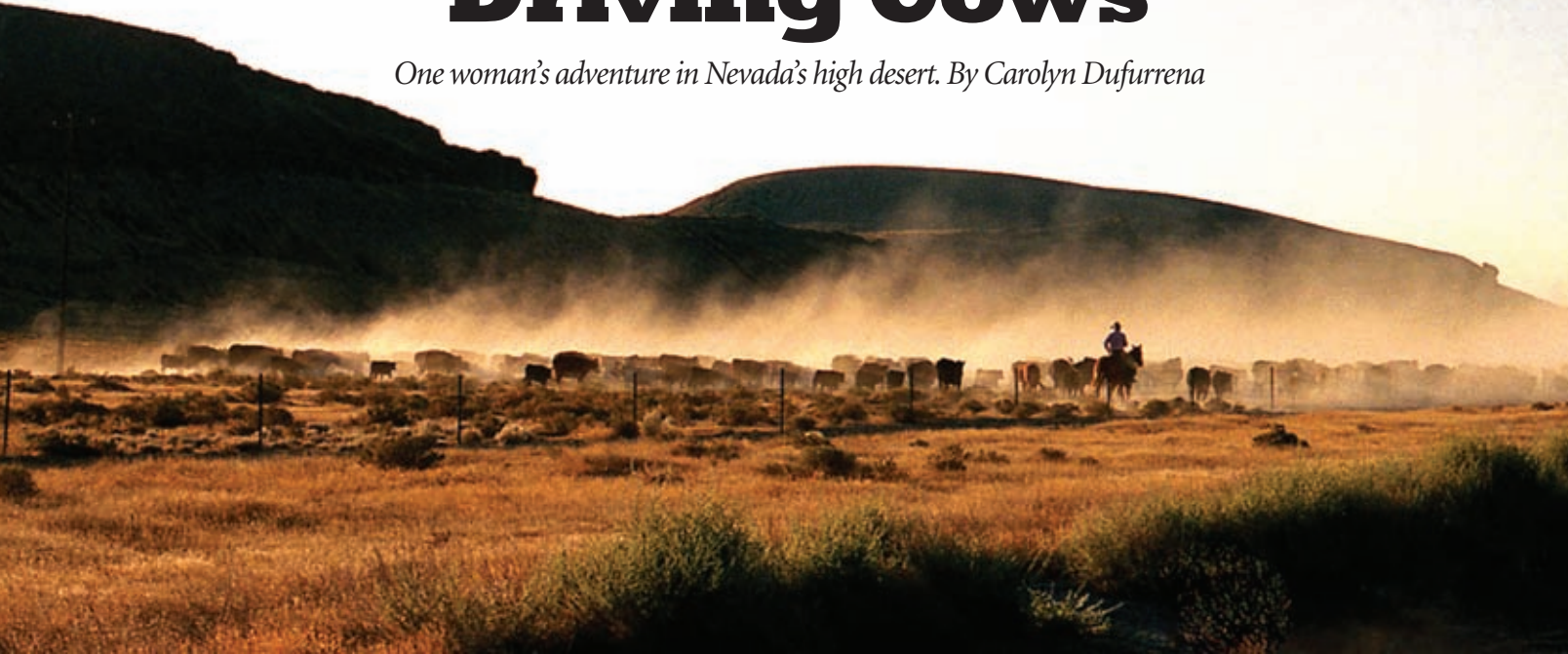


Driving Cows

One woman's adventure in Nevada's high desert. By Carolyn Dufurrena



The season's journey takes the cattle north, away from the river into the high country where there are no roads; they follow the greening of the bunch grass as they move steadily into the upper elevations. The allotment fence keeps the lazy ones from coming back to the flat, from drifting back into their comfortable winter pasture. It won't be so pleasant in July down there. It also gives the lower country a full growing season to recover from their passage; the grass will go to seed and be dormant by the time these cattle pass through in the fall.

This range of mountains is not wide, roughly 15 miles. Thirty million years ago, low andesite shield volcanoes spread their purplish flows across these miles; later, more violent eruptions of viscous ash flow and thin layers of basalt buried them. The whole volcanic mass sliced and slid, so that now parallel layers of basalt, tuff, and rhyolite repeat along the ridge-and-valley structure, long snakes of white and red and black that slither along ridge and canyon, rising gradually to the north like the ribboned back of a striated beast. It is steep, rocky, raw country.

Springs rise in the heads of these canyons. Water runs along the buried surfaces of the tilted flows, carried to the lower benches hidden from the sun's heat, to emerge and pool at the turning of a canyon. Cattle, horses, deer, chukkar gather at the tiny oases. Coy-

otes den nearby, where they can take advantage. Sage grows taller in these crannies. Wild roses bloom. Above, golden sunflowers cape the dark ridges; paintbrush, lupine, phlox grow low.

The fence crosses the mountain roughly east to west. Like a bracelet on a long arm it separates the elevations of winter and spring from the upper valleys of summer. We start the gathering in the lower canyons. Like raking leaves in your yard, we work the farthest edges of the low country, pushing the cattle toward a central point. Every cow and calf passes through the gate into summer.

The first day of the ride, we reach the corral at gray daylight, quietly saddle up. The cattle slip away into the canyon ahead of us like ghosts; we ride single file between steep black walls. Two by two the riders peel off up side canyons, until only Louie, our adopted Basco grandfather, and I are left, each riding on opposite sides of the creek's main fork. The walls of the canyon are so steep that Louie can see the animals above me on my side, and I can see the ones above him. We talk softly back and forth.

Louie motions. "There's a few up there," he says, pointing with his chin. I start up the steep, loose-rocked slope, zigzag. The bay horse, Charlie, is young, energetic. He loves to chase cows. I don't know this yet, but I am about to find out.

I make a mistake, cut across the sidehill too soon, and I don't get high enough to come out above and behind the pairs on the hill. Two or three is what I see, but that may not be all of them. When they see me, we are eye to eye across the hill. They arrow off ahead of me, contouring the steep slope. Damn. I keep climbing, but there's not much choice in the way of trail.

The horse takes a few lunges straight up the hill, a little canter on a suggestion of trail between jagged rocks. There is nothing but the humid gray air on my right. The part of my brain in charge of my survival comments on my behavior, "Well, that's pretty western," using the private derogatory for outsiders who think they know how to operate here.

I overshoot the pairs; directly below me they split, two pair cutting back, two staying on the trail ahead. I circle back until I see Louie, watching from below, anticipating my screwup, backtracking, starting up the steep draw to cut them off. I leave then, take off through the rocks after the ones still ahead of me. That's when I hear the hollering from across the gorge. Tim, off his horse, on the skyline, waving that big black hat. His words float to me across the misty distance. "God-dammit to hell, get down offa there...go back...dammit."

I rein in, chastised, and come at a walk in 20 yards to the ragged edge of a black



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I can see something you can't."

Use common sense. Pay attention. Look at everything, the whole picture, not just what's in front of you. Then just go again the next day.

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Helen "Toadie" Stinson taught me to make cowboy coffee. Crack an egg into the boiling pot to neutralize the acid, pour a cup of cold water in at the last to settle the grounds. She grew up in the Sandhills of Nebraska, the first ranchwoman I ever met. I worked for her in Ladies' Foundations in her mom-and-pop clothing store. She was the mother of my high school sweetheart, but also, when I moved to that small town in Nebraska my senior year, my mentor, my confidante. She would say, from behind a cup of that coffee in the break room at the store, the smoke of a Salem curling through the air, "Life is very daily."

I thought she was just talking about keeping track of inventory in Ladies' Foundations.

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The next day smells like rain; we clamber into the pickup at 3 a.m. We catch horses in the dark at Texas Spring—Tim, our teenage son Sam, Tim's brother Hank and his two kids, and Louie. The horses are eager to go in the predawn chill, stomping in anticipation. Louie looks at Sam, who will ride Chief, Tim's big sorrel Appaloosa, the long-circle horse, the one that would do anything you asked of him. "You're mounted today, boy," he grins.

Sam grins back and grunts as he swings a leg over. "It's a ways up here, anyway."

A long fast trot up a dirt road, then a

well-marked trail through tall sagebrush, then a not-so-obvious trail over rock and hardscrabble, then no trail at all, the only sounds the creak of saddle leather in the dark, the chink of spurs, the huffing of horses, occasional clink of steel on stone as hoof strikes spark. Riders peel off in pairs and threes up the forks of the creek, hooves thumping quietly.

Tim takes one group north; Louie leads the rest of us south. We pause at the highest fork of the creek. He looks at me. "You rode this last year, didn't you?" "Mmmm," I nod, noncommittally, looking around. The light is pretty dim, and there are no landmarks. Louie shifts his attention. "Remember the little meadow up there on top?" he asks Sam. Sam remembers. "Well, you guys spread out in there. Kick everything over the top that wants to go this way, and gather the rest. We'll meet you up there in that meadow. You'll see us. And Tim'll see you."

Sam takes Chief up the west ridge. I stay in the bottom. I slow down this time, letting him get ahead of me in case cattle cut back behind him. Wait and listen for cows bellowing to each other, or until a rider shows himself ahead of you half a mile, trailing half a dozen red backs across the ridgeline. For a long time, I don't see anybody.

Toadie called me a quick study, but I'm wondering whether that's really true. I have a good visual memory, and a poor auditory one. I take notes. I make maps to understand where I am in my world. Ladies' Foundations was a piece of cake, fitting things into spaces, ironclad brassieres into plastic boxes, boxes into size compartments. This is a new kind of

precipice that makes the bottoms of my feet tingle. The cattle have found a way down off this thing, but I can't see how. Sheepish, I pick my slow way back along the trail to the bottom. Louie's halfway up the other side, gathering a bunch, letting me settle my embarrassment by myself. A quarter mile up the main canyon I round a bend, and see what Tim saw, the fall I would have taken in just a few more moments. My God, I think.

I watch from the bottom of the canyon as Louie picks his slow, careful way through the basalt crags. The cattle clatter ahead of us on another invisible trail. He has worked his way just above them; they think they're getting away if they sneak down onto the trail. When he is back at the bottom of the canyon, another half mile or so up the way, I apologize. He says, more gently than he needs to, "Well, I picked 'em up." What about the others that had been ahead of me on the black cliff? "They're still ahead of you, on the trail." There was really no place else for them to go.

We follow backs and swishing tails, red, black, butterscotch, caramel, through groves of baby aspens, clumps of chokecherry, thistle. I look for Tim above us, but he has disappeared in the gray morning. Later, his direct gaze shows me several different emotions, but all he says is, "You would never have made it down that slope, and neither would your horse. If I tell you to go back, it's because



The Pine Forest Range looking across the valley and dry lake toward the Pecos. OPPOSITE: Quinn River Ranch crew moves cattle back to the home ranch after spending the summer in the high country.

perception, feeling with all my senses in the vast space around me for the people who are part of this day, this gathering of animals across hillside and canyon, all headed someplace they cannot see, but know.

Snaking up the draw, my horse picks his way through layers of basalt; I hear the cattle clacking stones ahead of me around a bend in the canyon. I have to learn to trust that even when I can't see, they're there; not to rush, not to panic. The clues I hear, the birds that start up ahead of me, are proof enough of what's happening.

The line of light from the rising sun hits the ridge above. I see Sam and Chief, his big sorrel and white haunches glowing like fire in the sun. I barely hear Tim's whistle; Sam turns and looks back. His father is on the highest rim a little way behind. Watching our progress. Sam reins in, backtracks along the skyline. They sit just a bit on that ridge in the sunlight, heads turned toward each other. Then Sam nods, points his sorrel north through the rimrock a thousand feet above me. Tim allows himself to watch his son a moment longer, turns off and disappears from my view. In a moment, I am alone again, in this landscape that looks like no human has ever touched it.

We all converge somehow on the same meadow; cattle file through the gate, calves kicking and playing, cowboys appearing over the ridges and up from draws, pushing everything through into the basins of summer.

This day has gone well, but there are other days that don't.

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Antelope Valley is not really a valley, but a piece of foothill country that flanks the mountain like the wide collar on a school-girl's dress. Under the fabric, her collarbone is the structural hinge of the Continental Divide. Down her back the rain slides north into the Columbia River watershed. Down her chest rain runs into the Great Basin. At the point of her left shoulder is the little buckaroo camp we call Wilder; her outstretched arm points into the high country of summer. About 200 head of cattle spend the eight weeks of early turnout season in Antelope. In July we gather them and move them across the highway into their late-summer pasture.

Antelope is full of little nooks and cran- nies, green meadows rising through rose- bushes to granite crags. Purples rust into yellow; old homesteads hide down in the draws near secret springs. Most of the ranges

in Nevada break east and west: shadows in the canyons define a geography that becomes familiar. In Antelope, the land breaks north and south. The same light conceals what it defines in other places.

When we pull the trailer up to the wire gate, shapes of animals barely emerge from darkness. I expect Tim to drop Sam and me off at this lower fence, and we will gather cows and calves across Antelope. I imagine he and Steve will drive around, park the truck and trailer and meet us at the opposite fence, eight miles away.

Without a word, plans for the day change. Or perhaps I have imagined things incorrec- tly. Steve unloads and cinches up. He and Sam wait politely while I get ready. There is, of course, no conversation. Steve goes around the few animals that hang by the fence and they obediently set off down the road. I drop back a little and watch Steve and Sam trot out ahead.

Yesterday they left 20 head in a branding corral, a small wood-and-wire enclosure in the middle of the valley. There are no houses or barns or sheds anywhere near. It's just a halfway house, a place to keep things overnight before continuing the longer drive over the hill into the Harness Place, the old homestead with a fenced meadow, which is today's destination. Steve swings down at the corral, opens the gate, and these animals join the others on the trail.

Sam is confident now at 17. The dynamic between us has changed in the last few years, since he's been riding with his dad. He passed me by several years ago in Tim's School of Cow- boying. He knows the country, knows what to do. He's patient, methodical. He's also a cross between the two of us. He remembers what it's like not to know what's going on. And he knows how to tell me what he's thinking.

Steve peels off into the shadowed draws of the alluvial fan. Sam and I follow the bunch for a couple of hours across the foothills. The trail parallels a fault line, and we pass just above several steep draws, which drop away below the trail. At the top we hold the bunch to wait for the men. We can hear them, behind us somewhere, hollering at the



bulls who would rather fight with each other than move. There aren't supposed to be any cattle left up here, except the ones we are bringing across. The first gather got most of them, Tim has said.

We dawdle on the top of the ridge, hold- ing the cow-calf pairs in the bright, hot morning. I see movement out of the corner of my eye and trot ahead to investigate. Around the south side, the sunny, early morning side of the hill, are at least 50 head, staring like kids caught smoking in the park- ing lot. To Tim this would imply a broken fence somewhere. I just see a bunch of cows someplace they're not supposed to be. I wave at Sam; he circles around behind, and we gather them into the main bunch, now close to 80 head. He spies another handful on the next par- allel ridge and goes off to get them. Meanwhile, the cattle I am holding are getting restless. I can still hear the bulls fight-



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ing behind us. I decide to nudge the bunch along the ridge. It's too soon.

Tim trots around from behind me some- where, stops them. "Steve's going to need these cows to move those bulls along," he admonishes. I wait.

Finally the bulls crest the brow of the hill- side, three of them. Two red, one white, all rolling shoulders, raw power and dust. It is



Tim and Carolyn in 2006, checking cattle in the Bilk Creek Mountains. It's great country for cows and sheep. OPPOSITE PAGE: Carolyn and three-year-old Sam in Texas.

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mostly a shoving match, the older white bull and one of the red ones pushing the younger one out of their territory.

"Keep back," Tim hollers. "When they're fighting, they'll run right over the top of you."

At last they turn and line out. I contour the steep hillside below the herd. Steve is in the drag. Tim and Sam are both down in the draws. The last time I was here, I'm thinking, I got too far behind them and they snuck off down into those canyons on me. So I ride right below them on the trail. Out of sight of Steve, I can hear him hollering.

"Get a line on it, you sonsabitches!"

Later Tim will explain: "You had the herd too high on the hill. Steve was trying to ease them down to the saddle into the Harness Place, and you weren't letting him."

You have to watch everything. Remember that you're part of a whole, a line of cowboys moving a lot of animals across a great deal of space, even if there are only two of you. Try to see what you do in relation to the others. Everything you do affects everyone else. We either benefit from your presence, or we have to compensate for you.

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This time, I'm too far ahead. Pressured from front and back, two pair squirt out behind me, and sure enough, go pounding down the draw. I curse, turn my horse and crash after them through tall sagebrush.

Sam appears, on a faster horse, overtakes and gets them stopped. I ride back to the bunch, not looking at Steve. I can feel him up there, though, steaming. Tim is still down below; I see him every so often, outflanking runaways in and out of the draws ahead of

us. I guess things aren't going too well.

Eventually the trail leads over the saddle into the Harness Place. Its triangular meadow slides down the canyon between steep rock walls; apple, plum and cherry trees grow below near a trough-sized pond. I can see a stream of dust as cattle dribble through a hole in the fence, a half-mile below us. We wait while Sam rides down to the hole in the fence; he turns the beasts back into the meadow, plugs the leak. I see him turn his head, look at something I can't see. Steve opens the gate and the herd moves through into tall green grass. I turn to ask him something, but he is gone.

Sam reappears: "Leave the gate open, Mom. Dad'll be back over the top in a minute with some more." He disappears too. Without saying anything, they all know what to do. Should I help? Should I stay here? Will the cows try to escape the meadow through this gate? It's as likely as anything else, I think; I stay. Somehow I feel like there must have been a way for me to do better.

I climb down off the roan horse, tuck myself gratefully deep into the shade of a granite boulder veined with rusty red quartz. In the shade it's so much cooler. I lean my hot face against the rough rock. The bulls' bellowing echoes back and forth between gray granite walls. It anchors the sharp high melody of a bird whose song I've never heard before.

At last Tim finally pushes six high-headed, wild-eyed cows and their feisty calves through the gate. The bulls are fighting, the cows are hot, Tim glares. He swings down at the spring, turns to his sopping wet horse,

pulls the cinch and drags the saddle off him in one sweaty motion. He leads him under the only tree and lets him cool off before watching him drop his head to the spring and drink huge horse gulps. Tim's blue chambray shirt is dripping too. He stands shaking his head, wipes his forehead with the back of the hand that holds his big black hat. It's 10:30 a.m.

That night, I sit in the cool shade of the house, scrunched up in my chair. Tim rattles ice into tall glasses in the kitchen, making highballs. I listen to him moving quietly through the routine of evening.

"It's not that I'm mad at you," he says, standing at the doorway between the kitchen and the living room. "Sometimes I'm just mad at the day, the way things are going. Sometimes I can't yell at the person I want to, so I yell at you. I know it's not right." He walks over, leans down to hand me my drink. Beads of condensation pick up the light. I turn the glass in my hand, watching the beads of moisture run down, cooling the glass.

"It's the dailiness of it that's important," he says, settling into his chair. I see Toadie's face smiling at me from behind the curl of menthol smoke, the invisible pattern that somehow connects that Nebraska department store to this summer evening.

"How many stampedes are there, after all?" he says.

"Well, none."

"No. That shit never happens. It's just what people imagine, the excitement of life that appeals to them. It's the routine that gets you through the year, not the flashy stuff. It's easy to get people for branding. Lots of noise, smoke, horses going every which way. It's not nearly as easy to get anybody to help you drive cows. The romance of that disappears pretty quickly."

"No matter how smart you are you can't anticipate everything."

He looks at me, cocks his head, quizzical. "You did a good job out there today."

Carolyn Dufurrena is a geologist, rancher and educator. She and Tim have made it through 30 years of driving cows together. This essay is adapted from "Sharing Fencelines: Three Friends Write From Nevada's Sagebrush Corner," University of Utah Press, 2002.