

A cavalryman recalls the day they told the horses goodbye

He's 95 now. And it was more than half a century ago.

But the colonel shuts his eyes and sees the day the U.S. Army cavalry said goodbye to its horses.

"It was down in Marfa, Texas, the last saddle home of the 1st Cavalry Regiment," Wade C. Gatchell says. "Washington ordered a change from horses to tanks."

Franklin D. Roosevelt was in his first term as president. Gen. Douglas MacArthur was Army chief of staff. Budget-pinching of the Great Depression and 20th century military tactics relegated the war horse to history and Hollywood.

"All the officers and troopers mustered at the Marfa railroad depot," says Gatchell. "A train had come to take the 1st Cavalry to Fort Knox, Ky. There the regiment would become the first armored cavalry division. Tanks for horses.



R.H. Growald

"Just beyond the depot, hostlers had lined up the horses behind a rope. Hundreds of the big beauties."

The horses looked at the cavalrymen. The troopers looked at the horses.

Gatchell had been riding Army horses for decades. As a boy in Vermont when his father was chief of a military academy. At Fort

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Rosecrans, in San Diego, in the first decade of this century, when his father was commandant. In France during World War I, when he served his brigadier general father as an aide.

Horses even played a part in his courtships.

Before World War I, at the Army's Camp Ethan Allen in Vermont, he sat a local young lady on a horse. He moved to tighten the cinch.

"Each time I would tug," says Gatchell, "the horse unleashed a dreadful noise. The horse was no gentleman. The lady was unenchanted.

"At Fort Oglethorpe in Tennessee, after World War I, I met my wife Clara. 'Come ride with me, Clara.' Game girl, she did."

Noises at his living-room windows interrupt Gatchell. He is 95. But he hops up from his easy chair, fetches a rag from the kitchen and attacks the windows.

Two painters are on the front lawn. They are washing the house before painting it.

"Clara told me to secure the windows before they started hosing," he says. He wipes water that dribbled in. He tightens the window latches. "Don't tell Clara I waited so long to secure the windows," he says.

"During that first ride with Clara, our horses reached a stream. They lowered their heads and began to drink. Then I saw Clara's horse began to paw the streambed. Oh, Lord," says Gatchell.

The veteran cavalryman knew a horse began pawing before it laid down. Clara's horse was planning to lie down in the cool stream.

"I yelled to Clara to pull the horse's head up," Gatchell says. "I was too late.

"The horse laid down in the stream. Clara, thank God, was not hurt. But she got mighty wet."

Gatchell had loved his postings to Marfa, Texas. There, where mysterious lights hop across the desert plain at night. There, where the Old Borun-



The San Diego Union/Joe Flynn

Wade C. Gatchell was part of the 1st Cavalry Regiment, which traded horses for tanks.

di, the oldest Mexican restaurant in America, still opens and shuts at the pleasure of its woman owner.

There, where six decades ago, he bought a big white show horse named Jack. Gatchell and another officer teamed for the annual riding show. Gatchell and his friend rode their horses out into the arena.

"Jack did not like the other horse," says Gatchell. "The other horse did not like Jack. They began nipping at each other.

"We managed to get our horses over the first hurdle. But after that, despite all we could do, the two horses went to war.

"And together they just plowed through the rest of the barriers.

"My friend and I were not overly pleased. But the audience rose and cheered."

And now, that day in Marfa, it was all ending. No more horses.

Gatchell remembers days of war. The day he rode with his father into the combat zones of France in World War I and the general halted on a road being shelled by the Germans.

"I wondered why," he says. "We stood there 10 minutes or so. Then Father moved us on. 'Why did you

stop there?' I asked.

"Father explained he wanted to time the intervals between the German artillery shells coming over. He said the intervals showed it was only nuisance shelling, not a full-throated barrage.

"The intervals would give us time between shells to move men across the road, he said. A good lesson.

"I put it to good use in World War II," Gatchell says. He led an armored combat team in France and Germany in Gen. George Patton's Third Army.

The memories of war fade. Gatchell's eyes shut again and he is remembering Marfa.

The 1st Cavalry troopers were supposed to board the train. A thought seized them all, officers and men.

"And one by one," says Gatchell, "every man of the 1st Cav marched down the line of horses.

"Every man raised an arm. The old dragoon salute. When you'd raise your saber in salute.

"All the arms stayed raised as every man marched down the line of horses. Goodbye, old friends.

"When they got aboard the train, there wasn't a dry eye in the 1st Cav."