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## Western Nostalgia

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Erna Fergusson

## WESTERN NOSTALGIA

**I**N HIS "Salute to Gene Rhodes," which introduces this volume,\* Frank Dobie has presented the man, the quality of his writing, and the reasons "a passionate few" keep his work alive. Much of it is nostalgia, though it may be that when the young and brash critics who do not like Rhodes' style or his point of view have been forgotten Gene, like Stevenson, will be revived as a writer of good, racy, and characteristic prose.

One might take exception to Dobie's statement that Rhodes' characters' "talk is uniformly natural." Frank Dobie has known more cowboys than I have and it may be that they uniformly talk like this: rounded periods, sparkling with whimsicalities, heavily interlarded with classical allusions and apt Biblical and Shakespearean quotations. But I somehow doubt it. When a sheriff named Barela, a near-illiterate cowboy, and a tenderfoot proving his mettle talk just alike I suspect they are all Gene Rhodes. Because Gene, of all things, loved words. He may have been an indifferent cowboy, as hinted. But he always carried a book in his saddlebags, and as he rode he read. He read under a flickering mesquite or aromatic creosote bush, or resting up against the station water tower. He was always reading. A real reader is little distracted by what he is supposed to be doing. So a lot of words and apt quotations drifted through Gene Rhodes' mind, and many stuck. He loved words, the very sound of them, and their synonymity: the way they could be piled up, played with, arranged and rearranged to say the same thing over and over, maybe better and better. So that's the way his cowboys talk—like Gene Rhodes who loved the vernacular and used it as well as he

\* *The Best Novels and Stories of Eugene Manlove Rhodes*, edited by Frank V. Dearing, with an introduction by J. Frank Dobie. Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949.

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used the classical speech. But who, whatever he did, did it like a literary man.

So were his plots literary, intricately contrived. Inconceivable that such things could have happened. But they were fun to read, as any lover of stories would have to admit. They are, in addition, unfailingly true to the scene in which they are laid. Nobody was better than Gene Rhodes at giving the feel of air, the smell of growth or sand or a corral, or the way a country rises to pale blue peaks or fades off into desert nothingness. Most of all, his tales are true with the truth-to-type of a man who writes of life not as it was or even as he knew it to be, but as a man of his generation would speak of people not present—with gentle judiciousness. Only his villains are presented with some rancor, but amused rancor and in the sure knowledge that they will be downed in the end when the knightly hero gets the delicate heroine, whose hair is soft and misty even in a sandstorm and whose hands are always small. No wonder *Saturday Evening Post* readers loved Gene devotedly for a whole generation.

This is a volume to have at hand for escape reading or to put on the guest-room table.