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Insightful New Book of Lea and More
"Max Evans Animal Stories: A Lifetime Collection"

Last week I took a digital sabbath, retreating into a restful world I need more and more these days, a world far from smart phones, emails, the internet, conference calls, and satellite communications.

The escape was into the world of the book, that document I need to have on my shelves, beside my bed, and in my hands to touch and hold before I open it for the pleasure of the words heard in my mind, for the stories it tells, for the emotions it conjures, for the music of the soul it sings, and for my and the world's history it offers.

For me, books are sacred documents of the mind and heart, and last week I made a spiritual pilgrimage to the debut and launching of a new book by Max Evans, Lea County's most famous author and a man who has written passionately and insightfully about Lea County's part of the American Southwest, that is, Eastern New Mexico and West Texas. Max and the illustrator of his new book, Keith Walters, did their first book signing for the new publication in the pastoral setting of a museum and library located on the beautiful Philmont Boys Ranch outside of Cimarron, New Mexico, a setting

appropriate for the new book for several reasons.



Max Evans (right) and artist Keith Walters sign copies of their works at the grand launching of the sales of their new book "Max Evans Animal Stories" at the Philmont Boys Ranch Museum near Cimarron, New Mexico.

Published by the University of Oklahoma Press, the book is titled "Max Evans Animal Stories: A Lifetime Collection," and it contains 26 narratives written by Max about the animals--coyotes, dogs, prairie dogs, cattle, mice, and more--that have been part of his life, some of them fictional and created for his short stories and novels, some of them horses he rode or dogs he owned as pets.

Now Max will tell you that he has been around a few humans he would label as animals, but the stories in this book emphasize non-human animals, most of them beloved in some ways, but certain of them the

ornery, mean, frustrating critters that slip into our lives.

For instance, one of the stories set in Lea County is titled "Cricket," the name of the small bay horse Max owned and rode when he lived in Humble City just north of Hobbs on the Lovington Highway.

Cricket was one of the beloved animals in Max's life, his attitude expressed even in the story's subtitle, "Little Horse of the Prairies."

Here is how the story begins: "I don't remember when I started riding, playing, and working on Cricket. I was a four-year-old kid when I first got him, and he was a horse a year and a half younger than me, that's all. The little gelding was an odd horse in many ways. For one thing: his ears were the size of a much bigger horse--these gave him acute hearing ability. He was smaller than a quarter horse but built just as powerfully in the hindquarters as any show winner. This breed was called "Steel Dust" back then. The little bay had 'bottom,' as the saying goes about a horse that never quits, and delivers under the toughest conditions."

In the opening sentences, the reader can feel the love and nostalgia Max has for the little horse he had as a boy, but the Cricket story is much more than an older man's longing for the days of his youth. It is a story that subtly relates the history of Lea County in the 1920s and 1930s, and it tells that story in a manner very different from the era's narratives found in books written by academic historians.

Max is a writer of literary works--novels, short stories, biographies, reminiscences, and screen plays--and it is often the case that literature provides the reader with history that is much more realistic and specific, that is insider or flesh-and-blood, engaging history, a history without the constraints of footnotes and bibliographies.

Max's "Cricket" tells of the hardships of the Depression era. It lets the reader experience the hunger many Lea residents experienced. The story informs the reader of the Evans neighbors and his relatives who were finally forced off of the drought-weary county land that would not produce the water or the food they needed.

This is not to say that "Cricket" is a story of sorrow or sadness. In fact, it's just the opposite of that. It is a joyous celebration of a different time and land that pushed children and adults to live up to their potentials. They were a people living in a time that drove life into a corner, and the survivors who knocked down the walls of that corner were heroic women and men, boys and girls. I have watched people respond to Max over the last 15 or 20 years; to many of them he is a hero for his life and for his writing.

In his new book, Max's story of Cricket has a beautiful pen and ink illustration to accompany it. The drawing shows Cricket in the background and in the foreground is a young boy extracting rabbits from a hole in the ground, one dead rabbit

lying beside the boy. These are rabbits that were the main source of protein for the Evans family of Humble City. For a time, it was the young Max's job to hunt on horseback the jack and cottontail rabbits that ended up on the Evans dining room table.

The Keith Walters illustrations of the twenty-six stories add much to the experience of the fat, paperback book, and the book's color cover shows a plains pronghorn, golden grass in the foreground, white clouds and blue sky behind the animal. It is a beautiful painting that looks like it should be hanging in an art gallery. In fact, it is such a good looking work that a 16" x 24" cloth print reproduction of it is now part of the Lea County Museum's Max Evans Room.

Walters appeared with Max at the Cimarron book signing last week. He is a very personable and engaging man who looks like he belongs in a movie. In fact, he has appeared in a number of motion pictures, including a brief appearance in the 1998 film version of Max's novel "The Hi Lo Country."

Working in his other occupation, Walters has been a property master on 22 major motion pictures, including "The Road," "No Country for Old Men," and "True Grit."

I'm hoping to have an exhibition of Keith's work in the Lea County Museum Art Gallery one of these days, and I am hoping he will be able to

accompany Max down to the Lea County for a book signing sometime this fall.

In the meantime, visitors to the museum can buy copies of Max's new book in the LCM bookstore, and they can see prints of two of Keith's works in the Max Evans Room.

I think every Lea County resident ought to have a copy of "Max Evans Animal Stories" for the book's insight into life lived here during the Depression, but it is also a book enjoyable for young and old readers who simply enjoy stories about animals.

The photos of the following old building show a mill built by Lucien Bonapart Maxwell in 1864. It is now the Aztec Mill Museum in Cimarron. One photo was taken last week, the other in 1936.

