

Last of the Big Cattle Drives

by Loman D. Cansler

Illustrations by V. Preston Terrell

Signs in the museum and other store windows let both natives and strangers know that Syracuse, Kansas, was celebrating its centennial in 1973. I was told that “a bunch from Syracuse, New York, settled here and that’s how the town got its name.”

As he drove past a site one block east of Main Street, Preston Terrell remarked, “That’s where the livery stable was



Lou Cook and Preston Terrell in June, 1973. Then, the oldest and youngest living member of that last big cattle drive. Twelve year old Smokey, Lou’s current riding horse, standing more than 16 hands high, looks on. (Lou was 79 years old.)

located in 1919 when we first moved here. My brother, Allen, and I rode our horses this far, and picked them up after school. We lived ten miles northwest of here, then."

"Had to ride horseback to school?" I queried. "Well, when our Model-T Ford wouldn't start. That was quite often," he chuckled. "Or sometimes Dad needed it."

I was continually learning something new about Preston Terrell. In fact, a comment he had made rather nonchalantly three months before was why we were now in Syracuse. Saying casually that he had been on a cattle drive as a youth, turned out to be a typical understatement. He was thirteen in 1922, the year of the drive. His brother, Allen, was sixteen. "Dad [Harry Terrell, 1879-1958] took Allen and me out of school for three weeks," Preston remarked with a broader smile than usual. Then, after a slight pause, "That's the only time Dad ever intentionally kept us out of school."

Besides the three Terrells on that 1922 cattle drive, were Louis "Lou" Cook, Bob Groves, and Joe McMann, the cook and driver of the Chuck Wagon pulled by mule team.

Six cowhands left Hamilton County, Kansas, in mid-October with 1066 mixed or range steers, and three weeks later arrived in Clark County, at a ranch about thirty miles southeast of Dodge City. Thus, Preston's casually mentioned cattle drive is probably the last big drive in southwestern Kansas.

Lou Cook, the oldest participant of that 1922 cattle drive, still lives near Syracuse. Preston Terrell and I had come to talk with him¹.

It was about mid-morning (June 13, 1973) when Preston and I drove south out of Syracuse. In a very short distance we crossed over the Arkansas River and immediately into the Sand Hills. These baby mountains, thickly covered with sage brush, stretched for three or four miles before we struck the open prairies. In another six miles, we were at Lou Cook's ranch.

Lou and his wife, Dorothea, greeted us. For a few minutes we lingered in the yard visiting. We looked at a prized apricot tree which had been robbed of much of its fruit only a few days before by a wind storm. Hardy Buffalo grass, present on all the prairies before the coming of the plow, was scattered about the yard. For a man nearly 79, Lou certainly stood erect. Sometimes his barn and corral would serve to silhouette his lean, tall frame. At other times, he would be between us and the undulating landscape of his ranch. Lou Cook and the prairie were inseparable.

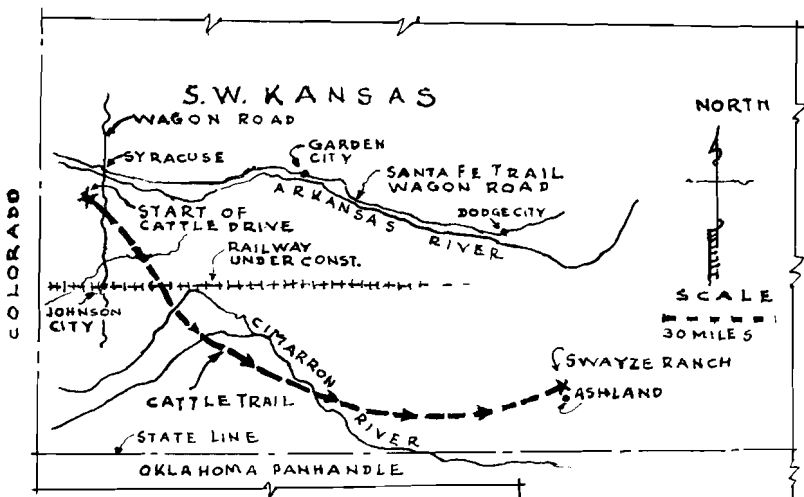
Inside the house Lou was given a current highway map of Kansas. He pointed out the general direction of that cattle trail of fifty-one years ago. "We started at the C. W. Beeler ranch four miles southwest of Syracuse," he said. "We went down by where Big Bow is now,"² he continued as he traced the route with his finger. "Then there was Moscow, Kismet, and over through here—I don't know just

exactly where—and finally we ended up two or three days after the November election on the ranch where Daryl Swayze lived, twelve miles north of Ashland.”

I wondered why the cattle were being moved and how Lou came to help with the drive.

“Well, Beeler shipped these cattle in here from Arizona or New Mexico and sold them to Swayze,” Lou explained. “He contracted Harry Terrell to get them over to Swayze.” Lou went on to say that he started to work for Harry Terrell soon after the end of World War I. He had helped Harry drive cattle from near Holly, Colorado, and to and from other local places. Preston looked at Lou and offered this observation: “I remember that Dad relied a lot on you during that drive.” Lou’s silence indicated he was pleased to know that Preston had caught the mutual feeling of trust and respect that he, Lou, and Harry had built up through the years.

When Lou Cook estimated that the three week drive covered about 200 miles, he was counting the zigzagging that had to be done occasionally. As the cattle made their way from Hamilton through Stanton, Grant, Stevens, Seward, and Meade Counties, and well into Clark County, detours to locate adequate supplies of water and grass were necessary. Consideration was given to the location of places to buy groceries and supplies, as well as certain terrain and other areas to avoid. Since Harry Terrell was the trail boss, he chose this longer route over the more direct course, as Lou Cook explained, when “He



A map of southwestern Kansas showing the approximate route of that 1922 cattle drive.

went ahead and sorta mapped out the trail before we ever started with the cattle.”

Lou Cook recalled only one “dry camp” during the whole trek. The lanky, lean steers drank one afternoon, meandered along the trail until nightfall, and a long restless night ensued for both men and beasts. Mooing and bawling the herd moved out earlier than usual the next morning. A cloud of dust followed among and behind the bawling steers as they plodded along. Their pace quickened—even among the stragglers—when just before noon the smell of water filtered through the gusts of wind into which they trod. Anyone un-



V. Preston Terrell in 1922 with Dude, one of the horses he rode on that west to east cattle trail. The dog did not make the trip.

familiar with cattle talk would have sworn that a herd of cows had been separated all night and morning from their young calves.

Sometimes the cattle on the drive were watered at some of the large ranches along the way. Once the men had to pump water for the herd. At another time or two, Lou remembers the herd being split into three herds, and each group was taken to three different ranches to be watered.

Allen Terrell believes that the bluestem grass near the Oklahoma border prompted his father to take the longer route.³ After all, autumn had already blown its icy breath over the vast prairies, shrinking even more the short Buffalo grass. More time spent grazing, meant less time on the trail for the herd.

While more ranches, fences, and settlements, tended to slow down the cattle drive, availability of groceries and supplies somewhat offset these hindrances. Lou Cook recalled that Joe McMann was sent on different occasions to purchase foodstuffs and other supplies. Allen has a vivid recollection of the large loaf of bread his father bought from a Mennonite farmer south of Meade.

Preston will never forget the single night that he had the comforts of home away from home. After the second straight day of rain, the men were drenched! Their blue-jeans and shirts clung to them in the crisp, cool air, especially after nightfall. Even their slickers were wet inside. Harry Terrell found a rancher where Preston could get his clothes dried. "And I got to stretch out in a bed and spend the night there," Preston said. Being the youngest on the trail had its compensations.

"I remember the morning when about fifty steers were missing," Preston remarked as we sat in the living room at Lou's ranch. "Yeah, and we didn't budge the herd an inch until them steers had been found," Lou added. Anticipating my next question, Preston explained that the steers were found in some "nester's" Kafir corn field.⁴ "I think Dad ended up paying about fifty dollars for what the cattle had eaten and the damage they had done."

Missing steers meant that counting the cattle had to be done regularly. Since cattle in a single file were impossible to arrange on the trail, an organized plan had to be devised to obtain an accurate head count.

To begin with, two men stationed themselves on their horses some twenty feet apart, near the lead steers of the herd. The other cowhands "heyed and hollered" from the rear and sides of the herd, urging the cattle forward. As the herd closed ranks, the two counters gradually moved closer together until only three to five steers could pass between them at a given time. The herd and riders together formed a funnel-like shape. The twisting and twining horses, steers scattered throughout the herd stopping momentarily to let a more dominant one by, the perpetual motion of legs, heads, and tails, and

the shouts and incessant chatter of the trail riders, made at times for only an imaginary funnel.

"I remember Dad would tie a knot in his saddle rope everytime he reached one hundred," Preston explained. "All he had to do when the cattle had passed by was to count the knots in the thirty-three foot rope, and remember to include the number left over after tying the last knot."

"Do you remember the prairie fire?" asked Preston of Lou. "Yeah. Joe let the campfire get out."

My mind went racing to the accounts I had heard about such fires traveling faster than horses could run.

"We soon got it out," Lou said. "We wet sacks and beat it out. The Buffalo grass was short, you know." "Some of the fellows used their chaps," chimed in Preston. "Hadn't one of the fellows used his saddle rope to beat out the fire?" I asked. Preston chuckled, "I got kidded about that for a long time."

I wondered if they had any trouble crossing the Cimarron River. "No. Old Joe just pulled his wagon out in the middle of it," Lou said. "Hell, there wasn't a drop of water in it. He made a fire and cooked dinner."

As Lou Cook and Preston Terrell recalled the happenings of that 1922 cattle drive, I tried to absorb every comment. What they considered routine seemed exciting to me.

In my imagination I saw one of the men taking his turn at the two hour "night herding" shift. Blackness prevailed. On this night he was utterly dependent upon his horse. Slowly the horse and rider continued to circle the herd. Sometimes the cowhand sang softly a familiar tune; sometimes he hummed. Then followed a period of whistling, interrupted by a shorter interval of quietness. From across the prairie to his left came again the howling wail of a coyote. Far to his right, almost out of hearing, came the yipping, yelping cries of the pack. The night herder patted his horse's neck and spoke words of assurance to him. Strange that it just now penetrated his consciousness, but his words were spoken more for himself than for his steed.

By the dim light of the banked campfire, his pocket watch indicated it was time to awaken his relief.

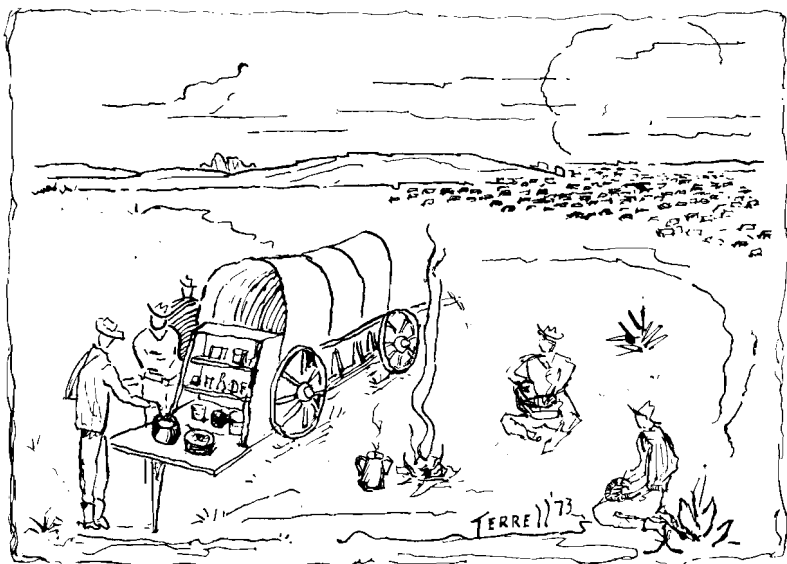
When Preston crawled from his bedroll and stepped over his brother, Allen, his bare heel came down upon the rowel of his spur. Absolutely sure his relief was awake, the tired drover slipped into his own bedroll.

An hour later, with the first signs of daybreak, there was some stirring among the two and three year old steers. Preston could see movement among the lumps that dotted the prairie. At every few steps taken by his cowpony, more lumps stood up. The young cowhand's sense of hearing told him what was happening. After all, he had been driving cattle since the age of eight.

From the far side of the herd, Preston saw a glimmer of light at the campsite. He knew that Joe McMann had replenished the fire in preparation for breakfast. Soon the grayness would be pushed from the prairies, and only the smoke from the coal could be seen as it traipsed upward and disappeared into the atmosphere.

With the aroma of bacon drifting along the dry- cool ground, the dark shadow-like figures near the campfire would begin to change shape. The dull sound of metal against heavy canvas would be heard as the tarpolans were unsnapped and each cowhand sat up not believing the night had passed. Sitting there on his bedroll of quilts protected from the ground by the "tarp," he would soon have his feet in his boots, the "tarp" and bedroll rolled and tied, and placed in the Chuck Wagon, and ready for breakfast. He knew Joe would have biscuits (baked in the Dutch oven) and gravy, and coffee to go with the bacon.

Immediately before breakfast, the horses staked out and used for "night herding" were set free to roam with the cattle. The other two horses each man had brought along had been hobbled all night—tied between the hoof and ankle, the pastern, with a sack. The horse that had worked the morning shift the day before would work it again today. Back and forth he would carry the weight of the saddle, the slicker tied behind it, the rope at the horn, and always the heavy weight of the one whose voice, touch, and shift of weight, he obeyed instantly. Fifty paces ahead; an about face and to the rear for half



Meal time on the prairie wasn't always so relaxing, but somewhere, at sometime, and somehow, the cowhands ate three times per day.

that many. Now a sharp left to nudge a steer wanting to rest; a canter to the right to unite a dozen white faces with the main herd. A complete pivot broken by a dancing backstep. Now standing like a statue—except for the heavy breathing—among the soapweeds (*Yuccas*). Still all that weight pressing down about the middle of his back.

And thus it went for horse and rider until the Chuck Wagon was seen ahead. Joe McMann needn't announce dinner. The men each grabbed a tin-pan, helped themselves to some beans, cornbread, and a steaming tincup of coffee. Some days they would have an apple to bite into as they caught the horses for the afternoon shift and freed their morning horses.

As the cattle grazed or moved along the trail to the yells and noises made by the men, Joe washed the utensils, put out the campfire, and prepared to leave. Harry Terrell had told him during the noon break approximately where they would make camp that night. Harry had ridden there that morning.

The team that pulled the Chuck Wagon moved along briskly. In a mile or two, Joe would overtake the drive and proceed to the campsite. Tonight he would stew some potatoes, fry some sowbelly, and bake some biscuits. He definitely would not have beans twice in the same day, again. He could still see Harry throwing out the beans that had been warmed up one time too many. For a moment Joe heard himself again angrily telling his boss, "If you want anything to eat, fix it yourself." Harry did just that. He treated the men to some flapjacks, over which they poured Karo syrup.

Fifty-one years later—June, 1973—Preston Terrell and Lou Cook sat at Lou's ranch recounting the events of that west to east cattle drive. Wondering if accounts about beans to eat had been exaggerated in songs and stories of such cattle drives, I asked Lou, "Did you have beans to eat on the trail?" "That was our main dessert," he answered, holding onto the word *main* about three times longer than he normally would. He joined us in our laughter. In response to my asking if the five dollars per day pay wasn't good wages for that time, Lou said, "Well, yeah," then hesitating for a moment, added, "but you might have to work all day and all night!"

By yesterday's standards or by today's riding the cattle trail was hard work. The cowhands were like the country doctor, or even more so, always on call. Hadn't Lou Cook told me that on rainy or stormy nights, he and Harry took their turns at night herding and doubled up to help the others. Along with the wearisome work of trailing cattle, the drovers needed patience and understanding. How far and how fast could the herd be pushed? Those "draggers" as Allen Terrell observed, held back the herd. "We could have made twenty miles per day, instead of eight to ten, if the 'draggers' and main herd could have kept up with the four or five 'lead' steers."

Allen was speaking of the open prairies, not the rough terrain north of Ashland. There in these mountain-like hills on Bluff Creek, the cattle drive ended. Under the circumstances, the tenseness at the end was understandable.

No, there was no gunfire. No guns were brought along. There was some display of temper fed by suspicion.

Imagine arriving at the 15,000 acre ranch and the buyer of the cattle not present to receive them! He had been notified two days before when to expect the cattte. His foreman wanted to wait until morning to make the count. Harry Terrell and his crew had been on the trail for about twenty-one days, watching and tending those steers night and day, almost minute by minute Harry was certain the drive consisted of 1066 cattle right then, the number he had contracted to deliver. In that rough terrain, and with daylight aplenty, he could see no point in holding up the count until morning.

As Lou Cook reminiscenced about that final episode of fifty-one years ago when the cattle were turned over to Daryl Swayze's foreman, his voice raised and some of the irritation he felt then flooded his being now. Less a few cuss words, here's how Lou reported that final scene:

"Can't you count?" I asked the foreman. "Well, what's the matter, then? Don't Swayze trust you to count? We're gonna count these cattle right now and turn them over to you!"

The count was made and amicably agreed upon.

Returning the Chuck Wagon and horses to Syracuse by the most direct route took about five days Lou Cook said. Altogether, the drive and trip back took "about twenty-six days."



Bluff Creek, twelve miles north of Ashland, Kansas, the site where the drive ended.

Preston and Allen Terrell boarded a local train in Ashland and caught the westbound Santa Fe in Dodge City for home. The wailing sound of the whistle reminded them of the loneliness so often felt riding "night herd." At that moment, the reminder was as close as they wanted to be to the trail.

In June of 1973 two strangers in Ashland surprised Preston and me with some information. We had inquired, if they or someone they knew, could tell us where the ranch was located that Daryl Swayze lived on in 1922. They gave us directions to the ranch and added that Daryl's body was found in the debris of his burned barn. Later that day one of the operators of the 15,000 acre B Bar Ranch, confirmed the information given by the strangers. Clarence Beckerdite said the incident took place in January, 1923. Beckerdite—after Preston said that he had helped drive some cattle to this ranch in the 1920's—named the year, 1922, and added: "Daryl wintered them cattle up by me. I lived six miles north of here then."

Events and circumstances, long in the making, deemed this to be the last of the big cattle drives. The Kansas Herd Law that made cattlemen liable for their cattle crept westward county by county. More land was fenced. Ranchers learned that the soil would produce wheat. Tractors came and more and more of the Buffalo grass gave way to waving fields of grain.³ Thus the four men and two boys witnessed two eras during the third decade of this Century: the ending of the big cattle drives, and the borning of wheat as an important crop to southwestern Kansas.

FOOTNOTES

1. Lou Cook died in October, 1974, after this article was written.
2. Eighty-two year old Mrs. Esther (Grantham) Kearney, Big Bow, Kansas (June 13, 1973), said that there was no town of Big Bow in 1922, the year the railroad came to Johnson. She recalled Henry Labaugh from near Coolidge stopping with a herd of cattle and staying two nights with her father, Richard Grantham, when he and the family lived four miles south of present day Big Bow. To her knowledge, no big cattle drives took place in that part of Kansas after 1922.
3. Information from Allen Terrell, Wichita, Kansas, was obtained when he was visiting his brother, Preston, in Kansas City, May, 1973.
4. "Nesters" originally referred to the settlers who fenced their 160 acre homesteads or government claims, as well as to those who had no legal right—squatters—to the land they lived on. To those on this late cattle drive in 1922, the term was a carry-over, and included any small tract of land, fenced and farmed, set amidst ranches having many hundred or thousands of acres in them.
5. Fred Raney (b. 1894), Syracuse, Kansas, told me June 12, 1973, that in his home county of Stanton, 1926 was the year when many farmers learned that the land would grow good wheat.