added a three-room house which Zach Cain moved down from Oak City, Stevens County, Kansas, the village that died when the railroad missed it and touched Liberal.

When the Oak City house was moved to Shade's Well, the Cains' dugout was used as a bunkhouse for the men employed by Mr. Cain. Zach Cain added another house to the five rooms that was brought down from Stevens County in Kansas. The dugout was filled up so that the new wing could be placed at the end of the five-room house. The original two-room house was the core of the final structure. Three rooms were attached on the east and four on the west by a screened in porch connecting the two wings providing a stairway down into the new dugout. A cellar beneath the original unit made nine rooms in a land of dugouts and shacks. But nine rooms were not enough for the Cains as time went on.

The road went past Cains' house and up the long slope on to Tyrone and Liberal was a much traveled one as the years passed. People stopped at the Cains' house and were entertained with true hospitality, but the guests were embarrassed to take food and lodging and pay nothing. They finally forced Mrs. Cain into business. She began to run a wayside hotel. It was not in keeping with the nature of the Cains to charge for hospitality but common sense made them realize that they could not feed the whole cattle shipping world. A man now felt free to come as often as he wished, and could take his seat at the table without feeling he was imposing. Mrs. Cain and her four children thus learned to know the big world as did Zach, with whom alone they had formerly dealt. The men left their herds with cowboys while they waited about for dipping time while they waited at the inn of comfort.

Mrs. Cain could not do all of the work unaided, so she kept young girls, hired help as they were called. They were always busy in the shipping season. A watch was kept to the south. A cloud of dust was noted. It came nearer and other clouds were apt to be seen. The cattle were coming. Mrs. Cain and the girls hurried about to close the windows to keep out the stifling dust. Then they
worked in the stifling heat to prepare the meals that they knew would soon be demanded. Not only were there cattle men at Shade’s Well Inn, but cattle buyers as well and many trades were made under the Cain roof, involving hundreds of thousands of dollars.

In time, that road to Shade’s Well was much traveled. Others besides those interested in cattle found rest and refuge at Shade’s Well Inn. Sometimes the place was overrun. The family would give up their beds and sleep on pallets. The women who came after the the beds were filled enjoyed a pallet in true western style, and even helped to arrange for accommodations. The men were sent to the barn to find a sleeping place in the hay. Life was friendly, gay and folksy, and the Inn was a haven. The people came in such numbers that Zach Cain built a wagon yard and corral for those who wished to sleep in their wagons. Everyone was accommodated in some way for the Cains turned no one away from their door. Guests appreciated the spirit of the Cains. Sometimes the cattleman who had paid his bill without protest left a quarter of beef hanging near the back door when he went on his way.

Zach Cain was not the only person who was recognized as an executive by passers-by. Everyone marveled at the ready response to the demands of the guests that Mrs. Cain was able to make. How she could provide enough food, how she could keep her stock of supplies were matters of a constant marvel. Once someone asked her how much plum butter she put up in the summer. “Fifty-six gallons,” was the tense answer. “And not enough,” Mrs. Cain replied. When the orchard began to bear she gathered twenty-five bushels of peaches one year, and her guests enjoyed much of that fruit during that fall and winter.

The name Shade’s Well suggests a clump of cottonwoods, or hackberries, or even willows, but there were no trees when the Cains lived there, except those on the Beaver River twenty miles away, where the grapes and wild plums along the stream provided Mrs. Cain with jelly in all the later years. Near the Well in time were the house, the barn, the wagon yard, the fields and orchard all fenced and cross-fenced, but no trees. Zach Cain could not stand this so he set out a double row of locust trees along the roadside up the hill north of the house. All their lives long the Cain children carried the memory of those two rows of trees one on each side of the road, beyond the house. Mockingbirds raised their young in those trees; mockingbird song floated down the hill during the long days and often far into the moonlit nights. In the spring those locusts were fluted, fringey white banners of blossoms, pendant dispensers of perfume, brought to the Cains by the soft summer breezes.

Mrs. Cain hired bright, intelligent attractive girls to help her. The cowboys in this womanless land lured them away from the
Cains. The girls made their own trousseaux and were married under the Cain roof.

Romance robbed the Cains’ children of their teacher, Miss Arnold, who came from Effington, Illinois, who taught them for two years. That teacher drew cowboys to the Cains with the magnetic lure of romance. The teacher had her pick of the whole country but dallied with the idea of marriage for two years. Then she was married at the home of the Cains but kept on teaching wherever she lived, serving as a teacher in the first school in Guymon in 1902.

Shade’s Well Inn took on a new responsibility, a new attraction. Mary Fore, post mistress at the office in the Fore home, married Jim England in 1896, and the post office was moved to the Inn, and was known as Shade’s post office. Mail was brought from Liberal by buckboard three times a week and was distributed from Shade to a half-dozen little towns with a radius of seventy miles. Optima, Buffalo, Red Point, Hardesty, and Range were the towns served. Many a lonely settler thanked the Cains for news from home.

After the Rock Island reached Santa Rosa, New Mexico in 1901, conditions changed and the railroad was built to the ranches and Shade’s well was no longer needed as a watering place for herds waiting for shipping. Life there was no longer stimulating. The Cains lived on at the well for several years, until all but one of their children were married and gone. They sold out their cattle interests and moved to new Tyrone which is located four miles southwest of old Tyrone. They took their place in the civic and church life of the town until their death years ago.

With the abandonment of Shade’s Well, an era passed, the big ranch era of the cattle business. No longer did the high plains feel the trod of the hooves northward to the shipping point. The dust of the trail herds was settled forever. The cries of the cowboys no longer urged the cattle onward in long drives. The cattle driving era had passed. And Shade’s Well, the words still attract. Some day the writer hopes to go there, and see a marker doing honor to J. U. Shade, Zach Cain and his wife and the cowboys of yesterday.

---

2 The post office called “Shade” was established in Beaver County, Oklahoma Territory, on August 19, 1890, with Mary L. Fore as postmaster. Discontinued, effective September 15, 1902, mail to Liberal, Kansas (Shirk, op. cit., p. 94.)—Ed.