A Survivor's Story

In the 19th century, Arizona ranching families had to be tough, and the Proctors were. By Frances K. Russell

George Proctor says: "We were reared on the Proctor Ranch in the Madera Canyon/Box Canyon area south of Tucson at the edge of the Santa Rita Mountains. Ranching was rough. As I look back, it is hard for me to imagine how we survived."

George was born in 1918 in Tucson, Ariz. "I was the third trip of eight that my mother made to Tucson by buggy." He was one of five boys and three girls. George is the only one left. His brothers were Charles, William, Navor and Robert. His sisters were Margaret, Eladia and Mary, who died in early childhood.

"Us kids walked to what is now the Proctor parking area to catch the bus to the Continental School. We had two teachers in grades one through eight. Their job was not easy. There was a long, locked cabinet where each child had a cup and toothbrush. Every day after we brushed our teeth, we lined up and saluted the flag. Each Monday every student was given a shower and most needed one very badly. The towel we were given was checked to see if all the grime had been washed off in the shower."

George graduated from the eighth grade at Continental in 1933. He then went to Tucson High School and is a graduate of the University of Arizona.

George's ancestors came to the United States from England between 1635 and 1643 and settled in Massachusetts. His granddad Charles Proctor came from Vermont to the West with his brothers via the Isthmus of Panama about 1861 (before the Panama Canal was built), then by water to California and horseback to Arizona. George remembers when his granddad owned the ranch in Box Canyon and later his father Charles Roque Proctor homesteaded in Madera Canyon just west of that. George's dad married Inez Redondo, who was born in Altar, Mexico, after her family moved to Arizona.

"The ranchers would drive their cattle to Amado or Sonoita and ship them by rail to the stockyards further east. Some of the ranchers increased their herds in interesting ways. One had a platform built on a pack saddle and when he came across an unbranded calf he would put it on the platform and take it back to his herd where he would brand it and have an instant increase of his calf crop."

They seldom ate their own beef if possible. George and some friends once dropped into a cow camp for a meal and cup of coffee, and one rancher asked the other, "When was the last time you ate any of your own beef?" The other replied, "Last week when I ate over at your place."

During the Depression when ranchers could milk a cow, butcher a cow, but could not sell a cow, George's dad built a still and made moonshine. Mescal distilled from the agave plant became the cash crop.

"As a little kid not yet in school," George reminisces, "I delivered 10 or 14 gallons of mescal on Carlota, a little black mare. I never received any special instruction other than how to go where I was going and who I was to deliver to. I collected $10 a gallon and went home very happy. I could count."

The Proctor brothers ranched in Box Canyon and on the Santa Rita Experimental Range. The family worked the ranches together—granddad, dad and uncles. The wild cattle would come across the mountains and the Proctors would ride above them and drive them down the west side of the mountains and join them to their herds. The brothers also caught wild horses and tamed them to ride and to sell. His granddad ran a few sheep on the high range of the Santa Rita

Mountains above Box Canyon Ranch. The Proctors also trapped coyotes, bobcats, badgers, fox and ringtail cats and sold their pelts. Mining also contributed to the economy of the region. George has a gold nugget his dad found in the canyon.

Charles Roque Proctor and Inez Redondo's wedding day, 1913.

In 1933, the Forest Service was fighting a fire in the Santa Rita Mountains. "I went up to the fire camp thinking I would get a free meal," George says. "I got my meal, but they put me to work for it. I had to haul water up to the base camp from down below, and then up to the fire crews. Each mule packed two five-gallon kegs. I earned 45 cents an hour."

In the summer of 1941, George scouted a trail for the Forest Service to go from Kent Springs over Pine Pass. Later in 1941, he was drafted into the U.S. Army, serving in the Infantry and fighting in the Pacific.

"I was wounded in action and received the Purple Heart and the Legion of Merit. When I returned after the war, I was again asked to scout that same Forest Service trail."

After finishing college at the University of Arizona, George worked in Mexico on the Hoof & Mouth Disease Program, and he worked for the Forest Service for 33 years. George's younger brother Robert quit the university and went to Mexico to work for the same government program but he was murdered while working there. Another brother, Navor, was an attorney. His other two brothers, Charles and William, were career U.S. Air Force.

Charles Proctor, George's granddad, was foreman for the Maish & Driscol Cattle Company. The company had a contract to supply beef to the San Carlos Indian Reservation. For each drive, around a thousand head of cattle were rounded up and driven toward Willcox, and on to the reservation, whose most famous resident had been Geronimo. Sabino Otero, a descendant of an original garrison family at the Presidio in the nearby town of Tubac, who had a land grant in the area, approached George's granddad about combining their herds. Charlie wanted no part of that because the Otero cattle had a history of stampeding. The owners of the Maish & Driscol outfit asked Charlie to "be neighborly and combine the herds." Charlie did so and during the night all the cattle stampeded. The next morning, about 300 to 400 head and one cowboy were missing. When they were found, the cowboy, Manuel Sanchez, had gathered the missing herd and was walking his horse around the cattle to keep them together. Sanchez' bravery and cowboy skills were well-known at the time, mainly because of how he saved other cowboys at Camp Cameron.

Camp Cameron was a hospital in lower Madera Canyon for U.S. Army soldiers in the Sonoita and Santa Cruz River areas. Abandoned in 1864, it was then used as a cow camp. As part of their ongoing conflict with ranchers and settlers, the Apaches surrounded the camp, cutting off the water in hopes of driving out the cowboys. Desperate, the cowboys decided to send a young boy for help. They tied him, bareback, to a very fast mare. They then feigned a breakout, and when the Apaches moved in to counter their escape, they opened the gate and the young boy raced out. The mare was able to outrun the Indians and the young boy alerted the men in the valley to the camp's predicament. The Apaches left when they saw the men coming to the camp's rescue. That young boy was Manuel Sanchez, who later became godfather to George's dad.

George likes to relate this story: "Another encounter with the Apaches occurred when one of the cowboys working for my granddad became separated from the others. He was chased by two Apache braves on horseback. One Indian riding bareback on a big buckskin horse with only a rawhide bridle tried to unseat the cowboy from his horse using his bow. The Indian failed to hook him with the bow and pull him off his horse and the cowboy was able to get help. My granddad went after the Indians, but wasn't able to catch them."

George now lives in Patagonia, and has a museum on his property with many objects from the area and the family ranch, including the mescal still. He has written a book, "A Profile for Survival," about growing up on the ranch, his military experiences and his career with the Forest Service. He is still active at the age of 91, and one of his greatest enjoyments is telling the old stories. And anyone interested in the history of the West should listen. ■

Frances K. Russell is one of many who encouraged George to write his book, "A Profile for Survival." The book is available for $20, plus shipping and handling, by calling 520-394-2063.

PHOTOS COURTESY PROCTOR FAMILY

George tests a bronc. INSETS: George, age 18 months, drives a goat cart. ➤ George Proctor, supervisor of the Carson National Forest, 1962. OPPOSITE: George today, at the old stone ranch house.