

A Story of Cows and Their Adventures ...and the Riders that Tailed Along.

A true story told by Strat Stepan



A Legendary Cattle Drive in 1981

© Strat Stepan, U.S. Copyright Office (TXu 1-590-550)

Well, let me tell you a story about what a bunch of ranchers did in southwest Colorado around Durango when they got hit with a serious drought in the late 70's. Not having enough water to raise hay to winter all their pregnant cows, some of the ranchers were going to have to sell off half their specially breed cows at half the regular price because of the drought. This was a real crisis. They eventually moved their herds 80 miles south to Northern New Mexico on the Navajo reservation and they did not have to sell off any of their prized cattle.

The way it started, the Colorado cattle brand inspector by the name of Dave Williams, said there was a chance of buying hay in New Mexico. Three of us drove down in Dave's pickup. The third guy in the in the truck had been a corporate type in Chicago. He left that way of life, moved out west and bought a cattle ranch. We see these kinds of folks every now and then. His name was Strat Stepan, that's a pretty strange name, so we just referred to him as the Chicago guy or Chicago.

The first stop was this new mega farm on the Navajo reservation that the tribe had contracted with a big corporation to build for them. None of us had ever seen it before. It was huge! It was about 10 miles wide and 20 miles long, located on the top of a semi-desert plateau. The irrigation water came from a large reservoir in Colorado. They had all the water they would ever need given their water rights. Large pivot irrigation sprinklers were located on the most level ground and the rest of the land was left natural. These beautiful green fields, were about a quarter of a mile in diameter in a perfect circle in the middle of the desert, looked a little out of place. They sure do a good job of getting the water to the plants.

We drove around for quite awhile just looking at the farm and how it was laid out. We saw many pivot irrigated fields of corn, alfalfa, winter wheat, oat, potatoes, and even pumpkins. There must have been 150,000 acres of irrigated fields. There was hay stacked up all over the place. We had found the mother lode! None of us had ever seen such a large farming operation in our lives.

We drove to an office building that the Chicago guy said was most likely the headquarters for the project. He led the way in and said hello to the receptionist. He said he would like to talk to someone about buying hay and he also wanted to talk to someone about leasing winter pasture for 1500 pregnant cows. Dave and I looked at each other and got nervous. We only had about 400 cows between the three of us. The lady led us into the office of the guy in charge of hay sales. We quickly got the information we needed and were then brought to the office of the man in charge of leasing winter pasture. Chicago did all the talking. He sat down and introduced himself and said that he would like the pricing and terms to bring in about 1500 pregnant cows for the winter. The two men talked briefly and then the Chicago guy got up and said he would call him back later. We left quickly.

When we got in Dave's truck and shut the doors, it was quiet for a moment. Dave, with the keys still in his hand, looked at the Chicago guy and asked where he came up with the 1500 cow number. He just starting laughing and then explained that this was a small

division of a very large corporation and we needed a big number for the guy to even talk to us and give us the information we needed. He said we got out of his office as fast as we could before he started asking questions about us. Everyone agreed that the pasture leasing price was great. It was a lot cheaper to truck the cows down to the reservation and let the cattle graze the crop aftermath in the fields rather than buy the hay and haul it to Colorado and feed the cattle at the different ranches. They could come down to the reservation with all their cows and sell off their hay at high prices. This was good news.

The rest of the drive back to Colorado we spent talking about how something like this could be done. First thing to do would be to talk to the other ranchers. This was a big change from the way they ran their ranches. If enough ranchers were interested then Dave said you would form a grazing association. You would need a range rider who would live with the herd. He would have two horses and a trailer to live in, would ride the herd to make sure that they stayed together and were healthy. Since there was fencing only on the outside borders, cattle rustlers could be a problem.

The farm had a lot of pens and loading chutes, so it would be easy to load and unload cattle. It would be easy to sort the cows and ship them back to Colorado to the different ranches.

The cattle had to be off the farm fields by March 1. There would be a roundup three days before this date. The herds that were going to Colorado would be shipped back then. We were told that cattle could stay until June 1 and they would go into pens and be given water and feed. This would be the beginning of calving season and the pens would be the best place to catch any calving problems, because it would be easy to see the entire herd.

Early the next morning, the Chicago guy phoned Jim Mars a well liked and respected rancher. He told him about everything that had happened the day before. The price really got him excited. Jim said he would call other ranchers and tell them about the plan and would call him back.

Two days later Jim called him back and told him that a lot of ranchers wanted in on the deal because it solved the hay problem and the price was cheap. The boys felt that since a big corporation was running the farm and he had experience working with those kinds of people that they did not have, they felt that Chicago should be the president of the grazing association. There was a long pause on the phone and then Chicago said that could be a big problem because he felt that a lot of ranchers did not trust outsiders and he was relatively new in the area and the business. They both had a good laugh over that. He then said that he would take the job if Jim, Dave Williams and one other rancher from the west side of the county would agree to be present at every corporate meeting so that they could tell their neighbors what happened at the meetings and then nobody had to trust him. Jim said that was a good idea. He called back the next day and said that a big cattle and sheep rancher by the name of Grant Paulek would be the representative from the west side of the county. This turned out to be a great solution and there were never any problems.

The next week a meeting was held in the Strater Hotel, a distinguished old hotel in Durango. The Chicago Guy thought it would be a nice gesture to serve liquor at the meeting to make it feel more casual and less “corporate.” This must have been a hot subject at home because all the wives and girlfriends showed up with their men. The meeting was for all the people from the different ranches to ask questions about the organization of the association, how things would operate on the reservation, who wanted to come back to Colorado on March 1st and who wanted to stay down longer than that date go into cattle pens and stay until the end of May. There were a lot of questions. The first herds would start moving in a week so people still had time to think about whether they wanted to go down or not.

Towards the end of the meeting, the manager of the largest ranch, which belonged to some rich guy from Cleveland, Ohio, started to talk. He said what he would do and not do with his large herd if he went down with the association. The Chicago guy explained that the association was going down as one group, there would be one herd and they would be moved around as one to keep things simple. The Chicago guy finally lost patience with the arrogant ranch manager and said that if he and his cows went down with the group, they would be happy. If he decided to stay in Colorado and buy expensive hay to feed his cows he would be happy. It was his choice. The meeting ended on that note.

Jim Mars called early the next morning. He was very happy! He had talked to everyone who had been to the meeting the night before. They all wanted to join the association and go down to the Navajo reservation. He also said that everyone liked his confrontation with the ranch manager who nobody liked. Nothing like a little anger to unify a group!

The next week, 700 cows were loaded into semi trucks from different ranches. After about an 80 mile ride, the trucks unloaded the different herds into one pasture. The land was very different looking. There were very few trees and except for the irrigated pastures, the desert vegetation was totally different from anything they had ever seen. The range rider, the Chicago guy, and two other cowboys mounted on their horses, helped to keep the cows in the same area. The cows were nervous. Riding in a crowded semi-truck will do that. Dropped into a totally different landscape with cows they had never seen before will do that.

The cowboys had a little camp and fire setup by the edge of the field where the cattle were grazing. When it got dark, they rode the outside of the herd. At around midnight, with only a quarter of a moon and a few clouds, the rider saw that small groups of cattle were moving north. It looked like they were heading back to Colorado!

That began a roundup in the dark over a 1 mile area. Off the pasture area there was some very rough native ground that was dangerous to horse and rider. Once they thought they had all the cattle, the plan was to move the cows to a horseshoe shaped area of the pasture and then let them go. However, when the lead cows got to the back of the pasture, they started to turn in a large circle. The lead cows eventually walked up on the last cows in the strung out herd and bumped into them. In the dark, this spooked the entire herd and all the cows bolted for a few steps. The range rider, who had seen a few stampedes in his life, motioned the other riders to back off the herd and he started to sing softly to the

cows. The other riders followed his example and things began to quiet down. Once again the cow gods had given some poor cowboys a break! The next day, more cattle were unloaded. They immediately joined the herd that was now happily grazing the lush pasture. The herd had settled in its new place.

On the outside of that perimeter fence were some small Navajo ranches. There had been an ongoing battle between these ranchers and the Navajo farm project managers. The small ranchers would cut the fence so that their cattle could go onto the large project and graze the lush pastures for free. After all it was Navajo land they would say with a smile. The management people would then order their Navajo employees to push the intruding cattle out and repair the fence. This didn't make any of the Navajos happy.



center: James Wendell (between baths) - range rider, right: John Shell - ranch hand

When the Colorado cowboys came down to the reservation, they were asked to help with this program. This presented a problem to them. There was more feed available than would ever be eaten. The hay that the Navajos would have to buy was extremely expensive because of the drought. The small Navajo ranchers were considered neighbors and fellow cowboys. Nobody from corporate management ever came out in the fields. The unofficial policy became that if the Navajos cut the fence and their cattle joined the large herd (which the cows would do because of their social nature) that was no problem. The range rider would tend to them just as he would any cow in our herd. This was the start of a great friendship between the Navajo ranchers, Colorado cowboys, and the Navajo project employees, some of whom were also cowboys.

The ambassador of good will for all this was James Wendell, the range rider. He loved to ride the perimeter fence and talk to the Navajo ranchers. He had the ability to describe a cow by her colors, configuration, and markings so that her owner knew exactly which cow he was talking about. They loved it when he told them which cow had a baby and which sex it was and after his description of the calf, they knew exactly what it looked like.

James Wendell was quite a character. He had a rough beard and claimed to take two baths a year. Because of his strong odor, nobody went into his trailer or offered him a ride in their truck. The best way to visit him was to bring your own firewood and build a campfire at his camp and remember to stay upwind. It was a running joke between James Wendell and a couple of Navajo farm project employees that were going to bring their horses over to his camp, lasso him and drag him through a large stock pond thus giving him a good bath. These two guys came by the camp another time and the one guy smelled coffee brewing in James's trailer. He said he was going in the trailer to get a cup of coffee. James warned him not to do it. The second warning was when James pulled the ever present pistol from the holster on his hip and fired a perfect shot between his legs. The Navajo cowboys went straight to their truck and left immediately. They went straight to the equipment barn so they could tell their friends about the shot. Their friends loved the story. This was definitely wild-west living.

While riding the herd one morning, James rode up on a dead cow. She had been shot and butchered. Judging by the remains and the truck tracks, the cow had been killed during the night. Calls were put out to the owner of the cow and the guy from Chicago who called Jim Mars and told him he was going down to the reservation and would call him back when he had more information. Chicago and his trusted hand Silviano Archeluta each quickly loaded their horses in the horse trailer and packed with their 30-30 rifles, firewood and camping gear they headed for the reservation. They planned to stay for awhile.

Silviano Archuleta was born in southwest Colorado in a small Mexican village where no English was spoken. He looked more Spanish than Mexican. He was a simple man of the earth. He was a rancher and farmer who particularly liked being on a horse and working cattle. Silviano was always looking for the animal in distress no matter whether it was on the wrong side of a fence or was sick. He carried a vet kit in his saddle bag and would tend to the animal immediately. Silviano's quiet gentle way helped to keep the sick animal calmer, no matter if it was a chicken, horse, or cow. He was a good man to be around and had an easy smile. If there was a problem, you knew that he could be counted on to stay until the problem was solved. No doubt he had not an enemy in the world.

They drove straight to the cow camp and unloaded everything. James Wendell, the range rider, was waiting for them. The three men then drove to the dead cow. It was close to a road near the back way into a power plant. The Chicago guy then dropped the two men off at the camp and went to the headquarters to talk to the general manager. Not their problem. He then went to the Navajo police in Shiprock New Mexico - again not their problem. The cowboys were on their own!

The men had an early dinner at the camp. They all agreed that the shooting was done by some white men who worked at the power plant. The three cowboys knew a lot of Navajos and they were on very good terms with them. The Navajos were very angry about what had happened. The only thing the cowboys could do was keep driving through the herd to show that they knew about the crime and they were taking action.

Their plan was to drive through the herd every hour and stop along the road. Vehicles stopped to see if they needed help and they would tell them about the crime. Hopefully the bad guys would get the story that three armed cowboys knew about the crime and were looking to punish the culprits.

At about four in the morning, the three men walked to the truck to do another patrol. The Chicago guy slid in behind the wheel. The two other men got in adjusted the rifles on the seats and closed the doors. The windows were down even though it was cold outside. This was done so that you could hear a rifle shot and so you could not smell James as much. As they were driving along the Chicago guy began to talk. "You know guys this winter grazing down here is a great deal for the association. We want to keep coming back forever and graze the winter stubble. If we came over a hill and saw a couple guys butchering one of our cows, it would be bad for our long term relationship with management if we shot the hell out of the thieves." The two other men shouted in unison, "if anybody kills our cows, we kill them." There was no more conversation.

Just before they went out on patrol the next night, Chicago pulled a big spotlight out of a box that he had just bought that day and plugged it into the cigarette lighter and held it in his hand. The three men drove off in the truck and the Chicago guy was shining it all over the place. It really shot a beam a long way. They were all happy. Later some people thought it was a good idea but others said that any rustler could see the light from a mile away and take off. When they mentioned it to the Chicago guy he just smiled. There were no more killings that year or any other year. It makes you think that our Navajo friends took care of the problem in their own way. After all it was their land. This has always been sort of a mystery.

In the contract it stated that on the first day of March, all the cows had to be off the farm fields so that the farming operation could begin. This called for a big roundup. A second meeting was held back in Durango in the same hotel and again drinks were served. Things had gone well and the cows looked great, so everybody was happy. About half the cows were going to stay on the reservation and have their calves in the pens. The other half would be loaded into semi trucks and delivered to their ranches in Colorado to have their calves at home.

After all this had been figured out, the guy from Chicago said to the group, okay folks, now all we have to do is get it done. He paused and slowly said "all you people know that I haven't the faintest idea of how to execute this plan. I propose that after we all get down to our camp on the reservation and after dinner we have another meeting and we choose a real cattleman to be the boss of the roundup." Everyone nodded in agreement, finished their drinks and went home.

Two weeks later, everyone rolled in for the big roundup and the sorting of the cattle. There were trucks pulling horse trailers and trucks carrying campers. A lot of people brought firewood to the land of few trees for the community fire. This was good because it was a place for everyone to gather to socialize and talk roundup business.

The first night it was good to see everybody. People were a little nervous because most of them had not ridden this area nor rounded up such a large herd. How many cattle had strayed off not to be seen again or stolen? That night and the next morning, the Chicago guy brought up the subject of picking a leader for the roundup but nobody wanted to talk about it. They just saddled up and started riding with whoever they wanted and rode off to wherever they wanted to go. They knew what they were doing. It was a good first day, about 600 head of cattle were rounded up and put in a well fenced area near the pens by dark.

You know Mother Nature can be a real bitch sometimes and by the next morning it had turned very cold and a strong constant wind had the flames of the campfire going parallel with the ground. Winds like that can make people mean.

Once again the conversation of choosing a leader came up, but it went nowhere. The conversation around the campfire was about how the wind would make it harder to gather the cattle. One person said that it would make it harder to sort the cattle and that maybe the roundup should be called off. The Chicago Guy was not happy. He said, "To meet the terms of the contract the cattle have to be off the fields so the farmers can start working with their tractors on Monday". Someone then shouted, "The feed won't be in the feed bunks and the water won't be in the water tanks today!" At that point the Chicago guy said, "I've already set it up but I'll go up to the headquarters to double check it – but it's your job to bring the cattle in, now!" He turned, got in his truck, and leaned over so everyone could see him flip on the heater as he drove off. If the anger of the cowboys could kill, he and his truck would have been destroyed!

At that moment a leader rose up to the job. Jim Mars started talking about what needed to be done and who was going to do it. Within 15 minutes, everyone was saddled up and headed out. There goes that anger thing again. It got everyone to cowboy up, and do the job in some seriously bad weather.

When the Chicago guy got back everything was running smoothly. He saddled up his horse and rode over to the cutting alley where they were sorting cattle. The cutting alley was about 200 hundred feet long and 20 feet wide, gates on one side of the cutting alley so cows could be sorted into the various large pens where the different herds would be spending the rest of the season. Once the cows in the cutting alley had been sorted into the various pens, another group of about 12 cows would be brought into the cutting alley and the process would be repeated. His eyes never left the alley. He was entranced by the expert horsemen and horsewomen working the cattle so smoothly. Levina Mars, the new boss's wife, was one of the finest riders in the cutting alley. After the brand was read on a cow she would be cut out from the small group of cattle in the narrow cutting alley and be herded to the proper pen, the gate now being open, she would be cut into it and a mounted horseman would close the gate. Only the best cattle people were in the cutting

alley. When Jim Mars, the new boss of the roundup was freed up, he rode over to Chicago and told him to ride with James Wendell who had just delivered a group of cattle he had just rounded up with the help of a couple of Navajo riders. As the Chicago guy rode off with them you could hear Wendell hollering something at him. He responded with a big smile and a laugh and said that he was just being assigned to work at his level of competency and he has happy to be riding with him and his Navajo friends.



Jim Mars - trail boss, Levina Mars - excellent cattle woman!

By the end of the next day all the cows were in the right places. All the cows going back to Colorado had been loaded into semi trucks and shipped to the different ranches. The ones that were staying on the farm to have their calves were in their pens. Sometimes one rancher would have a whole pen. Other times, 2 or 3 ranchers would buddy up and share a pen. The Navajo ranchers had come and got their cattle before the big roundup began. Jim had sorted a few cattle they had missed into a separate pen. Several Navajo riders came in that afternoon and got their cows from Jim. There was lots of smiles and talking going on. The Navajos getting their herds out before the big roundup started was very helpful and they had saved a lot of money by not having to buy any hay. Best of all, management was never the wiser!

That evening the cattle people had a big party around the campfire. The wind had stopped and it had warmed up. The moon and the stars were beautiful. Everyone was happy. The headcount had turned out perfect and the cows were in great condition. The Navajos were doing a great job feeding and watering the cattle. The best thing of all was the outsider, the guy from Chicago, had left. Following the trucks with his cows in them, he had gone back to Colorado.

It is the western way that when a group of people get into a job where there are a lot of unknowns, risk of failure, dangers, and different personalities, people tend to dump their anxieties and resentments onto one person. In the first year, all of this was put on the guy from Chicago.

This was the beginning of the calving season. If the cows were at home and all spread out around the ranch, you ran the risk of missing a cow that was having a calving problem. In the pens, it was easy to see all the cows. If you had a problem, it was easy to see and there were other people around to help you. For some of you that don't know anything about cows, the main calving problem is usually the baby getting hip locked in the mother's pelvis. Generally, the head and front feet are sticking out of the mother's rear and there is no movement. If the baby is not stuck badly you can pull the calf by the feet, you have to use your hands and work with the contractions of the mother. If that doesn't work, then a small chain is wrapped around the calf's feet. Sometimes you have to use a jack to pull out a seriously hip locked calf. These are very tough animals and are seldom hurt by this procedure. Once the calf is on the ground, you can never stand between the mother and her baby; you could get trampled or gored. You retrieve the chains and get out of the way fast. The wild cow is only interested in getting to her baby. How's that for a little vet medicine lesson!

The first year was such a success that the second year more ranchers joined the grazing association. The economics were great. There were no cattle rustling problems. Jim Mars signed on as the range rider and moved his camper down for the season. Everyone felt comfortable now that one of their own who had his herd down there was watching over things. He was a skilled cowboy, a good man and he could talk to the corporate people. The second year went slicker than snot!

When the cowboys went down to discuss the contract for the third year, the general manager threw a new hitch into the deal. He had been talking to a large cattle operation in

Utah that was talking about coming with a much larger herd. It would be more profitable to take in the Utah herd, but he didn't have their answer yet. Oops!



The Chicago Guy

It was the same story on the second trip. But on the third trip, Dave Williams, the brand inspector, Jim Mars, and Chicago had breakfast in a greasy spoon restaurant before driving down to New Mexico for the third meeting. Dave said that he knew a way that you could walk a herd of cattle from Colorado to the Navajo reservation in New Mexico. The Chicago guy and Jim Mars were surprised and curious. Since they had time to kill before the appointment, Dave drove them through most of the route in his 4 wheel drive truck. They all agreed that it was a good route and a cattle drive could be done.

When they got into the meeting, they got the same answer, still waiting for an answer from the cattle operation in Utah. The Chicago guy explained that it was getting late and they might have to make other plans for the season. He also explained that the management people ran the risk of having nobody come in for the winter grazing. The Chicago guy then called for a recess so he could talk to the other cowboys in private. They all got up and the Chicago guy led them to a bathroom. He walked in, checked all the stalls and then put his foot on the door so nobody else could come in. He then said, "boys we are in real trouble if we don't get this contract signed today I don't think we will be able to bring our cows here this season." He then explained to Grant Paulek the cowboy who met them at the headquarters building that they had just driven a route to the project. They felt it was suitable to walk a herd of cattle from Colorado to the project.

He told his partners that he needed some new ammunition to work on the General Manager. He asked them if they would agree to do a 1000 head cattle drive from Colorado to the project if the contract was signed today. They were all pretty shocked at the plan. But after talking about it for a few minutes, the cowboys all agreed to the

proposal. They went back to the General Manager's office. Now the Chicago Guy was really on a roll. He declared that this relationship was a natural fit for both the Colorado ranchers and the Navajo farm project. If freight rates went up, the large outfit in Utah would not be able to afford to keep coming to the farm. We would still come down here to graze your winter stubble. We would walk the cows down here. It is only 80 miles and we could do it in 6 or 7 days. To prove the point, we will walk 1000 cows down here this fall if the contract is signed today. The General Manager leaned across the table and scoffed at him. He said that was ridiculous and they could not do it. The conversation continued but it was now going to the level of a pissing contest between two 10 year old boys. Finally, with a sneer, the General Manager scribbled his name on the contract, shoved it across the table and said, "Let's see you do it." The Chicago guy scratched his signature on the contract, took his copy and said "we'll be back." The 4 cowboys stood up in unison and walked out the door. There was no hand shaking this time.

When they got to the trucks they stopped, and facing each other they started to laugh and laughed hard. They had a signed contract in their hands and had just committed to do a 1000 head drive. What a challenge and what an adventure! At that moment, they realized that they were still short about 400 cows for the drive. Jim Mars with a wave of his hand and a big smile said "don't worry, I'll get them." That started another round of laughter after which they got in their trucks and drove off.

The next day Jim stopped by the Pargin ranch. They were members of the association and had a large herd. The family had homesteaded their ranch a few generations back. They had lots of land to put hay up for the winter and had good spring and fall pasture on the ranch. In the summer they ran their herd in the mountains on a National Forest lease that they had for many years. It was a great operation!

He ran into Steve Pargin first. He was about 25 years old and was running the ranch for his aging parents. Jim told him about the 1000 head cattle drive to New Mexico and how he needed his herd to get the head count. Seeing Steve running into his parent's house and telling them that he needed to take the cherished herd on a 6 or 7 day cattle drive to New Mexico was a sight to behold. The parents just sat in their chairs stunned. Jim got in the door last and slowly with a smile explained how the association got in the situation and why their herd was important. He told them he was taking extra riders to make sure they didn't lose any cattle in the rough country they would be going through. Since they knew and trusted Jim, they consented to the request and sealed it with a handshake. In a few days, Jim had the 1000 cow head count.

The Chicago guy went into the very jaws of the federal government to get permission and hopefully the permits necessary to travel on the many miles of government forest and desert land that the route required. As the people in the offices got to understanding that this cattle drive was something special their interest in solving some of the little red tape problems grew. Maps came out and people wanted to see the route taken from Bayfield, Colorado to The Navajo farm project (One thousand cows and six or seven days to do it). Nobody had ever heard of such a large cattle drive covering such a long distance ever being done in this area. When the permits were given to the guy from Chicago, he had to

promise that he would come back to the office after the drive was finished and tell them about it.

The next job was to find out where to stop the herd each night. The dream plan was to be able to find well fenced places that would hold the cattle so the riders did not have to ride the herd all night. Talking to ranchers, everything was found that was needed including a privately owned “fenced in spot” in the National forest on the top of the mountain they had to go over. There was no water for the cows at the mountain top camp site, but the farmers coop in Durango agreed to deliver and pickup new water tanks to the campsite that the Navajo farm water truck would then fill with water. Not one person asked for any money. Everyone just wanted to help.

Now comes another lucky break. It was a kiss from the cowboy and cowgirl gods. Turns out that the Chicago guy’s best friend was in the advertising business back East. He puts him in touch with the right people. They would pay real money to use the cattle drive to take pictures of cowboys with their cigarettes with the fancy filters. The advertising people would have to move fast, so he makes them an offer they couldn’t refuse. The price he gave them covered the cost of the feed for the cattle during the cattle drive and the cost to have a vehicle follow the cattle drive and feed the riders. Imagine a free catered cattle drive!



Steve Pargin - big rancher

The advertising people arrived 3 days before the beginning of the cattle drive. They wanted to have dinner with the three cofounders of the association who were Jim Mars, Dave Williams, and the Chicago guy and their significant others. Things were going great until the art director said that to preserve the rugged character of the cowboy image no women could be in the photographs with the men. Since a third of the riders were women, things got a little sticky for a few minutes. Wives, girlfriends and daughters,

everyone wanted to go on the historic cattle drive. The advertising people didn't want any women. The compromise was that when a picture was to be taken as the herd was moving, the cry went out; "Women to the rear"! It worked ... not great but it worked.

Two days later the cattle drive was on. It is pleasing to know that a cattle drive today is done the same way it was done thousands of years ago. The first nights stop was the La Boca ranch next to the Pine River. In the old days it was a watering stop for the narrow gauge railroad train. The 5 different herds all came from different directions and by the time they got to La Boca they had merged into just 2 herds. When they got to the ranch, they were turned loose in the main pasture.

An old hippie school bus that had been converted into a kitchen many years ago was already there and was preparing the evening meal. The owner of the bus and the cook was a woman by the name of Margie Bent and she was no hash slinger. She had gone to a culinary school back east where she was raised. Her meals always brought smiles and complements from the riders. The bus was followed by a fine old 1937 Chevrolet pickup driven by Larry Hall, whose wife was the local county judge. He was pulling a water trailer for the use of the kitchen and drinking water for the riders. In the back of the truck there was firewood to keep a bright fire going at night. The big fire made a great place to eat, socialize, and talk about cattle drive stuff.



It is hard to get a cattle drive going, so once it is moving smoothly you do not want to stop it. During the cattle drive, the bus would pull over at a wide spot on the road and riders would come by on their horses and get a coffee and sandwich or burrito and keep riding with the cows.

Now a Navajo semi truck loaded with hay comes down the gravel road and stops at the pasture gate. A group of cowboys climb on the trailer and the truck pulls through the now open gate with a 1000 cows following it as the busy cowboys toss out armfuls of hay. The truck makes a long slow circle turn and goes out the same gate that he came in. Dinner has just been served to the cows.

Feeding the horses is a different matter. The horse hay and grain is carried in the various pickup trucks that are now leap frogging to the new camp. The riders tend to their horses by the truck, unsaddle them, brush them, feed and grain them. The pickup is sort of a portable horse barn.

A few of the riders, who had finished dinner early, climbed up a hill and sat down. The view of the valley filled with Evergreen and Aspen trees, rocky hills dropping down to the small river weaving through it and the cows, horses and people eating their meals was a quiet, beautiful, and peaceful site to look at after all the whoopin' and hollerin' of the first day of the cattle drive.



Before daybreak the next morning things sprang into action. The riders got their breakfast at the school bus, then stowed all their gear in the back of pickup trucks, wherever they could find room. They saddled up their horses while the advertising people started taking pictures of their cowboys in front of an old wooden barn, standing around a campfire, or chasing some of the cows from the herd.

The second day was to be a 12 mile long slow push up a narrow old dirt road up to the top of a mountain to the next camp. Juniper trees were growing up to the road. Not exciting scenery. Talking with the advertising people, it was agreed that a dozen cows would be left behind so they could get some good action shots with them in the rocky

wooded area by the river. It was done on the condition that at the end of the day, the cows would be loaded in the advertising people's trailers and delivered to the herd at the next campsite. The cows got a free ride! You need to know that these cowboy "models" were real cowboys. Two of them were foremen on the ranches where they worked and the third was working his way up to foreman. They told Jim Mars, the trailboss, that they would see to it that the picture taking people would not hold up the drive. This was greatly appreciated by the riders who now liked these guys even more.



takin' a break and the 2 chuck wagons

When the herd stopped that night, they were put in a large fenced in area of private land in the middle of the National Forest. This was great because now there was no need for riders to ride the cattle all night to make sure that none of them wandered away.

The stock tanks that had been borrowed from the farmers coop in Durango were now filled with water by the Navajo water truck that came in exactly on time. That was good because some mighty thirsty cattle came in shortly thereafter. The semi truck with the hay was not far behind. A lot more people jumped on the trailer this time to help unload the hay. Didn't have to, just wanted too!

When these chores were done, the riders who had left their trucks with gear and horse hay at the last camp all got in the back of a couple pickups for a lift down the mountain to shuttle everything to the new camp.

The goal for the third day was to move the cattle to the next camp on the other side of the San Juan River, about 12 miles away. The only thing harder than taking cattle up a mountain is taking them down a mountain with a steep grade. It is easier for the cow to trot down the mountain. However, if they did that, you would get an accordion effect where the cows would be running then stopping and running again. This is dangerous and you can get a cow or rider hurt. Jim Mars and a few experienced riders got up front of the lead cows and wore themselves out trying to fight the cows and keep them at a walk. They did hold the cows to a walk, a bad problem was avoided. The funny thing about it was that the riders in the back thought everything was going fine. Their cows were just walking along at the regular pace. They were too far back to see the battle in the front.

As the land flattened out, everybody relaxed. It was a hot day and it was great to see the school bus off to the side with ice cold water and sandwiches. It was still a long way to go to the river so it was just one hoof in front of another in this now desolate rocky and treeless land.

Susie Mars, the daughter of Jim Mars, and a superb cowgirl, was the first to see a lone vehicle in the distance parked out of the way. Susie soon saw that it was a New Mexico Sheriff sitting in his squad car watching the large herd coming at him. Susie thought this was the perfect time to pull a well chilled 6 pack of beer out of her saddlebag. She took one and gave a few to her friends. The last one she held up and rode over to the Sheriff. He pointed to his uniform but she just kept riding around him talking to him and now the other riders were cheering. The Sheriff finally took the beer, raised the can to the riders and drank it down to the cheers of everyone. What is it about a 1000 head cattle drive that makes people do crazy things just for fun!

The advertising people had a big picture coming up at the river crossing. They had rented two horse drawn chuck wagons to be in the front of the cattle as they crossed the river. The model cowboys were in position towards the front of the herd as they approached the river. The chuck wagons were in the river but when the first cows got to the water, they dropped their heads and started drinking the cool water. No amount of hollering or pushing the cows with the horses made any difference. It was like trying to piss up a rope. It doesn't work. The cows were going to drink their fill before they left the river.

The film crew threw up their hands, laughed and starting packing up their gear. The Chicago guy offered to move the herd across the river in the morning to reshoot the scene. The offer was declined. The Chicago guy made the offer because he was on the

other side of the river with the cameramen, watching the chuck wagons lead the cows into the river. The second before the cows dropped their heads there was a vision of a long ago scene. It was an incredibly beautiful picture.



trying to hold cattle at a walk

The ranch where the camp was setup had land on both sides of the river. It had been in a Mexican family for several generations. The boss of the ranch was a feisty grandmother type. She and her extended family had previously been invited to have dinner around the campfire that night. The school bus kitchen put out a lot of great food that night and there was never any shortage of things to drink. All of her family and a lot of their friends came to dinner. It was quite a fiesta! English was the second language!

This was now the fourth day of the drive. It was what locals called “falling weather.” The hot, dry weather of yesterday was gone. Clouds started moving in and a cool wind started to blow. The riders pulled their collars up on their jackets and gave a tug down on their hat brims, as they got the herd lined out. Cows are very social animals and they like to be with members of their herd that they have lived with their entire lives. It was the fourth day of the drive and each of these herds still traveled with cows from their own herd. You could be off to the side on your horse and you could see the brands of 5 separate herds go by within the one large herd.

As the day wore on the wind kept increasing until there was a full fledged sand storm. Jim Mars sent the Chicago guy to the front of the herd to be the scout because he was the only other person who had been over this area before. The visibility dropped to almost zero. The scout just kept weaving his horse from one side of the narrow road to the other to make sure he stayed on it. The herd kept moving.



rider pickin' up chow

The bus couldn't move in the sand storm so nobody had any lunch. The sand was in your eyes, nose, ears, and teeth. The skin on your face was getting raw. It was miserable! The sand storm started to ease up mid afternoon. The visibility got better. That was critical because the herd had to make a few turns onto a few other roads to make it to the next camp. The scout had decided that if he couldn't figure out the right turns then he would just stop the herd and wait the storm out. This was not necessary and they found the camp. The Navajo hay trailer and the bus eventually found the camp. The camp was quiet. Everyone was exhausted. The riders ate in silence. After that people started getting in trucks and driving off. They were looking for showers, body lotion and fresh clothes. Hey, this was a modern cattle drive and there were a few benefits to it!

Day 5- Happy Thanksgiving. Yes that's right, with the delays in the signing of the contract, it put the start of the cattle drive on the trail when mother nature could be ornery and cause some real trouble. But never mind, there was pleasant weather today and it was only about a 5 hour ride to the next camp with plenty of time to get ready for the thanksgiving meal.

As the herd moved up the road, it made a left turn onto a slightly larger road. A pickup truck pulled over and gave a big wave. A man and three kids got out of the truck. The man asked if this was the 1000 head cattle drive that was coming from Colorado and going to the Navajo reservation. A couple riders pulled up their horses and told him that it was. The man told them he had seen it on TV last night and he and his boys drove 150 miles to see it. He had never seen one that big and he told his sons that they would probably never see another one that big in their lifetime. He said there were a lot of cars further down the road that were waiting for them. He and his sons starting clapping and cheering, a couple of riders then did a few fancy movements with their horses. Everyone started yelling and laughing. Further down the road there were a lot of vehicles parked on

the side of the road. When the herd got closer, people started getting out of their cars and stood quietly by them. A lady from one of the ranch houses was walking to the road with a cup of coffee in each hand to give to a couple of riders. Seeing the respect and awe on the faces of the onlookers, it was an honor to be part of the cattle drive.



married ranchin' couple and sittin' by the fire eatin' Thanksgiving dinner

This was to be the last night in a camp. Tomorrow was to be the day when the cows were going to arrive at their winter pasture. It was going to be the longest distance traveled in one day of the trip. It was also going to be over the roughest terrain of the trip. Oh well, Happy Thanksgiving!

The school bus had been in place most of the day and was cooking up a storm. Family and friends had driven down from Colorado and had brought more food and deserts.

The guy from Chicago had two lady friends who were retired nurses and had a small sheep ranch close to him. Their names were Gloria and Arloa. They made quite a scene when they pulled into camp. Some bad directions by some guy with a cowboy hat had sent them off a little cliff in their 4 wheel drive vehicle. The turkeys and the pies bounced off the roof of the truck before landing on them and the front seat. They had to drive another 15 minutes in that condition because they were losing light and they might miss the camp. The TV guy got them on tape as they opened the doors and started throwing out pieces of pies and turkeys. They were not happy. It's a good thing they have sound edit buttons on those cameras and deleted some of the x rated language they used. It was a very special Thanksgiving celebration. Everyone was very grateful that it had been safe for the cows and the people. This wonderful party was held in a dark pasture with several large campfires for light.

The riders were up a couple hours before first light. People were quietly whispering to their friends "Get up, we are burning daylight". The school bus was quietly putting out breakfast for the riders plus a packed lunch for the riders because the bus could not get in the rugged white and pink colored little mountain peaks that were pure rock. Some "falling weather" had occurred during the night and small snow flakes were starting to come down. Once again mother-nature held all the cards.

The riders saddled up their horses in total darkness. The plan was to slowly start rounding up the furthest cattle in the large pasture and very slowly move them towards the front gate. It was important that no cows got spooked. In total darkness, this could be a problem. By the time this was done the sun was giving a little light to the situation. The riders had kept silent. It all worked and the drive had just picked up a half hour on the day.

The weather was growing more threatening. Jim Mars and Chicago rode together talking softly to each other. If the snow picked up a lot, they would not be able to make it onto the reservation. The herd would have to be held on the open desert until things got better. A shipment of hay would help hold the cattle for the night if they could get any and if they could get the truck to them. The Chicago guy would go to the reservation and try to line up a truck just in case they needed it. The night before, the two men agreed to make a small change in the direction of the cattle drive so that the advertising people could have the two chuck wagons leading the herd down the mountain with a peak in the background. As if the two men didn't need anymore on their plate. They rode close together and as they talked you could hear frequent laughs. These two men were from two different cultures but they worked smoothly together. Their different skills complemented each other perfectly and they needed each other in the cattle association venture. They had developed a strong trust over the last three years working together. They knew they could depend on one another for whatever they needed. Nobody had ever heard a cross word spoken between them. The Chicago guy peeled off from the herd to find a new route for the advertising people. He went back to his horse trailer and loaded his horse in it. He went around to the highway where he would lead the herd out

through a particular gate. Unsure of his scouting abilities, he loaded his saddlebags with empty beer bottles to mark the way back to the gate.

This is where, by accident, the advertising people got the best photograph of the whole drive. It was to appear in the centerfold of a national magazine. The herd had overshot the marker by a little bit, so Jim had to turn the herd a little as they were coming down the mountain. A sharp advertising camera man realized what was developing and quickly put cowboy models in the right spots. Snap! That was it. 1000 head of cattle coming down the mountain all strung out in a Z pattern. Later, the advertising people in New York called it the Zorro picture. The Chicago guy then turned his horse to go on to the next job. He needed to look for hay. He yelled over his shoulder to Jim as he was following the beer bottle trail to please pick up the bottles so he could get his deposit back.



When we scouted the route for the cattle drive, we drove on the dry river bed just like the oil and gas trucks had done for years. However, when the cattle were crossing the dry river bed their small hoofs putting all their weight on a small area started to bring water up thru the sand. This started to create a quick sand condition. Some of the cows broke thru the trampoline like sand and sunk up to their hips. Quick action stopped any more cows from going into the dangerous situation. The cows in trouble were freed up by moving them to a less boggy area. The river bed had to be crossed. A small batch of cows were moved to a fresh area and moved across as slow as possible. As soon as the sand began to look spongy, the cows that had not gone into the river bed were moved to a fresh area. Using this method and a lot of patience, the whole herd got safely to the other side.

The Chicago guy had no idea of the trouble his friends were in with the quick sand. He was riding happily along thinking that in spite of the weather that they were going to make it to the reservation just fine. He got to the highway and loaded his horse in the trailer and headed for the reservation. He was looking for one man by the name of Lawrence Martinez, A Navajo-Mexican Indian. Lawrence was the 'go to guy' and good friend of the Colorado cowboys. Luck prevailed and he found him. Chicago was told that it being the day after thanksgiving that the project was shut down tight. Lawrence asked why he wanted the hay today. The Chicago guy explained that they were walking down 1000 head of cattle from Colorado and they were getting close to the reservation, but if the snow got bad and they couldn't make it, then the hay might help them hold the cattle for the night. Lawrence, with his stone faced Indian expression used to impress white men said, "White men do not walk their cattle for long distances they put them in trucks and haul them." The Chicago guy quickly responded, "look Lawrence, I consider the Pine River Grazing Association to be a guest of the Navajo Nation and we are walking our cows down here to graze on your winter pasture and pay you good money. We are having a little trouble and as a good host you need to come see our situation and help us." The two men laughed and got in Lawrence's farm project truck and drove to the perimeter fence. After some looking, Lawrence started to see cattle way off in the distance. They looked like little dots going up and down a series of peaks. He was impressed. Then he asked about the route that was going to be taken to their assigned fields. He then drove back to the Chicago guy's truck and trailer and told him he would meet him at the highway in 45 minutes.



At the highway, Jim and the Chicago guy were on their horses talking while they were holding up the cattle to get them consolidated before they crossed a paved highway. Up pulls Lawrence and 4 other Navajos with him. They start unloading their saddled up horses from the big horse trailer. Looking surprised, the Chicago guy rides over to

Lawrence and asked him what he had in mind. Lawrence with a big smile says he doesn't like the route that he has picked out. Lawrence and his riders would guide them through a tougher but better route to their assigned pasture. That was going to be a decision for Jim Mars, the trail boss, so they rode over to him. Lawrence and Jim started to talk. The Chicago guy backs his horse out of the circle and rides over to his girlfriend Judy. Her job has been to be Jim's scout, messenger and cowhand. She had a ready smile and was an excellent horsewoman. She has an accounting business in Durango and one of her clients who made custom cowboy hats made her one for the cattle drive. It stood out from all the beat-up cowboy hats of the other "hands" and she gracefully took a lot of kidding about it. The two tired lovers visited for awhile until Jim called her over. He wanted her to carry the message to all the riders that there was no stopping the cattle drive. Also that 5 Navajos cowboys were going to guide the herd to the designated pasture. So really what happened was that the Navajo Indians just came to the rescue of the white cattle wranglers. The New Mexico state highway patrol had been standing by to stop all traffic so the herd could cross the highway. Jim finally gave the signal and the smiling patrolmen stopped all the traffic. After about 15 minutes, they had the herd on the other side of the highway. It seemed like everyone wanted to be involved in the cattle drive.



The Chicago Guy's girlfriend Judy (now wife) who was the trail boss's scout, messenger, and cowhand.

While all this was going on another horse trailer was being unloaded by a skinny 7 year girl, by the name of Jovanna, who insisted that she could unload her horse, named Buckskin Charlie, all by herself. She pulled her way up on the horse and settled in the saddle. She proudly rode over to her father, the Chicago guy. He also looked proud but a little concerned as the wind and the snow had picked up a bit. She was an excellent rider and had been on a lot of cattle drives. She had a keen sense of cows. During the night she got separated from the main herd with 10 cows. She said she knew the cows would

eventually find the rest of the herd so she just sang to the cows. The cows did rejoin the rest of the herd. Darn tough little ranch kid. When she later told her Dad about this incident, he told her that she should probably not tell her mother about this or she might not let her come down to the ranch and play with him.

As the herd headed off into some rough native country on this part of the reservation, it was if they had been swallowed up by mother-nature and she turned up the wind and the snow and turned down the temperature. The herd disappeared for 8 hours until they reappeared in the middle of the reservation at the designated pasture where Lawrence Martinez had told Chicago to locate the school bus. In total darkness he had guided the herd exactly to it. That was quite a navigational feat.

Family members had relocated the trucks, trailers, and campers to the new location of the school bus. The dog tired riders handed the reins of their horses to friends or just tied them to anything that would hold them. Jim Mars and his riders had been in the saddle for 16 hours. The wind was blowing but the snow had not been a bad problem. Talk about tough and talk about the phrase “cowboy up”..... this is what it means!

The half frozen riders squeezed into the warm school bus. They were in there so tight that the only thing that moved was their hands to take a bowl of beef stew, whisky, beer, or soft drink. The noise level in the bus started to increase as people warmed up. Every now and then a wind gust would cause the bus to lean and happy screams would come from the now protected riders.

This was probably the best celebration party that any of these “hands” had ever been to in their lives. This group had moved 1000 head of cattle 80 miles in 6 days. The Navajo guides had taken almost a day off the trip with their short cut. They had been through one bad sandstorm and through some dangerous quick sand with no injuries to man or beast. The trip was a real adventure which included some great times and some miserable times.

The cows were the happiest of all because they traveled through new places, met a lot of other cows, and most important they had many lifetimes of lush and varied feeds. They would eat the best and leave the rest to Mother Nature.

The End ... of this adventure.

