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WOKE UP ONE MORNIN' ON THE RED DEER TRAIL

by Dale Speirs

Despite growing up in a rural area, I never liked country-and-western songs, at least not the modern stuff. It was entirely too much the phony "yer cheatin' heart" type of stuff and did not match the reality of what I saw around me. The older folk songs, based on the actual experience of real cowboys (not Nashville fakers) were, however, more tolerable, such as "The Old Chisholm Trail". That song documents the genuine cattle drives of the Old West of the United States (and Canadian) prairies, and can still be applied to modern cattle drives. So let me tell you a tale of my boyhood days in rural Red Deer, and tie the anecdotes in with the song, verse by verse.

Come along boys, and I'll tell you a tale.

My father was a veterinarian specializing in farm animals. He kept a small herd of cattle on the side, comprising a hundred or more Charolais, Hereford, and Charcross (a hybrid between the first two), plus a few miscellaneous animals from other breeds such as Simmental or Limousin. It was strictly a beef cattle range operation because they were easier to look after, as opposed to feedlot or dairy cattle, which are labour-intensive operations. There was no way Dad could be milking cows and running a veterinary practice at the same time. Although I suppose he

derived some tax benefits from the operation, I suspect part of it was due to nostalgia for the south Saskatchewan dairy farm he grew up on.

We didn't actually live on the farm, but rather on a bush-covered acreage a few kilometres away. The farm proper was only a quarter-section, too small to sustain the herd. (The Canadian prairies were surveyed into sections during the 1880s to pre-WW1 period, a section being a mile on each side. A quarter-section was therefore a quarter-mile square of land.) Dad rented pasture in various places around Red Deer to which the cattle were taken.

All about my troubles on the Old Chisholm Trail.

At the beginning of a cattle drive, there was a lot of confusion and noise, milling around in circles, and uncertainty about which direction to go. And those were the cowboys; the cattle were even worse. Planning a cattle drive is much like planning the D-Day invasion, only with a smaller cast and no opposing fire. The cows were bad enough, but at least most of them had been driven before. Once we got going, they knew what to expect and would simmer down. The calves, however, had been born on the range in the spring and had spent a peaceful summer in quiet pastures. They now found themselves being chased from pillar to post for no apparent reason.

Figure 1 on the next page shows a formal photograph of us at the start of a cattle drive in October 1970. My mother took all these photos. You will note there is not a cowboy hat in sight. I am standing in front second from right and my father is on horseback behind me third from right. My brother is not in the photo and he doesn't remember this particular drive so he must have had something else important to do that day. The woman on horseback at far left is Dad's secretary Marge, and her father, then in his late 70s, is standing at far right next to me. Old Bob and I are staring at something but I can't see what. The rest are local hired hands and a cowgirl (next to Marge), none of whom I recall by name. The cattle behind us are feeding on grain dumped to attract them to one spot and save the trouble of chasing them out of the bush. They are mostly Herefords and Charolais.

Started up the trail October twenty-third.

Spring was the busiest time of year for a farm animal specialist like Dad, with a constant flow of calving cases or milk fevers. Cattle were thus usually moved by truck to summer pastures, a more convenient procedure but also far more expensive for the hire of the cattleliner. We did our cattle drives in the autumn, bringing them in from the exhausted summer pasture and branding the calves that had been born out on the range. September and October was the droving season in central Alberta for farmers.

Figure 1: Ready to start the cattle drive.

Driving the cattle of the 2 Bar herd.

Actually it was the CJS herd, but that doesn't scan in the song. My father's herd was officially called "CJS Charolais", and the brand was his initials, CJS.

I had a brief spell of owning cattle, which ran with his herd. When I applied to the Ministry of Agriculture for the brand "DCS", my initials, it had already been taken, so I had to settle for "SPE". At that time I was a big fan of Isaac Asimov and had been reading his articles on the ancient Greeks. I therefore named my herd (two cows) as "Speirs Psammites", the latter word from the essay "The Sand Reckoner" by Archimedes, in which he estimates how many grains of sand there are on Earth.

The first cow I owned in my own name was Miss Fishchar, purchased from Fisher Charolais of Rocky Mountain House, who were rather startled at the unusual herd name she was going to. If, even at this late date, there are ranchers in central Alberta who can quote Greek history while ignorant of everything else, I can take quiet pride (and Asimov, too, unknowingly) in having contributed to this. See pages 8 and 9 for my cattle registration, covering half my herd. The other sheet of paper is much the same. Dad had a file cabinet drawer for his herd.

Figure 2 shows the start of the drive, as the herd comes out of the pasture and onto the highway. I'm at the back of the photo somewhere; we have just turned the herd into the proper direction and the cowboys are bringing the cattle up to speed.

With a rope in my hand and a cow by the tail.

Cowboys learn a practical appreciation of Newtonian physics early on, especially the stuff about equal and opposite reactions. They know what inertia really means. This comes about lassoing cattle. It actually wasn't done that often, as it is easier and faster to chase an animal into a corral and thence to a squeeze chute. The problem is not so much lassoing the cow but rather what happens when you succeed.

Forget what you see at rodeos or cowboy movies. It is all very well for a cowboy to come bursting out of the rodeo infield gates, run down a frightened animal, and hog-tie it. He stands up after, receives the audience's applause, and will not have to perform again for another hour. Doing that out on the ranch takes too long. Even supposing that a cowboy and his horse could take the impact of a yank of a cow every five minutes, they would be there for days catching them one by one.

Figure 2: Move 'em out, boys!

Cows generally have to be lassoed while the roper is on horseback or standing on the back of a pickup truck. This has to do with the fact that a man on foot would be yanked off his feet if he tried to stop a cow by roping her. Cows are considerably heavier than a human, of course, plus they have twice as much traction. Instead the rope would be tied to the saddlehorn or pickup rack. There is one way to do this on foot, which I used. Rope the cow but start running alongside her before the rope tightens. Chase her towards a fence, keeping plenty of slack on the rope. As you go by a fence post, quickly loop the rope around the base of the post and hang on. This will stop her short, assuming the post is in solid. Sometimes the post was rotten at the base and gave way, so one would see a cowboy chasing after not only the cow but the fence.

On a ten-dollar horse and a forty-dollar saddle.

Not that many farms keep horses anymore unless they breed or show them professionally, perform in rodeos, or have wives or daughters who ride for recreation. The pasture that a horse eats could support a cow and calf, and as anyone knows who has ever kept a horse, the bills quickly add up for halters, saddles, veterinary bills, and a hundred other miscellaneous expenses.

My brother and I never rode, and the hired hand did so only if he couldn't get his pickup truck into a place. Dad had practically spent his entire boyhood in the saddle back in southern

Saskatchewan, but as a middle-aged man he only occasionally rode. The main thing he didn't like was the tedious business of saddling a horse and then later unsaddling it and seeing it fed and watered. It was easier just to get into a motor vehicle and turn the key.

For cattle drives we usually had the help of local farm girls who had horses. My brother and I walked along with the herd. The pickup truck, loaded with feed grain, led the way with hungry cattle trying to catch up to it. When we got home, the hired hand drove into the corral, leapt out of his truck onto the back and frantically shovelled off the grain before the herd mobbed him.

Goddamn' tired of punchin' cattle.

It was a monotonous job driving cattle, but you couldn't daydream your way along. The main problem in driving cattle is to keep the herd moving. Cattle are intensely social animals, and no straggler liked separation from the main herd. If, however, the herd stopped and began milling around, animals would break loose in clumps to form their own herds headed in different directions.

So we had to keep them moving. We drove the cattle along roadside ditches, with fences on one side, cowgirls on the road shoulder, my brother and me blocking off side roads, and pickups fore and aft. You had to stay close to the animals so they would

veer away from you back into the herd. Take your eyes off the herd for a few seconds to admire the scenery and, sure enough, some of the cattle would bolt down a side road.

My brother and I walked along the side of the herd. The worst position was the drag, or back end of the herd, where you got all the dust and droppings. The horse riders usually took the drag because the tail-end Charlies in the herd were more likely to break away.

Clouds up above, looks like rain, left my coat in the wagon again.

The trouble in organizing a drive meant that it would go rain or shine, unless it was raining too heavily. When postponed due to rain, it was not because anyone worried about getting wet, but rather that the herd would destroy any turf it passed over and turn it into mud. If it began to rain after the drive was underway, nothing would stop the drive. It was easier to go on than to turn the herd and start over another day.

We had the additional hazard that my father might be called away on an urgent case, but I don't remember this happening. He may have had another veterinarian cover for him; I don't remember.

Began to storm and the rain to fall; we thought, by God, we'd lose them all.

We never had a stampede, not from lightning storms or any other cause. In, fact I've never even heard tell of a stampede in the Red Deer/Eckville area. Not even from old-timers in our neighbourhood who never let the facts get in the way of a good story, and who were secure in the knowledge that no one else was still living who could call them a liar on something that happened fifty years ago.

Charolais and Hereford are reasonably mild-mannered cattle. The big drives down in the States were often of Texas Longhorns, a notoriously skittish breed. We also only drove small herds of a few hundred cattle. It might have been different with thousands.

We hit the river, we hit her on the fly.

Rivers were always a serious problem for cattle drives in the Old West, but only once do I remember our drives taking a route that required crossing a river. We usually could run the herd over a bridge. Rivers were trouble not only because they were a physical obstacle but because the cattle would automatically stop to drink. This bunched up the herd in a traffic jam as the followers plowed into the lead animals, pushed from behind by the rearguard.

Figure 3: 50% of the SPE herd.

CANADIAN CHAROLAIS ASSOCIATION

Incorporated Under The Livestock Pedigree Act, 1960

Certificate of Registration

H OF A
EAR TAG _____

This is to certify that the PUREBRED FEMALE No. FC 11182

Name SPEIRS PSAMMITES SPE 1E Calved APRIL 25, 1973

Herd No. E1 RE Breeder's Letters SPE

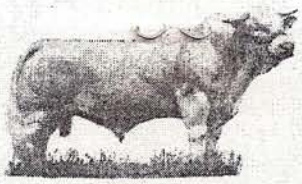
Breeder W J FISHER & SONS, ROCKY MTN HOUSE ALTA

First Owner DALE SPEIRS, RED DEER ALTA T4N 2M1

Last Owner

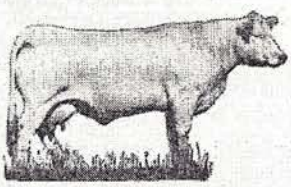
Present Owner DALE SPEIRS, RED DEER ALTA T4N 2M1 Date of Sale / /
62575022

has been accepted for entry in the records of the Canadian Charolais Association, according to the Constitution and By-Laws of the Association.



SIR LEE CABOTIN 52B
FMC 567

- CABOTIN FMC 130
  - ULYSSE 58218U11
  - VALSE 58693V40
- MISS LEF AIGLON FFC 501
  - AIGLON FMC 14
  - BOULE FFC 201



MISS FISHCHAR C08
PFC 6811

- BIGARREAU FMC 60
  - URANUS 36107U28
  - REINE CLAUDE 58164R09
- MISS CR BOUVREUIL A986 RFC 20446
  - BOUVREUIL FMC 66
  - QUEEN RUE 736 RFC 2300

CANADIAN CHAROLAIS ASSOCIATION

DECEMBER 27, 1973
Date Registered

Recording Secretary

Figure 4: The herd at the Blindman River crossing.

Naturally, those at the back of the jam would try to go around the flanks. This suddenly turned the herd from a long thin line moving forward into two separate lines moving sideways in opposite directions along the riverbank. The only thing worse than trying to re-assemble a herd is trying to re-assemble a herd while splashing around in water. For this reason, the herd was sped up as it approached a river and chased across at full speed on the fly, so its momentum would carry it over without stopping. It didn't always work; see Figure 4.

The mud and the dust and a case of pink eye.

Some hired hands still wore bandannas against the dust, but many preferred disposable paper dust masks. You could throw them away at the end of the drive and have one less item to launder. Usually only the married cowhands wore bandannas because their wives did the laundry. Bachelor cowboys, who had to haul their own laundry into the town laundromat, preferred to minimize their workload with paper masks.

We never had to mask ourselves that I recall. Autumn is the dry season in Alberta, but I don't remember much dust on our drives. Red Deer is in the moister parkland belt of Alberta, and dust was generally not a problem. This would be because we were driving the herd along grass-lined ditches, so there was little dust raised. Mud was certainly more common, but we generally did not drive herds in wet weather, so I don't recall worrying about that either.

Baseball caps were the preferred headgear because they were free. Farm supply dealers gave them away by the thousands, so why pay money for a cowboy hat when you can get a cap for free. Sunglasses were always worn against the dust. If you didn't mind the jokes, one might even wear goggles.

Bedded the cattle on the hills close by.

We would have, had it been an overnight drive, but we arrived home in time for supper. The drive always started in early morning at sunrise so if serious trouble developed we would have a long period of light. The only thing worse than trying to re-assemble a herd while splashing around in the water is trying to re-assemble a herd in the dark. One reason I liked Charolais cattle was that they are white or cream-coloured, and show up easily in the twilight.

But we got the cattle home in plenty of time. They were driven into a corral and left to settle down for a while. The calves would then be separated out, branded, and vaccinated. The entire herd would next be culled, shipping animals to the auction mart and keeping the nucleus of next year's herd. They were kept on the farm over the winter and grain-fed until spring.

Figure 5: Blocking the highway was such fun!

Our cattle were purebred stock sold as breeders, not meat animals. Very few would ever go to a packing plant as did ordinary stock animals. There was more paperwork keeping breeders but the returns were higher for a pedigreed cow. Dad was sloppy with his paperwork, as Revenue Canada and the Ministry of Agriculture were the first to agree, and didn't always get the papers done before selling the animal. After his death, I was sorting out his papers and found various letters from the auction mart or the Ministry of Agriculture complaining that he was trying to sell mavericks (unbranded cattle) or animals whose brands didn't match the paperwork. It is illegal to sell any unbranded cattle or horses.

Today they use implanted microchips and a remote reader, which picks up all the information from the chip, so no paperwork is required. This was after Dad's time, but I suspect that had he used microchips, there would have been complaining e-mails that the data was in an invalid format. Dad was like that. He felt, and as I get older and crankier I tend to agree, that if the bureaucrats wanted the info they should come out and get it themselves.

And that was the last of the old 2 Bar.

My parents later sold the acreage we lived on, moved into town, and commuted to the farm. The town also moved into them. I made the mistake of re-visiting the acreage in later life. I found it only by triangulating a few landmarks that remained. The acreage had changed hands several times before being 'developed'. The bush was logged over, the gently rolling hills were flattened, and the old roads vanished completely underneath crescents and winding drives lined with tract houses.

The farm proper was once quite a distance outside the City of Red Deer, but at the time of my father's death in March 1996 the boundary line was the highway directly in front of it, along which we had herded so many cattle. The grain fields around us became an industrial park. Dad had the farm up for sale at the time of his death, partly because he was planning for retirement, and partly because farming is not practical immediately adjacent to the city. Yahoos on motorcycles and snowmobiles charged around the fields. Teenagers had drinking parties in the poplar bluffs and tore off branches for firewood. People in the adjacent suburbs let their dogs run loose and chase the cattle.

A week after Dad's death, the remaining twelve cows of the herd, plus two horses he had picked up somewhere for breeding purposes (he never rode them himself) went to the auction mart. The farm was sold as part of the estate, to eventually vanish under urban sprawl like all the other farms swallowed up by cities. And that was the last of the CJS herd.

Vignettes From The Drives.

Figure 5 shows the herd moving along the highway. My mother was following in her Volkswagen Beetle and you can see her camera in the rearview mirror. That's George, the hired hand (and Marge's husband), on the horse. One thing I enjoyed greatly about cattle drives is that we got to obstruct the traffic and annoy drivers. A teenager like me felt quite self-important to be able to hold up my hand and make the traffic wait. Nowadays I suspect ranchers have to get permits, do an environmental impact statement, and pay four different fees and two taxes.

Figure 6 shows the normal routine though, moving the herd along the ditch. This was the vanguard of the drive. The drag end of the herd is far over the horizon. What amazes me about this photo (I don't know how well it will show in the final print) is that the two motorists passing by the herd are in mid-1950s vehicles. This photo was taken in 1970 and I do not remember that many old vehicles still on the road.

Figure 7 shows the herd moving across our home fields. The corral is about 1 km to the right of the photo. At this point, the older cows recognize where they're going and keep the herd moving by itself. Everyone, both cattle and cowboys, is anxious to get home and take it easy. The fields today are now an industrial warehouse neighbourhood. The swathed grain has been replaced by asphalt, stacks of pipe and parked semi-trailers. The poplar bluffs in the background were leveled and the muskeg behind them filled in.

Epilogue.

I left home for university in 1973 and my brother followed a couple of years later. Without the extra help, Dad reduced the size of his herd to about 25 head or so, and kept them on the home quarter-section all year round. The pasture was used in the summer and in winter the cattle were grain-fed in the corrals. There were therefore no more cattle drives.

But it wasn't the last cattle drive my father went on. In 1989, the American state of Montana celebrated its centennial. Among the numerous events was a massive state-wide cattle drive to recreate the old days of droving. For a suitable fee, tourists were provided with a horse and could take part in the drive as an outrider. My parents went down and Dad rode with the herd. He was 62 at the time, and to my knowledge, that was the last time he rode a horse on the range.

Figure 6: Moving the herd along the ditches.

Figure 7: Home across the last field.