

I grew up on the other side of nowhere. Social distancing was an art form 70 years ago. The only fresh faces you saw were the new hired men. Most were still trying to choke down WWII or Korea. Some were even hiding from a sordid past and would evaporate into the shadows when a strange vehicle entered the yard.

As a small boy your mentors were the key men who had worked at the Island Ranch for years. The buckaroo boss, the ranch foreman, and the mechanic were all held up a little higher than the chore boy and the derelict who sat next to you at the table who couldn't control his DT's shaking him at the dinner table.

The visitors would make an indelible mark on you as they seemed few and far between. When Doc Minor the local vet showed up he vaccinated the heifers for brucellosis or carved up a calf too large to fit through the birth canal or put an animal down that had no chance of recovery.

The one thing that made every ranch kid want to be a vet was the fact he had a nice pickup and was held in high esteem by the family and when you found the milk cow down in the willows with a new calf and Grandma fired up the crank phone, here he came. He would be armed with a large bottle of elixir and a tube with a large needle. The Holstein would be near comatose when Doc hits her in the jugger and the next thing you know she is standing up and the new calf is filling its belly with colostrum. You are pretty sure the vet can also walk on water.

There is another annual group of visitors that one could never forget and those were the order buyers. Today video sales have put these boys on the shelf with the buggy whip and the Studebaker wagon. Back in the late '70s, Jim Davis and Mike McCullough were trying to fire up video and it was never going to happen. Well, it did and now with everybody thinking a Coronary virus is chasing them it's a cinch that video will cover a lot more than just livestock.

The colorful fellows who I am making reference to were like the Fuller Brush man or the Hoover vacuum cleaner salesmen of city lore. They were peddling bull but actually

BUCKAROO STEW

Cow Trader

Peddling bull in brush country.

By Hank Vogler



Order buyers wore a sport coat over a Winnemucca tuxedo—white shirt and Levis. They drove a Cadillac and smoked a big cigar. Dinnertime was the guaranteed time of arrival. Most were packing a large bay window that drooped over the belt buckle that said they won third money at a goat roping in 1951.

they wanted to buy something. Yes, as Jim Quinlan in his Irish brogue would say: "I like those cattle. I'll buy those cattle." You could always tell where he had been as everyone was trying to imitate his Irish.

Along about September the parade would start. They all seemed to shop at the same haberdashery: a large white Stetson hat, quill-out ostrich-skin boots with pointy toes. Jim Hutchinson, the buckaroo boss, would point these boots out as twinkle-toe boots and a guaranteed wreck if you were bucked off as the toes pointed up and easily could hang you up in the stirrups. Jim's advice was always round-toed boots with a high heel...Bluchers, if your budget was flush.

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Most would eat as if they were starving. One reason for sure if you knew Granddad's legend, you had better eat. Granddad ate with the men and food was plentiful but simple. More than once I saw him give his test. You better break bread with the crew because if you were too good to share a meal you weren't going to do any business with him. Even having a cup of coffee and a slice of canned fruit pie would get you a pass but abstinence would get a door slammed in your face when he went to his house. Game, set, match.

After dinner, on the way to his house a large pinch of peerless tobacco would start the song-and-dance routine. When Granddad spit it looked very much like a fresh cow pie. My grandparents combined the skills of the son of a German immigrant with an eighth-grade education and an Indian squaw who could read and write and do math. He had traded her father a horse for her hand in marriage as the family legend went.

The cow trader would enter the house with the complimentary bottle of high-dollar whiskey, usually Crown Royal. Grandma would pour the drinks and then take the

bottle to the pantry shelf. Over the years the pantry shelf looked like a liquor store, as it seemed to be added to but never taken from. Each bottle was missing a couple of slugs and the remainder to wait for the end of time?

Then the first soliloquy of the Shakespeare performance would begin, a long pontification of how the would-be buyer was Granddad's best friend and he was here to help the earth to continue rotating and the cutbacks would be few and the deal would be as smooth as a baby's bottom. The money was good and if he would accept his draft for the calves, Mother Earth would be at one with herself. The buyer would elaborate on how tough the market was and how he was getting little or no commission for his work, it was more of a courtesy to Granddad's family.

I was always amazed by this pontification. Bracey Neil was very colorful with his speech. He would say, "This deal is like wiping your backside with a rope—no end to it."

Bracey was a huge man. Maybe six foot five, lots of gold teeth and his hands looked like full hams with bananas sticking out of the hams. When I was young and dumb it seemed so wonderful that he could get 19 cents a pound today but by tomorrow the bid would be a dime. What a great guy! Telephones were the modern invention of the day and the ranch number on the crank phone was two long and a short. The next issue to use it was to get all the neighbors to hang up as it weakened the signal. The phone was very unproductive and I never knew how that final decision was made but at some point the nuptial was consummated.

Over the years a clearer picture was painted of what could and sometimes did happen. First lesson was *no drafts*. This was a sort of check that when the trader got someone hooked on, on the other end, the funds would be available and the draft would be good, sometimes a couple of months could pass. This was an interest-free loan and sometimes gave the fairly honest trader time to play the market or get a larger commission if the market was going up.

Checks were scary if you didn't know the trader as a check could bounce up and take an eye out and the cattle could be in a no-brand state east of the Mississippi with 10 different farmer feeders who would all dummy up about where the cattle came from. If the market indeed was falling below the agreed price, the trader would be late to the scales, the cattle would be sorted hard and shrunk up by the time they crossed the scales. Whip and slash would now put his giant cigar on the end of the balance beam to lighten the weights.

In those days you sold Hereford, Angus, or shorthorn. The farmer feeders insisted and crossbreds went at a dime discount. Northern states called for blood-red Herefords, and Texas Herefords needed a feather neck and an almost yellow color. Never knew there was much difference with the hide off. If Fast Freddy was on the wrong side of the trade he might have to avoid telephones to recover his error in judgment or start trading in a different venue. Really and truly, it all boils down to trust.

Hang and Rattle. ■

Hank Vogler's grandfather traded a horse for his Native American wife. "The Gipson Indians were hardworking and prosperous. My mom was part Seminole. My uncle Bill said we have never signed a peace treaty. Thus my hard-headed stubborn attitude."