COWBOYS ON THE TRAIL

(1) The illustrious job of cowboy dates back hundreds of year. Settlers from Spain brought horses and cattle with them to North America in the sixteenth century. The horses were used to help the settlers keep the cattle from wandering too far as they fed on abundant grass and water. There were no fences barring the cattle from moving about freely. As cattle herds thrived, horse riders, proficient in skills necessary to find, gather, and look after cattle, were highly sought by ranchers. These skilled cowboys spent their daylight hours riding, roping, and herding noisy, belligerent cattle.

(2) Over time, herds of wild cattle roamed up into Texas from Spanish settlements in Mexico. Many of these animals were descendants of cattle that years before had wandered out and away from their owners. By the middle of the 1860’s and the end of the Civil War in the United States, hundreds of thousands of long-horned cattle roamed the wide opened spaces of Texas and northward.

(3) After the war, people wanted beef. The **market** grew. Improved methods of processing beef and getting it safely to consumers helped fuel this call for meat across the northern and eastern part of the country. Texas had an abundance of cattle, but no way of getting it to the meat plants. Railroads did not yet extend into Texas from the rest of the United States. The only option was to move the cattle from Texas up to the railroads in Kansas, Missouri, and other neighboring states. There the cattle were put on trains and shipped to Chicago or Kansas City to be processed into beef.

(4) Fences did not yet cover Texas and the plains states. It was a matter of walking the cattle the long distance between Texas and the rail yards. Ranchers realized a profit could be made in driving a large herd of cattle up to the railroad towns farther north. They hired cowboys to move the cattle and take them to market. The days of the cattle drive were born.

(5) Several trails crisscrossed Texas, through Indian Territory, later to become Oklahoma, and on into Kansas or Missouri. Another trail took a more westerly route up through New Mexico and into Colorado. These trails, with names such as the Shawnee Trail, the Chisholm Trail, the Western Trail, and the Goodnight-Loving Trail provided the cowboys a route north.

(6) Sometimes the cattle were driven even farther into Wyoming, Montana, Nebraska, or the Dakota Territory. Feeding on succulent northern grasses of the plains located in these states added weight to the cattle before taking them onto the meat plants.

(7) Who were these trail-riding cowboys? Most hailed from Texas or other southern states. Many of them had been soldiers in the Civil War. Returning home, they found jobs scarce. On the other hand, cattle ranchers were scrambling for workers to take cattle to the rail yards in northern cities.

(8) The number of trail drives increased and more and more cowboys were needed. These men often were African Americans or Hispanics. Texas had been a slave state before the Civil War. Many freed slaves went to work on ranches and trail drives after the war. Quite a few ranches in the southern parts of Texas were owned by Spanish families. Cowboys up from Mexico and these southern ranches also came to work on the trail drives.

(9) Trail drives typically took two to three months to travel from Texas to the rail yards in Kansas or Missouri. Drives up to Wyoming or Montana could take as long as six months.

(10) Ten to twelve cowboys accompanied about two to three thousand head of cattle on a normal trail drive. In addition, there was a trail boss, a cook, and a horse wrangler. The boss supervised the rest of the workers, made most of the decisions, and was responsible for solving any problems that appeared while on the trail.

(11) An older man usually served as cook. He prepared all of the meals on the drive. Traveling ahead of the herd to a place on the trail that would serve as the midday or evening camp, the cook drove the chuck wagon. This four-wheeled wooden wagon hauled all of the food used on the drive as well as medicine, water, tools, and each worker’s bedding.

(12) Each trail drive included extra horses so that the cowboys tending the cattle always were able to ride on a fresh mount. A single horse wrangler took care of this ever-changing band of horses. Other duties included helping the cook and cleaning up the camp.

(13) The long drive north was mostly dull and unexciting. Each morning, the cook would wake first and prepare breakfast. A couple of cowboys guarded the sleeping cattle all through the nights. The men would switch off every couple of hours while the other slept. Breakfast got everyone up. The cattle stirred with the rise of the sun.

(14) After breakfast and riding fresh horses, the cowboys headed the cattle north. The cook was well on his way to finding a good spot to make camp for lunch. Two men rode in front of the herd to make sure it traveled in the right direction. On either side of the long line of cattle, riders kept watch and made sure that none of the animals wandered away. Riders at the back of the herd kept watch for stragglers. Huge clouds of dust thrown up by thousands of shuffling hooves filled the air. Most cowboys used bandanas to cover their faces in an attempt to keep out the thick choking dust.

(15) Noon brought a halt to the drive for lunch and a bit of rest. None too soon, the outfit started rambling back on the trail. The boss kept the herd moving at a constant speed, but not too quickly. Too fast and the cattle would lose weight and be worth less at market. Most herds could travel between fifteen and twenty miles in one day.

(16) Sundown brought an end to the day’s travel. The cowboys stopped the herd at the evening camp where the cook was busy preparing supper. Riders rode around the head, drawing the cattle into a tight circle in preparation for the night’s sleep.

(17) Even though most days on the trail were uneventful, the cowboys had to be constantly alert for danger. Any unusual noise or movement could disrupt the flow of cattle and frighten them into a stampeded. The herd would take off running at full speed, shaking the ground beneath their pounding feet. Cowboys would ride to get ahead of the herd and attempt to force the long line of cattle into a circle. As the herd turned, the circle would become tighter until the cattle began to bunch up and slow down. This usually brought the stampede to a close.

(18) Care had to also be taken while crossing rivers. The cattle could often just wade across. At other times, they might have to swim. Riders had to make sure that none of the cattle were swept away or got caught in any underbrush along the river’s edge. Frightened or struggling animals could upset the herd so the cowboys worked to keep the cattle moving.

(19) After months of hard work, the trail drive reached the rail yards of Kansas or Missouri. The cattle were sold and loaded onto railroad cards headed for Kansas City or Chicago. The extra horses, chuck wagon, and much of the other equipment from the drive were usually sold, too. The men then went their separate ways. Many returned to Texas and joined up with another trail drive heading north. Others found work on ranches.

(20) The invention of barbed wire and the settling of the middle and western parts of the United States brought an end to trail drives in the late 1800’s. Landowners began to put up fences along their property, preventing easy movement by large cattle drives. Railroads were expanding south and west into Texas, making cattle drives a thing of the past.

(21) The life of a cowboy changed too. A job worked on the open range turned into herding cattle in fenced pastures, repairing windmills, fixing broken fences, harvesting hay, and feeding the cattle. But as long as there were cattle to raise, cowboys took up the challenge.

A LETTER FROM A HORSE WRANGLER

Dear Grandma,

It is hard to believe I have been gone for two weeks! I miss you guys so much. We leave for Kansas tomorrow. I am nervous as a chicken in a fox’s den. Lots of things can happen on a trail drive. I hope I do right as a horse wrangler. Thank Uncle Henry again for helping me get on with the trail drive down here in Texas. The trail boss says it will be hard work but, thanks to Grandpa, I’m used to that. Working on the farm for the past five years after Ma and Pa died toughened me up. Still, I don’t want to let the men down. They are going to need fresh horses all during the day on the drive and it’s going to be up to me to get the horses fed and rested.

Cookie told me that as long as I keep the band of horses bunched together during the day and stay ahead of the cattle herd I will be okay. The dust gets really think at the back of the herd and he says that I need to avoid that to protect the horses.

As we packed up the chuck wagon today, he told me of one drive from a couple of years back. It was real rough, he said. Constant rain and bad storms made the cattle hard to keep in line. Each river that they had to cross had water up to the tops of the banks like a turned-over hat filled to the brim. Twice the cattle were spooked by lightning into a stampede. The first time, they ran for almost ten miles in the dark before the boys were able to turn them and get a tight circle. Finally, they stopped running. Even then those cows were restless until that storm blew over. A week later, a fast-moving squall blew through like a bull in a china shop. Bolts of lightning flashed and crackled all around. One struck the ground near his chuck wagon while he was fixing lunch and shook up the herd. He just managed to pull in all of his gear before they plowed past him on a beeline away from camp. After about two miles, the trail veered off. Luckily the herd kept running straight and ended up in a little box canyon. There the cattle were corralled by the cowboys. If they hadn’t turned off, those boys would still be chasing them trying to get them to stop.

Both times, the horses got scared, too, and the poor wrangler spent the better part of a day rounding up the band. Later, he told Cookie that when the drive was done, he was going to find a town and get himself a job in a quiet little store- inside.

I sure hope my first trail drive isn’t that tough. I might not be able to handle it. I will try to write more out on the trail. Cookie says that we pass by a couple small settlements on the way north. Maybe I can mail a letter to you if I can get away. Wish me luck! Take care of Old Petie. Maybe he’ll finally catch himself a rabbit.

Love,

William