

## **Western Crossroads (Typical Western Experiences)**

### **Cowhand James H. Cook reminisces about the adventures of a “long drive”**

**The giant cattle drives along routes like the Chisholm Trail were a dramatic--and often romantic---part of the “Wild West.” This cowhand’s description of the first few days of a drive gives a picture of life on a “Long Drive.” It also suggests the kind of adventure that lured many young people to the West.**

When Mr. Roberts informed me that I was to be one of his trail waddies, I immediately moved all my personal belongings over to his camp. I was allowed to take five of the best saddle horses which I had been riding, to be used on the trail. Robert’s trail crew consisted of twelve riders and the cook, beside himself. We were most fortunate in having with us on that trip a man who was one of the best ox drivers or bull-whackers, as well as cooks, that ever popped a bull whip over a cattle trail. The men who usually did this work were veterans on the frontier, who had seen long service with wagon trains drawn by oxen. Too much praise cannot be given to those old-time trail cooks who were numbered among the good ones. A camp cook could do more toward making life pleasant for those about him than any other man in an outfit, especially on those trail trips.

On the morning when we were to start up the trail, all was in readiness. About a dozen extra men were to help us for a few days while we were breaking in the herd to accustom them to being held by riders both night and day (for we should have no more corrals). They were also to help us out of the brush country to the open plains. After reaching this open country the extra men would turn back.

On the trail we were each allowed to take a pair of bed blankets and a sack containing a little extra clothing. No more load than was considered actually necessary was to be allowed on the wagon, for there would be no wagon road over most of the country which we were to traverse, and there was plenty of rough country, with creeks and steep-banked rivers to be crossed. We had no tents or shelter of any sort other than our blankets. Our food and cooking utensils were the same as those used in cow camps of the brush country. No provision was made for the care of men in case of accident. Should anyone become injured, wounded, or sick, he would be strictly “out of luck.” A quick recovery and a sudden death

were the only desirable alternatives in such cases, for much of the time the outfit would be far from the settlements and from medical or surgical aid.

On the first day I was told to help drive the saddle horses and to keep them with the wagon. The wagon started, and we followed with the horses, the cattle herd following us in the trail made by oxen and wagon. Roberts [the trail boss] pointed out the course which he desired the outfit to follow, and then rode on ahead to select our first camp ground. After going a few miles he found a place with water and some fairly open ground upon which to bed the cattle down for the night. Returning to us, he told us where to go and where the wagon was to be located, so that it would not be too close to the herd.

After the first night we divided the night-herding into two watches, half of the entire outfit being on guard at a time. When we were out of the brush country the extra help turned back, and as the cattle were now pretty well broken to being night-herded, we divided the watch into three tricks, three men going on guard with the cattle at a time and one man on each watch over the horses.

One night we were camped on a little creek that ran into the Llano River at its head. Throughout that day we had seen a lot of fresh Indian signs. I was on the first watch with the horses. Roberts had arranged for me to be on guard with the horses herd during the early part of each evening and also just at the break of day, those hours being the Indian's favorite times for deviltry. I was known to be the best shot in that outfit, and I was expected to score straight bull's-eyes . . . no matter how plentiful, hideous, or dangerously close the human targets . . .

I started for camp again and, riding up to the campfire, swung down off my horses, with my rifle in my hand -- for I had been carrying it, ready to shoot at a moment's notice, all the evening.

Just as my foot touched the ground I heard a couple of dozen shots in quick succession. I turned my head and could see the flash from the guns. I fired one shot in the directions of the flashes. My horse had also turned his head when the shots were fired. A bullet struck him in the forehead, and he went down at my feet. I jumped away from that campfire as quickly as possible and crawled under a big cedar tree, the branches of which came very close to the ground. The next moment most of the horse herd came tearing right through camp. We had ropes stretched from the wagon wheels to some trees to make a corral . . . and the horses ran against the ropes, upsetting the wagon.

Every man in the camp ran for his life into the thicket. The horses ran into the cattle herd, and away went the cattle into a big cedar brake containing many old dead trees. There was a smashing and crashing and about as great an uproar as any cowboy ever heard. The men with the cattle did not dare yell at the animals or sing to them, lest Indians locate and slip an arrow into somebody.

I lay quite still under the tree. After a time I heard Robert's voice calling out: "Don't let them get away with the horses, boys! Stay with 'em!" One boy one I could hear the boys answer him. I did not like to get out from beneath that tree, but I did not care to be called a coward, so I joined him, although I thought it the most foolish thing we could possibly do. It was so dark that an Indian could slip up within three foot of a man and not be seen.

Frank Dennis not appearing, I made up my mind that he had been killed. We went and searched but could not find no trace of the missing cowboy. We then wandered about until daylight.

About sunrise Frank Dennis came into camp. He was a little pale, but quite cheerful. He said, "Well, fellers, good morning; we had a very pleasant night of it, didn't we?" When he swung down from his horse I saw that there was blood on his clothes, and that his hand was tied up in his handkerchief, which was soaked with blood.<sup>1</sup>

## Questions

1. Why do you think people like James Cook were anxious to sign up for the hardships of this kind of cattle drive?
2. Why do you think cowhands felt that a good trail cook was so important?

## **Cattleman John Clay recalls the end of the open range**

**During 1886 and 1887, a combination of harsh winters, severe drought, and over-population of the grazing range brought on an economic disaster that led to a major change in the cattle industry. Within a few years, fenced-in ranches replaced the romantic West of the "open range" and the long "cattle drives." One witness, John Clay, described some of the causes of what happened during 1886 and 1887.**

May was dry, June did not bring the usual rains, and by July 4th it look so bad that we finally decided to do nothing. By August it was hot, dry, dusty and grass

closely cropped. Every day made it apparent that even with the best of winters cattle would have a hard time....

.... Our neighbors kept piling cattle on to the bone-dry range. The Continental Cattle Company drove up to 32,000 head of steers. The Worsham Cattle Company, with no former holdings, turned loose 5,000 head or thereabouts. Major Smith, who had failed to sell 5,500 Southern three-year-old steers, was forced to drive them to his range on Willow Creek near to Stoneville, now Alzada, Montana. The Dickey Cattle Company had brought up 6,000 mixed cattle from the Cheyenne and Arapahoe country.... Thousands of other cattle were spread over the Western and Northwestern country in the most reckless way--no thought for the morrow. Even with the best of winters it would have been a case of suicide. As things turned out it was simple murder, at least for the Texas cattle. Winter came early and it stayed long. The owners were mostly absent, and even those who remained could not move about or size up the situation.

It was not till the spring round ups that the real truth was discovered, and then it was only mentioned in a whisper. Bobby Robinson, acute judge of conditions, estimated the loss among... {those} cattle at less than 50 per cent. It turned out to be a total loss among this class of cattle, and the wintered herds suffered from 30 to 60 per cent.... It was simply appalling, and the cowmen could not realize their position. From southern Colorado to the Canadian line, from the one hundredth meridian almost to the Pacific slope it was a catastrophe which the cowmen of today... can never understand. Three great streams of ill-luck, mismanagement, greed, met together--in other words, recklessness, want of foresight, and the weather, which no man can control. The buffalo had probably gone through similar winters with enormous losses, and in the survival of the fittest their constitutions had been built up to stand the rigors of winter and the drought of summer....'

The cowman of the West and Northwest were flat broke. Many of them never recovered, They had not the heart to face another debacle such as they had gone through, and consequently they disappeared from the scene. Most of the Eastern men and the Britishers said "enough" and went away.<sup>2</sup>

## Questions

1. According to John Clay, how had greed and mismanagement helped contribute to the disaster that overtook the cattle industry?
2. In what ways did Clay indicate that his sympathies were not wholly with the "cowmen" who went broke during this period?

## **A colorful memoir of life in a Virginia City, Nevada, in its heyday**

**The life of the miners, shopkeepers, and others who inhabited the gold---and silver-rush communities of the West could be even more colorful than life of the cowhands. The following account of life in Virginia City, Nevada, the site of the Comstock silver strike, comes from a reminiscences written in 1889.**

The Comstock, for a number of years was the most productive mining district that the world has ever known. Several years ago . . . a careful estimate was made of the dimensions of the pile, supposing all the bullion taken out of the mines up to that time had been concentrated in one solid block. I found it would make a cubicle brick . . . twenty-six feet in height . . .

In the palmiest days it was not an unusual circumstance for a million of dollars to be taken out of a single mine as a result of a month's labor. Those who lived directly over the mines at the time did not seem to have a full realizing sense of their wonderful richness or of the excitement the reports of the ore product was producing throughout the civilized world. One day I asked . . . for a good piece of ore to send as a specimen to friends in the East. [The mine superintendent] picked up a piece of rock weighing five or six pounds which assayed 30,000 to the ton. The mass seemed to be almost solid silver and likewise carried about 40 per cent gold.

The men who worked in the mines . . . were [a] happy-go-easy set of fellows, fond of good living, and not particularly interested in religious affairs . . .

. . . As regarded deportment, everyone was a law unto himself. Perhaps one reason for the laxity in the observance of the Sabbath was the fact that work in the mines went uninterruptedly during the whole 365 days of the year. Another demoralizing circumstance was that most of the men employed in the mines were unmarried and enjoyed none of the refining, humanizing influences of home life. They boarded at a restaurant, slept in a lodging-house, and as a general rule, spent their leisure time on the street or at the gambling tables.

During the flush times as many as twenty-five faro games were in full blast night and day. When sporting men, as for example, Joe Stewart, Cross and Bill Gibson, sat down on an evening to a friendly game of poker it was no uncommon occurrence for five or six thousand dollars to change hands at a single sitting. Some idea of the amount of money in circulation may be inferred from the fact that every working-man's wages amounted to at least 120 dollars per month. From what has already been written there is no desire to convey the impression that a low standard of morality was the rule in the Comstock mining district. Men

quarreled at times and fire arms were discharged with but slight provocation. Nevertheless they all had an acute instinct of right and wrong, a high sense of honors, and a chivalrous feeling of respect for the gentler sex. A woman unattended could pass along the streets of Virginia and Gold Hill without the slightest danger of insult or annoyance.

One of the most prominent traits of character as regarded the miners was their generous response to any worthy object. If a man of family lost his life in the mines thousands of dollars would be contributed to those dependent upon him. Each miner contributed regularly one or two days' wages for benevolent purposes. An annual fair given in aid of an orphan school under the charge of the Sisters of Charity, even in dull times, usually netted from 10,000 dollars to 12,000 dollars....

When a man died he was given "a good sendoff." A band of music headed the funeral procession, and if the officiating clergyman could not think of anything redeeming in the character of the deceased he carefully refrained from saying anything ill.<sup>3</sup>

## Questions

1. Summarize the writer's view of the miners' character and habits.
2. What evidence is there that the writer was romanticizing the miners?

<sup>1</sup>Selection adapted from James H. Cook, *Fifty Years on the Old Frontier*. Published by Yale University Press, New Haven, 1923.

<sup>2</sup>Selection from John Clay, *My Life on the Range*. Published by University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1962.

<sup>3</sup>Selection from *The Mining Frontier: Contemporary Accounts from the American West in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by Marvin Lewis. Published by University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1967.