



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

The Last Gather

The last time I gathered cattle for my grandfather — the last time anyone did — he assembled a crew of grizzled old brush-poppers and young buckaroos and promised to put on a big feed for the help. Times were changing, and he was bowing out of the cattle business. The buckaroos came dragging in from eastern California and the Nevada desert to help bring in the herd one last time.

He didn't have much room, and so we bunked wherever there was space to throw a bedroll, and in the morning we trotted out in the flat cold before sunrise. We rode large circles and gathered the cattle up bawling out of the miles of empty sagebrush country, and then began the long push back to the home ranch. We drove the herd off the desert, then along Highway 6 to the top of Montgomery Pass, Nevada, elevation 7,167 feet, where there was a truck-stop and casino called Soper's.

Soper's was a dump, and like many desert juke joints had started falling down the day they called it built, but they had a blackjack table and a decent cook, and it was the only thing going for 60 miles in either direction.

At the top of the pass we let the cattle rest and mother-up in the generous gravel parking lot, sitting our horses in the spitting snow, hands going numb, the temperature diving rapidly. Occasionally a car would drive slowly up from the east, the occupants wide-eyed at the milling Western spectacle they had suddenly encountered in the middle of nowhere. They stared at us through the glass, driving slowly through the herd with their mouths open, as though we were exotics in a living history museum.

When the cattle had settled down the ladies who worked at Soper's — and most held second jobs farther up the road at Janey's Ranch, say, or at the Shady Lady — brought out trays of margaritas. My grandfather, who wasn't riding much by then, and followed the drive in his ruined truck, cut lime wedges with his pocket-knife and lined them up on the tailgate. One by one we would leave the cows, ride over, pick up a wedge of lime, and then down a strong margarita offered up by the girls. It was heat enough for the final push down the west side of the pass and onto the great alluvial valley, where the corral gates were open, and stew was waiting on the stove.

I don't remember much about the second half of the gather. Wind and snow. Frozen feet and hands. My horsehair mecate hard as a steel cable in the cold and wet.

I couldn't know it then, but I certainly do now, that I was learning something on that last gather, about endurance, about grace, about the passage of time. I would give most that I have to ride that circle again.

By dark we had assembled again at the house, cowboys old and new, bachelors or widowers all, hot stew and French bread in a tight, warm kitchen, the smell of wet horse-hair and wet leather and denim, creaky chairs on a ruined floor, and the satisfaction of a well-earned fatigue.

We ate. The weather outside got worse. The storm set in for real and nobody said much as the windows fogged up, the quiet energy of the snowstorm pressing down from Boundary Peak.

A sudden gust of wind blew a confetti of snow at the windows, and something scooted noisily off the porch outside. Everyone turned and looked at the door but nobody moved.

My grandfather sat in the living room with one old cowboy or another, in the buttery light, all of them mostly deaf, pretending they understood each other.

Finally, in the kitchen, one of the old guys broke the silence. He said, apropos of nothing at all, or maybe it was everything: "One time, years ago, I was down in Bracketville, Texas." We all looked up from our food. "It was hotter than the hinges of hell, I can tell you. I was driving along, minding my business, when I looked over in the bar ditch and saw a coyote chasing a rabbit through the brush." He paused long enough to swab some portion of his plate with a piece of bread. "Thing is," he said, "It was so damn hot they were both walking."

It's the only thing I remember anyone saying that evening. An era was ending. We were tired. Maybe that's just all there was to say.

My grandfather has passed on, and the ranch is now somebody else's hard-scrabble dream. Soper's isn't there anymore either, but I have a \$2 chip from the blackjack table, my lucky starter, nailed to a post in our barn. Scoured by wind and weather, and at least one fire, the old casino sits at the top of the pass in shambles, tumbleweeds skating around the lot and piling up in the lee of the old front door.

But the way my mind works, I think about that last gather, about the ladies and the cows and my granddad slicing limes, and how the ruin of Soper's sits there like the remains of some glorious outpost on the old Silk Road, sacked when the golden horde of time suddenly appeared on the horizon, storming its way to the promised lands.

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