

Rounding up Wild Cattle

GAIL GARDNER SPEAKS: The cattle around Skull Valley, of course, those around in the lower valley, you could round ‘em up and handle ‘em in a way you’d handle cattle the right way, the ordinary way. But there were some cattle up in the head of Mule Canyon and Copper Basin that were so wild—you see, in working cattle, a cow will turn away from a mounted man. Well, those cattle up there in Copper Basin and the head of Mule Canyon got so wild they wouldn’t turn away from a mounted man.

Where you have cattle that are real, real wild, and you can’t round ‘em up in a bunch, they won’t stay in a bunch, and if you round ‘em up they run right over the top of you, the only thing you can do is catch one and tie him up and lead him in. Every cowboy carried a little saw, a prunin’ saw, usually a hacksaw blade in a

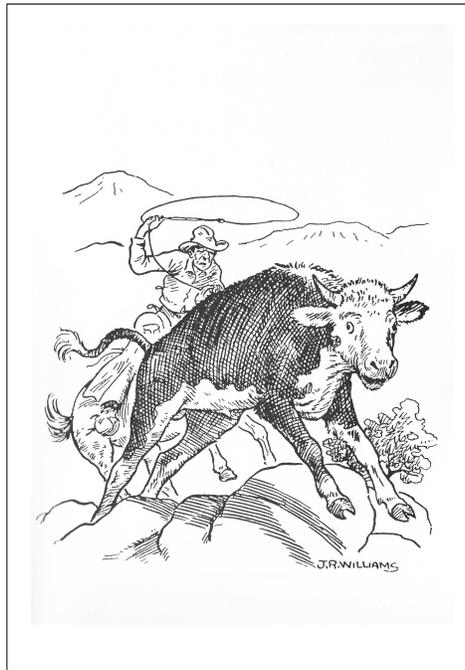
frame, and when you caught a steer you sawed the tips of his horns off, ‘bout that much, so you wouldn’t hurt your horse when you went to lead him in. And you tied him up to a tree, a sapling that he could go ‘round and ‘round the tree. Set back, and after leaving him there all night, maybe a couple of nights, you could go lead him in. Well, there was a special way you tied ‘em up. We had a little

hard twist rope, you know, which was known to the trade as Plymouth Yacht line. Usually when you’d get ‘em to the tree you’d just ditch ‘em—throw ‘em. And they’d be on the ground. You went twice around their horns and then tied a bowline knot and when you tied ‘em to a tree you went around the tree and came back through that double loop, back around the tree again and back through that double loop, and then you tied a knot in the end of that rope and you tied that knot to the rope, tied it with a little twine string so the knot wouldn’t come loose. When you went to lead one, you’d ride right in there—we tried

to take ‘em loose from the tree when we were still mounted, that was the best way. Sometimes you couldn’t ride up to the tree and you’d have to get down and untie them afoot. Well that was pretty dangerous ‘cause those are bronco cattle and they’d charge you at the least excuse.

Well, leadin’ ‘em in, there was quite an art to that. Most of the places where you could tie ‘em you could ride up and untie ‘em

from the back of your horse. You’d take your knife and cut that string that had the knot tied down and start untying ‘em, and you’d try to lead ‘em with that rope that they’d been tied up with. It was about 10 feet long, and it was long enough so that you’d get a dally enough to lead ‘em. Of course, sometimes you’d just have to put your lash rope around ‘em to lead ‘em. But that wasn’t too good because the



lash rope was a slip knot and if they hung back you'd choke 'em. Well you didn't want to do that. So we usually tried to lead 'em with the rope we tied 'em up with.

When you led one, if possible you'd just ride up to the tree and untie him while you were still on your horse. Then you'd take that rope and get you a dally on it and then you'd start off, and you'd go real fast in the direction you wanted to go. Just take out there with him! Well, of course, he's comin' behind you, he couldn't do anything else—you had him tied to the saddle horn! But after you got him started then you just couldn't go slow enough. You just slow your horse down and try to lead that steer, or that cow, just as slow as they could walk. It took a lot of time, but that was the only way to get them in without hurtin' 'em, and get 'em in in good shape. Generally it'd be a mile or less.

And that was leadin' in cattle. Hard work, kinda hard on the cattle, too. And the idea was this: that this steer set back and his horns would get sore around there, well after you started him he'd soon give up pullin' against that tree and he'd stand easy. Well, when you got on your horse and went to pullin' on him why he'd come forward and that'd ease it up and that would make him lead. Well, no two of 'em ever lead alike. Some of 'em would lead best straight behind you, and some of 'em down on this side with the rope around the cantle of the saddle. Incidentally, that's why some of the old time cowboys had high cantle saddles. You're leadin' the steer and that rope from the saddle horn would get around back of the cantle, these modern flat

saddles, why that rope'd cut you in two, leadin' many big wild steers.

Well, anyway, the cowboys had coined a verb in this handling of wild cattle, and the verb was "sulled." When a steer wouldn't lead he would get what you would call "sullen." So the cowboys said the steer "sulled." That meant he was sullen and wouldn't lead. And when one sullied on you why you just as well tie him up again, because if you drag him you're blowed up, you couldn't lead him a step. If you drag him a little bit why he wouldn't lead any more at all. You'd tie him up and try him another day.

If you're gatherin' steers, of course, all them'd be branded. An orejana, that was an unbranded animal. An orejana is an animal that is old enough to leave its mother but is unbranded. Well, if you caught an orejana, you took him down and branded him first thing. Got your brand on him. If he was old enough, something that was merchantable, that you wanted to sell, why then you'd tie him up. But otherwise, you'd just brand him and turn him loose and promise to see him another day when he got old enough to be marketable. There'd be [cattle in the country that got to be five years old], 'course there'd be old cows, wild old cows, but the steers, we tried to gather the steers and sell 'em.

I guess Frankie [Frank Polk] may [hold the record for bringin' in four at one time], but we had other men out there that could lead a bunch of 'em. I think Acey Bozarth was the best man I ever saw workin' cattle.

They could run like hell! But you could always let 'em straddle a rope, you know, and

throw ‘em. Let ‘em step over the rope and set back and you could bust one that way. Or you could, if you were handy enough to make a run you could just throw a rope over their hips and dally and go by ‘em. That’d really bust one. That was the way we usually did, you know. Just, just throw the rope over their hips and go by ‘em. When you throw ‘em, you get off right quick and you just, you put your knee on their hips. Just pick up a hind foot and put your knee on the hip and you can hold down the wildest big steer that ever was that way. Just put your knee—he’s flat on the ground — and just put a knee on his hip and get that top hind leg and just lift it up a little bit and you can hold down the biggest thing in the woods that way.

There weren’t a great many of ‘em. I had about five hundred head of cattle and I’d guess, I’d say that maybe sixty of ‘em were wild. The rest of ‘em why you could round them up and corral ‘em and brand the calves and handle ‘em in an orderly manner but about 50 or 60 of ‘em would be up in those high brakes of Mule Canyon and Copper Basin, and also in Spruce Canyon. That’s up toward Iron Springs, those high peaks up in there. And some of them get pretty wild.

In the spring you started to work after the calves had started comin’ ‘cause there’s no use goin’ out to brand if there were no calves. So you’d wait’ll you had some calves and then you’d be workin’ the calves in the spring. And it was in the fall that you gathered the stuff you were going to sell, if you were going to sell your steers, and we would sell all the steers we could catch. In those days yearlin’s went for about thirty five

dollars. Sold ‘em by the head. We didn’t sell by weight at all. Now they sell everything by weight. A yearlin’d go for about thirty five and a two-year-old for forty five, and a big three-year-old’d go for fifty five dollars.

[Because it was money you needed] you wanted to bring ‘em in. Now sometimes there’d be an old wild cow. Well I would catch her and lead her in and put it in the home pasture and keep her in the home pasture for a month or so, ‘till she got used to a man on horseback, would turn away, and you could turn her out again and then she’d never be so wild again. Yeah, we did that a lot, bring ‘em in and hold ‘em in the home pasture for a while and they’d get so they’d turn away from a horseman. And that way, that’s the whole secret of workin’ cattle is that they’ll turn away from a mounted man.

Most of those wild ones were of old Mexican stock, or California stock. See, California was early settled by the Mexicans and they had Mexican cattle, and our first cattle came over from California or a lot of ‘em up from Mexico. And they just had that wild streak. And boy, you had to have good fences, too!

Mostly the Herefords were pretty easy to gentle. They were that stock, you know, a beef stock, and you worked them a little bit and they’d be, they’d gentle down real nice, the Herefords would. But some of that Mexican stock, the Sonora cattle, they were, some of ‘em, we had a pretty Sonora bunch for a while.

But I’ll tell you another thing. They’d be some old heavy cow, a heavy headed cow, or a bull, and that’s the only thing I shone at in

the cow business, was leadin' one. I never saw a son-of-a-bitch that I couldn't lead. And we'd work with these other cowboys; there'd be some old salty thing they'd tie up, "Oh, we'll leave him for Gail. Gail'll lead him in." Well, I had lots of patience. Besides that, I had a hell of a good dog. Now a dog's a good thing. I had a big old part hound, you know, and when I'd start leadin' one why he'd be way, way back behind me. I just could look back and I'd see him look around a bush. I'd always motion him to stay back. Well, that thing that I was leadin', would what they call sullen, get sullen. He'd hump up and get sullen, why I'd just motion this old dog, he'd come up, he'd get to chewin' on their heels, and barkin' and pretty soon that cow'd have to go somewhere! She couldn't stay there! So she'd have to go somewhere and that'd mean I could lead her again.

And I had a dog, an Airedale that would catch a calf for me. 'Course I didn't like to do that, because he caught by the ear! And of course, that ear was — you had to ear-mark 'em to identify 'em. And I didn't like him to catch 'em by the ear. A neighbor of mine had a good cow dog that'd hold one by the nose. Well that was better because if they got scars on their nose why they could lick them and they'd get well. But the ear, they'd probably get screw bugs in the ear. We carried screw worm medicine always in our chaps pocket.

[That] old Airedale dog, I could just slap my saddle like that (slap, slap) and he'd jump up in front of me, and I'd point across the canyon somewhere, there'd be a cow and a calf over there, and I'd wait 'till I knew he saw what I was pointin' at, let him down, and he'd go

over there and pretty soon he'd have that calf caught so I could get that calf and brand him without ever takin' down a rope.

[They could] see you comin'. We called that 'brush up'. They'd brush up on you. I remember a time or two—most of us cowboys got so we always carried a [spy]glass of some kind. Well that saved you all kinds of chasin' because you could see a bunch of cattle across the canyon, a big deep canyon, but if you could get that glass on 'em and holler or whistle so they'd put up their heads, why you could see what they are. If there's nothin' there you wanted, you saved your ride across that big deep canyon.

You had to have a special horse to lead one in. You wanted a horse that wouldn't kick, you know. For instance he wasn't goin' around you, you get the rope under his [the horse's] tail, why he'd kick and if that steer was right behind you if he'd kick him between the eyes, he'd kill him!

I had a horse that was awful good to lead on, you know. If the rope got under his tail why I'd just take another dally and ride out sideways and the animal'd just jerk that out from under his tail. He wouldn't kick on it. So that was something you had to know, the right kind of a horse. And also well you wanted a horse that leading it you could get him down for a slow walk. You know, one that wouldn't, wouldn't prance or anything. That would really walk slow. Because leading in those cattle, the slower you could bring 'em in, the better.

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