

## back in the saddle

A former rancher rediscovers her inner cowgirl during a long ago, but not forgotten, Elko-area cattle drive.

STORY & PHOTOS  
BY EDDY ANCINAS

**B**uck swung up onto his palomino mare with an ease I envied. As his toe searched for a stirrup, his horse reared up, frightening the horses and riders milling about the corral in anticipation of our first day of a four-day cattle drive that would end at the Elko County Fairgrounds. Buck slapped his mare's rump, raising one arm in the air, as they bucked and crow-hopped across the road.

"Ride 'em, Buck!" the cowboys yelled.

We rode out into open range, reining our horses around unyielding bushes and moving back and forth behind the herd. While the cows plodded along in a self-created dust cloud, I wondered who, but a paying dude, would drive cattle in July? Five people could move this herd as easily as the 25 of us. When a stray calf ventured away from the herd, 10 cowboys brought it back. Why, then, was I having so much fun?

Five months earlier, at Elko's annual National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, I picked up a brochure announcing the Silver State Stampede Association Trail Drive—a cattle drive that ended on July 17, my son René's 33rd birthday. I grew up on a ranch

in California, and René had ridden since childhood. We both missed owning horses and the roundups at my father's ranch—the company of cowboys.

When René was 10, we joined my father and neighboring ranchers on a four-day cattle drive, gathering a thousand head in the high Sierra Nevada, driving them down in a river of brown backs to the cutting pens, where they were separated by their respective owners. I still remember

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vividly the "yips" and "yee-aws" of the cowboys, the slap of reins on chaps, bulls fighting—pawing, moaning, running at one another, locking horns. Those were the sights and sounds of my life until the ranch was sold. Horses, frustration, fear, courage, risk, and achievement shaped our lives. This birthday present would be for both of us.

In mid-July, our boots and saddles pol-

ished, we landed in Elko. Tana Gallagher, whose husband, Mike, had organized this event as a fundraiser for the Elko Rodeo, met us at the airport with her dad, Buck. "This is Eddy and her son, René," Tana introduced us. Buck stretched out his hand, hesitating. "Ain't you got yer names switched?" he asked.

We drove 30 miles north to a flat area surrounded by corrals, cattle pens, chutes,

a rusting red squeeze, trucks, and wagons. Two tents with corresponding signs—"Buckaroos" and "Cowgirls"—were set up for us to store our bedrolls in. At 1 p.m., Dorsey Munson, handlebar mustache waxed and curled in equal swoops, set up his "Cowboy Bar," defined by him as one without napkins.

Eager to dispel any suspicion we might be "dudes," we told Dorsey about our past

riding experience. He listened politely, then took René aside and said, "Son, I gotta tell ya somethin'. Your hat's on backwards."

René switched it around. "S---. There went my cowboy image," he mumbled.

By 5 p.m., guests and cowboys had gathered at the bar under the Jack Daniels banner. "I been cookin' since the army," Freddy said, as he lit the coals under the

Participants of the 1998 Silver State Stampede Association Trail Drive move cattle down to Elko as the Ruby Mountains loom in the distance.



wide open

beer and whiskey into outstretched cups. I asked for a glass of red wine, and Hank dispensed it from a carton into a Jack Daniels cup. "We's civilized out here, ma'am," he said.

"Yep," Dorsey agreed. "Did'ja know Elko's the only place in the U.S. where you can buy moustache wax in a vending machine?" Nobody knew that.

"I'm a sheep man," Hank declared. "An' we're an endangered species. I was born on the reservation. Had to fight all 'em kids, 'cause I weren't dark enough for some or pale enough for others."

At 10 p.m., René and I crawled into our sleeping bags under a canopy of twinkling stars. The last sound I heard was the slam of the outhouse door and the clink of spurs, as the last cowboy made his way to his bedroll.

At 6 a.m., I awoke to sounds of horses snickering, pots clanging, and cattle lowing in the corral. I pulled on my boots and stumbled to the washbasins behind a truck. That was the only time I saw a cowboy with his hat off.

René and I rode with Buck and the other riders into the sage-covered hills, on alert—actually hoping—for a stray to run after. After a few hours, we stopped at a watering hole, watching and chatting while the cattle sucked muddy water through grass-stained teeth. I could see the chuck wagons rolling along in the distance like a mirage.

We arrived at camp in the mid-afternoon heat, hot, thirsty, and hungry. After lunch, with no shade in sight, we stretched out under truck axles and trailers. There was no relief until 5 p.m., when the sun slanted across the desert, and a light breeze fluttered the camouflage strips above the bar.

After supper, we joined Don Farmer in some old cowboy favorites. I remembered all the words. Dorsey and Sheep-man Hank recited cowboy poetry between songs. A drawing was announced for a pair of chinks—Nevada-style chaps, cut shorter for riding through low brush. Soft suede, long fringe, "Silver State Stampede" hand-tooled down the side...René licked



Riders and cattle leave Lone Mountain Station, about 30 miles north of Elko, on day one. Opposite page: Evening entertainment is a major part of the social scene of any cattle drive, as cowboys and cowgirls wind down from a hard day's work.

his lips. "Man, I'd love to win those," he said, echoing the thoughts of the other cowboys and guests, including myself.

I went off to photograph the fading sunlight washing over saddles slung along the top rail of a fence. Horses pulled hay from broken bales as the sun sank into the West. When I returned to the camp, René had the chinks in his lap and a triumphant grin on his face. "I won them, Mom. Can

you believe it?" Four cowboys helped René try them on.

Dorsey chimed in. "Ain't no way this kid's gonna leave here with them chinks. All we gotta do is get him off the sissy soddy pop 'n' onto somethin' stronger. Hank! Shoot him some of that Jack Daniels."

The following day, we rode into camp at 2 p.m. I pulled my saddle off and hoisted it onto a fence rail, removed the bridle, and

walked stiff-legged to the truck, where I filled a basin with water and poured it over my head. I drank four bottles of water, ate two turkey sandwiches, and sat in a chair to wait for a breeze. It was 110 degrees.

That night three cowboy singers drove out from Elko to entertain us with songs they had written about loneliness, tough fathers, bad horses, and their love of the land.

I asked Teddy, a rancher with a round red Santa face and watermelon belly, if he knew my favorite song, "Lovesick Blues."

"Hey, what's yer name, gal," he asked, beckoning to Freddy to come over from his kitchen. "Well this here's the Freddy, Teddy, and Eddy show," he announced, and together we lamented our lost love: *I gotta feelin' kinda blue, oo oo, oh Lawd (slight growl).*

"Hey, Freddy, can ya dance?" asked a woman, rocking and swaying to the rhythm.

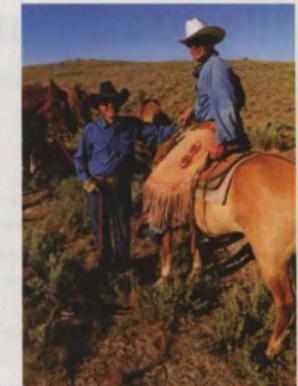
"Ma'am, you ain't seen nothin'," he replied. "When I dance, I'm a cat in a pig suit."

Hank filled the outstretched cups. His audience, one boot on the bar rail, leaned into their laughter, as his sheep-dip stories got ranker. I followed René reluctantly to our sleeping bags. Waves of laughter rolled like tumbleweed across the dry ground and into the night.

The following morning, with hangovers and clean shirts, the cowboys kidded one another, as we moved the cattle down a grassy canyon into a valley that felt like a furnace. Mike's eight-year-old son joined us for the day. Polite, confident, and never cocky, he swung his rope above two small heifers and sat his horse like he would the rest of his life. When he roped a calf, Mike encouraged him: "Good goin' son. Hold 'er tight. Now ease 'er up. Let 'er go. Good work." The other cowboys expressed their approval.

On our final morning, we rounded up the cattle and drove them into Elko, over a few lawns, under the freeway, and into the fairgrounds. The mayor rode with us, and town folk came out to wave.

That night, with hats on straight, scarves tied "Nevada style" (wrap around back, tie in front), we followed our herd into the arena for the opening of the Silver State Stampede Rodeo. This cowgirl was back in the saddle again.



Don Farmer admires the author's son René's chinks—Nevada-style chaps—that he won in a drawing on the cattle drive.

#### NEVADA CATTLE DRIVES

Although the cattle drive in the story no longer takes place, there are still a few available in Nevada for the wanna-be rustler who wants to prove his or her western mettle.

##### Hunewill Ranch Cattle Drive

November 7-13, 2010  
Bridgeport, California to Smith Valley  
hunewillranch.com  
760-932-7710

##### Reno Rodeo Cattle Drive

June 2011  
Northern Nevada, ends in Reno  
renorodeo.com  
775-329-3877

\*Read Associate Editor Charlie Johnston's account of the 2009 Reno Rodeo Cattle Drive on nevadamagazine.com.

##### Cottonwood Guest Ranch Horse/Cattle Drive

Visit website or call for 2011 dates  
Northeastern Nevada, ends at ranch near Wells  
cottonwoodguesranch.com  
888-269-2022

#### NEVADA ONLINE

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Nevada Magazine Writers' Contest  
stories at nevadamagazine.com.

