

Unbridled Cowboy

Joseph B. Fussell
Edited by E. R. Fussell

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This book is dedicated to the past, present, and future
descendants of Joe and Mary Fussell,
above all to their children, my aunt, Helen Fussell Johnson,
and my father, Robert G. Fussell.

To my aunt Helen's children,
Joseph B. Johnson and Bruce A. Johnson.
And to their children, Susan L. Johnson,
Barbara Johnson Runa, Robert D. Johnson,
Kimberly Johnson Simon, and Elizabeth L. Johnson.
And to their children, Blossom L. Runa, Ashley R. Johnson,
Drake W. Johnson, Aubrey Simon, Caleb Simon,
Marlee Simon, and Jessie Simon.

To my sister, Mary E. Fussell, and her daughter,
S. Alexandra Rowbottom.
And especially to my children, Elizabeth Fussell Racine,
Robert E. Fussell, and Anna Fussell Sorensen.
And to their children, Samantha G. Sorensen,
Carter J. Racine, Kayla R. Fussell, Elizabeth J. Sorensen,
Allison M. Racine, and Sophia M. Sorensen.

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Editor's Preface

In May 2005, I e-mailed my cousin Joe Johnson in San Clemente, California, from my law office in Le Roy, in western New York state. “Cuz,” I wrote, “I’m editing Gramps’ book. Any suggestions? Bob.” His four-word reply—“Reduce Mexican body count”—showed up on my screen the next day.

Reading this brought back an old concern. How many of Gramps’ stories are true? Did he really (as he explained in his memoirs) carefully plot and carry out the cold-blooded murders of nine Mexican *vaqueros*? And did he do it single-handedly? And strictly for revenge? And, when all is said and done, does it really matter whether his stories are 100 percent accurate, exaggerated, embellished, or pure fantasy?

And the big question for me was, What would I rather believe about my grandfather, whom I remember as a proud, loving, intensely caring, skinny, Stetson-wearing old man whose palsied hands shook in perfect unison as he spilled tobacco from the pouch he held in one hand onto dark brown paper he held in the other just before he rolled his own, while I sat eagerly waiting for him to finish spinning another fascinating yarn (sometimes starring himself) about the old West?

Would I rather believe that (a) he was a great raconteur who never let truth interfere with entertainment, or (b) he was a violent murderer and wild rascal whose concern for accuracy and truth ensured that his stories were true as gospel? In short, would I rather think of him as a liar or a killer?

When I grew up in small town Le Roy in the 1950s, my dad spoke little about his father’s life. I didn’t even learn that Gramps had written his memoirs until 1966 when I was twenty-three, nine years after Gramps died. And I only learned about it then because Aunt Helen, my dad’s sister and cousin Joe’s mother, gave me a copy of Gramps’ memoirs, which he titled “Backtracking a Texan,” when I stopped to visit her and my uncle Johnny Johnson at their secluded tavern on gorgeous

Lake Pend Oreille in Idaho. After reading it, I questioned my dad (Aunt Helen didn't seem to question its accuracy). He said little. But I was persistent and finally he slowly began to make his feelings known to me. After several years of pestering, I concluded that Dad avoided the subject not because he thought his father was a blarney-filled bullshitter, but because my dad knew his father to be very honest and blessed with an outstanding memory. Dad was too close to his father to comfortably deal with the nefarious parts of his father's past.

I also concluded that my father had kept much of the truth about his father hidden from me during my childhood on purpose. Dad had worked hard (maybe too hard for my taste) to train me to be a very obedient, responsible, law-abiding citizen, in part because he was worried I might take after him and lead a foolish and irresponsible childhood. Dad's goal, as he told me, was to graduate at the bottom of his high school class, but he failed to achieve even that because, he said, a slow-witted student beat him out. But my dad's real fear (I slowly discerned) was that I might, God forbid, model myself on my grandfather and completely destroy my life. Dad, I concluded, spent much of his adult life escaping his own and his father's past, working hard to be successful in his, not his father's, world.

But Dad shouldn't have worried about me. I was not like my father and grandfather, who had been big, rugged boys who matured early and were natural leaders with strong, colorful personalities. No, I, on the other hand, was on the small side (like my mother), a late bloomer who looked fourteen when seventeen, was sometimes sickly, and often felt inadequate at the prospect of competing on a physical level with other boys my age. At an age when Gramps was roping longhorns and Dad was captain of his championship high school football team, I sat at my desk trying to solve trig and physics problems, fighting to gain admission to a top university.

Dad knew that I would live in an America that, while only two generations and a couple thousand miles from the world his father had inhabited, was culturally light-years from his father's world. Dad was certain his son and father might as well have grown up on different planets, and that the behavior and attitudes that allowed his father to survive in his environment would prove disastrous for me in mine. Knowing my dad's feelings, I waited until after his death to look into publishing Gramps' story. While I don't know, of course, how true it all

is, I believe Gramps' story is very accurate and portrays an America that was once very real but is now just a forgotten dream. And even though many men led lives similar to my Gramps' and many others have written about his era, Joe Fussell's story is unique because there are very few people who led his type of life and wrote about it too. I believe it's one of only a few authentic, first-person accounts of that time and place.

While Joe doesn't mention his brothers in his book (they were much younger than he), at least two, John and Claude, were cowboys. A 1956 *Collier's* magazine article, "The Vanishing Cowboy," featured his brother Claude. And when John died in the tiny west-Texas town of McCamy in 1977, the local newspaper printed a long memorial and a poem entitled "John Fussell, Cowboy," describing his life.

Joe Fussell was an ordinary man in the sense that he obtained neither fame nor fortune, but he was consumed by an overpowering adventuresome spirit. And because of the unique circumstances existing where and when he lived, he led an extraordinary life. His childhood made Tom Sawyer's look tame. His adolescence was dominated by a true freedom that few American teenage boys could imagine today, and none could experience. His early manhood as a cowboy and undercover Texas Ranger, especially his time spent along the Mexican border, was colorful and violent. His lifestyle as a hobo and boomer railroad man is extinct today. And the strength of his feelings about issues that dominated American life during his middle years and old age—the Depression, World War II, and the Korean conflict—expressed both in his personal activism and in his prolific writings, are conveyed with a power, independence, and conviction that seems to have vanished from our America along with the cowboy.

Joe Fussell lived his youth and early manhood in an era defined by the fact that legal title to possessions—especially to land and cattle—was never clear, and there were either no established laws, or no official authorities with the power to enforce whatever laws may have been on the books. Life was cheap then. Very cheap. The American Southwest of my grandfather Fussell's life was wild and virtually uninhabited, especially by today's standards. In 1880 the population of Texas was less than 1.6 million. In 2000, it was almost 21 million. And, of course, most of today's world would have been unimaginable for my grandfather. Our ease of travel and communication, our obsessive consumerism, the modern roles of women, today's relationships

between the sexes, the Internet, space travel, TiVo, iPods, Viagra, and modern Vegas are among a few of today's facts of life that would seem more foreign than ancient Rome to my Grampa Fussell.

I ponder too how Gramps would respond to the economic and political conditions of America in 2008. I can hear him ranting, as he did during the Depression, against the financial interests that, he was convinced, dominated our nation's economic and political world, and selfishly ruined the lives of millions of ordinary Americans, leading America to the brink of revolution and/or Communism.

Books like James Michener's *Texas* give a comprehensive picture of Texas history and Texans. Michener describes that state's founders—people like my grandfather and great-grandfather—as “a resolute, courageous, self-driven lot whose basic attitudes could be summarized in a series of adjectives—individualistic, aggressive, volatile, rural, egalitarian, insofar as white Anglo-Saxon Protestants were concerned, and often violent.” He added that the overriding characteristic of the early settlers was poverty, noting that neither the State of Texas nor the federal government paid for police and other institutions that could bring law and order to Texas in those days.

While I was putting this book together, I discovered that Bill McDonald, the Texas Ranger captain who recruited my grandfather to work undercover, is a hero in Texas. His biography, *Captain Bill McDonald, Texas Ranger: A Story of Frontier Reform* by Albert B. Paine, describes how only a handful of Rangers with no resources whatsoever had to cover vast amounts of territory infested with criminals, many of whom had fled to Texas to escape established law in the East. Grampa's work with the Rangers was typical. The biography also mentions Ranger Olds and a N. Jones (Nat B.) from Athens, Texas, both of whom are described in this book.

I also found that a great deal has been written about Hatton Sumner, the district attorney in Dallas who wanted to prosecute the man who fought with my grandfather. And I got valuable information from the clerk of Navarro County, Texas, with respect to the date of the elections involving Charlie McConnico in Kerens. That helped me get dates straight that weren't made clear in my grandfather's writings, and I thank the clerk for generously helping me.

I was able to trace my male Fussell ancestors back to 1600. Moses Fussell, who was Joe's grandfather's grandfather, fought in the Revolutionary

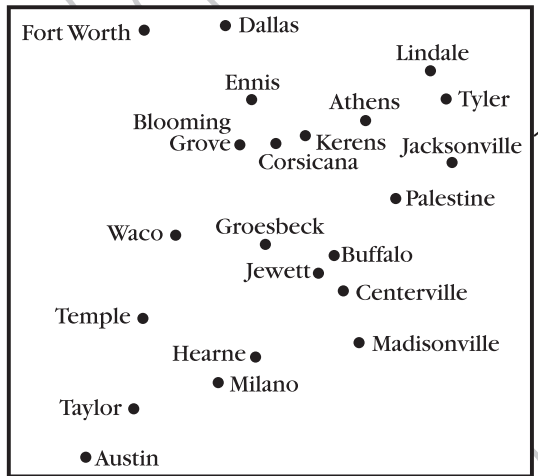
War. After the war, Moses went to Tennessee and his descendants then went to Arkansas, as my grandfather had heard through family lore. But according to my research, Nicholas Fussell, the first Fussell to come to North America, came in the early 1600s from London, England, not from France to fight with LaFayette in the 1770s, as my grandfather believed. Perhaps another of our ancestors did. It seems as if the Fussells were drawn by an invisible force that pushed them to move west and south, which they did for over four hundred and fifty years—from Scotland, to England, to Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, California, and Peru, where my sister and I were born in the 1940s. Two of my children were born in California, but the movement west ended when my youngest child was born in the east, as all of my grandchildren have been.

In editing my grandfather's memoirs, I recalled conversations with family members and examined the huge volume of letters he wrote to family, friends, politicians, and colleagues, and letters to the editor he contributed to various newspapers. I verified details in his stories whenever possible, but have not altered details I could not verify. I have made corrections to spelling and punctuation, but have not altered his grammar or wording unless required for clarity; in some places, I have condensed or omitted some longer rambling passages, but only when this did not affect his telling of his story.

Many who read his story will undoubtedly be appalled and thank God they live in a highly structured era dominated by law and order, compulsory education, modern conveniences, modern medicine, universal plumbing, omnipresent air-conditioning, plane travel, automobiles, the Internet, and a cornucopia of consumer goods. But many others will look enviously at the freedom enjoyed by men like my grandfather, who could run away from home and school, travel about willy-nilly, work at an endless series of jobs, settle their own disputes, and, if they were smart and lucky like Gramps, live to tell about it.

In editing my grandfather's story, I did not soften his language and did not judge any of his actions, attitudes, or beliefs. They speak for themselves. I hope you find him and his life as fascinating as I do.

E. R. Fussell
February 2008





Acknowledgments

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And finally, this entire process was dependent upon the constant support and love from my darling wife, Pat.

Foreword

In reading memoirs, I find, almost invariably, the writer seems to think he has accomplished something really worthwhile in life and wants the reading public to know about it. In this case, however, the writer hasn't anything in particular of which to be proud, except that he finally came to his senses, and because of the kindly influence of a good woman, deviated from the path he was following, married, and reared and educated a son and daughter. That in itself is nothing extraordinary because it has been done since time immemorial and will continue to be done until the end of time.

But as I consider my incorrigibility from the time I was large enough to throw rocks to the day I was married at the age of twenty-seven years, my lack of schooling, my desire to wander aimlessly from hell to haw river, my insatiable desire to know life in its every aspect, my personal contacts with men and women from the lowest depths to which a human being can sink to some in high positions of trust in industry and in the councils of our nation, my horning into places just to see what I could see, places from which men with no sense at all would have run as a rabbit would run from a hound dog, I marvel at the almost incredible fact that I could make such a complete about-face in my attitude towards the balance of the human race, play a fair, square game of give and take, persuade a good, patient, loyal, sensible woman to cast her lot with me, and rear and educate two children of whom the most exacting parent would be proud.

In my sixty-eighth year, I sit with my feet as high off the floor as I can get them and be comfortable, roll and smoke cigarettes, take an occasional drink of good red whiskey, and—for the lack of something else to do—live in the past. I am a habitual soliloquizer and quite frequently hear myself asking myself, "Why did you do that, or that, or that? Didn't you have sense enough to know you would have to

pay, and pay, and pay, in the end?" But I don't have any satisfactory answers, just flimsy excuses.

In this story of my life, I have confined myself to facts and to names of persons and places, except in a few instances where, in relating incidents that might embarrass the persons mentioned, I have used fictitious names and called attention to that fact. Many of the people I mention in this story are, I am sure, still living, and if and when they read this story, will remember many incidents herein related. Some of them will enjoy a good laugh. Some will wish I had died in infancy with an old-fashioned case of cramp colic. Others will, I presume, pronounce me the damnedest liar unhung, saying no one human could have had my experiences and escaped a hangman's noose or a penitentiary, or lived through it all and had the guts to tell about it, expecting anyone to believe his story.

Nevertheless, there are many men, high in the business world, men holding responsible positions, men honored and respected for their integrity, who could, if they only would, 'fess up and relate, in part at least, experiences very similar to some of mine. Many an old peace officer and puncher in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona will, when reading of my experiences along the border, say, "He certainly has been there and had plenty of experiences because one not familiar with the country and conditions could not give such a graphic word-picture." Many an Old Rail will have a severe attack of nostalgia and head for some switch shanty.

Right or Wrong - It is in the past. So what?

J. B. Fussell
1947