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S. Omar Barker

COWPEN OUTFIT

The idea seems to be pretty widespread that everything in the early-day West of sixty to ninety years ago was either wide open range, big ranches, trail herds, twice-gun shoot-bangers, honkytonk towns, gold mines or nesters plowing up grass. Not so! There were also a heap of men who, like my own Pa, helped pioneer the West simply by seeking a home and a living for their families. Their main equipment included courage, hardihood, sweat, calluses, a rugged love of freedom, and more often than not a day-by-day-and-twice-on-Sundays Christianity. Most of them also had a habit of minding very little of the other fellow's business unless requested.

My father, Squire Leander Barker, came to New Mexico mountain country in the eighties. He was a Virginia-raised mountaineer, preacher, axman, hunter and farmer. Since he always managed to raise a few more cattle than kids, I reckon he was also a cowman. Priscilla Jane McGuire Barker came with him to be a pioneer mother of eleven, including me. And she helped with the cattle, too.

Cattle in the SLB brand, all colors and originally Texas-bred, never did tally over a hundred and fifty head at any one time. That made ours what big-outfit cowboys called a "cowpen outfit." Some of those old rawhide cowhands would have laughed at the way we cow-worked that little bunch of wildish hornies along the willow-clumped meadows of Beaver Creek, in thickets of aspen and scrub oak, in tall timber, on mountain trails and trailless mountains.

Whenever we wanted to gather cattle for branding, to cut out a fat steer to butcher, pick out a likely cow for milk or for any other reason, we didn't ride circle to round them up as sure 'nough cowboys did. Nossir! We "swooked" them!

Here is how it worked: Range cattle, especially on sweet mountain grass, get hungry for salt. Instead of leaving salt out for them to lick whenever they wanted it, from time to time we hand-salted them. That is, we called the cattle to a meadow or other gathering spot, then put handfuls of coarse salt on the ground for them to lick. If

they didn't come when called they got no salt. Cow-critters are reputed to be pretty dumb, but you'd be surprised how quick they learned.

Calling the cattle was Pa's specialty. As nearly as I can spell out this cattle call, it was Swook! SWOO-OO-LOOK!—a long drawn-out, sonorous crescendo, delivered with a wide open throttle. Maybe it was Pa's vocal development from singing beloved old hymns; maybe it was just a mountaineer's natural vocal vigor brought with him all the way from his native Blue Ridge Mountains. However he got it, my father had the farthest carrying cattle call that ever brought an old lady longhorn high-tailing out of the timber. His "swooking" would bring the SLB cattle racing down the mountain from as far as they could hear him, sometimes as much as three miles away in that clear mountain air. Ma and us kids might use the same call, but none of us could ever match the Old Man for distance and fetching power.

Our summer range was too far away beyond a big mountain for calling the cattle all the way in to the ranch. The call served to gather them at some meadow on Beaver Creek, then we drove them over the mountain to the ranch whenever there was a need. But even on the drive someone always rode ahead on the trail with a bait of loose salt to dribble out while "swooking" the leaders up the trail. This made the job of shoving a bunch of wildish, woods-wise cattle over steep trails through timber and brush a mighty lot easier.

The cattle loved their summer range, a rugged spanch of canyon and mountain. In the spring old cows always seemed to know just when grass would be greening on Lone Tree Mesa and Beaver Creek and would take out over the mountain of their own accord. If a summer milk cow ever happened to get out with her calf, she wasted no time high-tailing it for that wild, green cow-paradise over the mountain.

We wintered the cattle in the hay meadows and stubble fields of the ranch, for forage in the Beaver Creek country lay blanketed under snow. But there was one beautiful, golden-yellow, linebacked cow that always wintered, with her that-year's calf, out on the range. Though she would come for salt, she never could be driven in to the ranch. One of our thrills each spring was to see that Old Sheba had made it. Then one October Pa decided not to risk letting her rustle through another winter. Regretfully he shot and butchered her out on the range, packing in the meat and hide on horses. I shall never forget how sad we all felt the next spring not to see Sheba's golden-

yellow, high-headed figure poised against a background of white aspen trunks, ready to vanish like a deer at the first suspected threat to her freedom.

Those were the days, it seems to me, when cattle were more like people and people not so much like cattle. Wild or tame, every SLB critter had a name, and to us, a distinct personality. We named the bulls Old Harvey, Old Robinson, and so on, after the ranchmen from whom they were bought. We kids liked to name heifer calves Madeline, Cornelia, Adelaide and the like, after favorite school teachers or neighbor girls. Sometimes we disrespectfully named steers after our sisters' beaux.

At one time or another we also had critters geographically named Spain, Cuba, Michigan, Texas, Alabama, Oswego, Dallas and Atlanta. Ivanhoe, Rupert, Lorna Doone, Sidney, Hester Prynne, Evangeline and others lived out whatever bovine span was allotted them without ever knowing they bore the names of famous characters in fiction. And of course there had to be a Darling Clementine!

Barker cow-ranching was not in the traditional big-ranch and open-range style of the Old West. Our little cow-work up in the tall timber was pretty tame compared to the big Texas roundups and trail drives. But looking back on it now after all these years, I can't think of any way I would rather have grown up than in Pa's "cowpen outfit" far up in the New Mexico mountains.