

## Bench Creek Cattle Drive

2003

I have just returned from the adventure of my life! My husband Mike and I spent three days as the guests of Pat and Linda Dempsey on their west-central Nevada ranch, helping move 200 head of cattle 25 miles to their winter range.

It all started when I was looking on the web for dressage events and stumbled instead on Pat's ad for his cattle drive. It seized my imagination. After numerous e-mails and phone conversations with Pat, and lots of fast-talking to convince my husband, we decided to go for it.

At last the date came for our trip. We arrived with our horses at the base camp in Middlegate, Nevada to a warm welcome from the Dempseys and their crew, a roaring fire built by Dennis McJunckin—who proved to be a master fire-tender—and a tasty dinner cooked over Dennis's fire by Tootie Power, cook and hostess extraordinaire. There were five of us going along as guests.

While the others camped out for the night, Mike and I enjoyed a last bit of convenience at the Old Middlegate Station Motel, just off Highway 50 (the loneliest highway in the world), along the path of the Old Lincoln Highway. Middlegate is a "town" consisting of a bar and grill, motel, chicken house, and a trailer park of about a dozen or so trailers. The total population is around 14. When you get there, you truly are entering another world, and everyone makes you feel as though you've been part of their "family" forever.

We awoke to the sound of the chickens that owners Russ and Fredda Stevenson keep to supply their restaurant, and quickly drove over to join the group at base camp and gobble down a hearty breakfast. They made it easy on us that first day, planning only a five-mile ride north along Bench Creek. This was the day we started learning the ropes,

where to position ourselves, how to bring back a stray cow, when to stay out of the way, etc.

It was a family operation. Tootie's husband Jim, along with Dennis, went ahead of us with the vehicles (water and hay trucks, Tootie's kitchen-on-wheels, etc.) from camp to camp, and had each camp ready for us when we got there. Pat and Linda's son Jake was the lead cowboy, along with his friends Cody, Wayne, and James. Linda cooked with Tootie, and Pat drove a team of draft horses pulling a beautiful bright green chuckwagon that he'd built with his own hands. At the end of the day, as we approached Second Camp at Bench Creek Well, the first thing we could see was a huge tee-pee, which we soon learned was part of a program that had been specially arranged for us. That evening, we were entertained by a marvelous demonstration given by Bill Burleigh, a flint-napper and expert on Native American crafts. After another great dinner and evening of friendly chat by the fire, we gratefully hit our bedrolls.

Everyone was incredibly helpful. When my horse was too excited the first morning to let me pick up her feet, Cody came over and cleaned them for me. He took his time and worked in some patient training while he was at it. The second day, Mike was getting tired of riding and his horse Toby was misbehaving a little. Pat gave him a quick lesson in driving the draft team, put him in charge of the chuckwagon, and took off on Toby. He rode him skillfully, got his attention on his job, and returned him to Mike a better horse. When the weather suddenly turned too snowy and cold to use the camp shower and latrine, Linda graciously opened her home for all to use the bathroom and take showers. Jim helped us with our horses in various ways, and he and Tootie housed them in their barn at Middlegate while we were at the motel. Jim and Tootie also lent one of their horses to a guest whose horse wasn't able to continue the ride. Dennis was a perfect gentleman, always making sure we had a chair and a choice spot by the fire. The cowboys gave us lots of helpful advice, and were tactful and patient with our amateurish mistakes. Tootie not only fed us but also had a knack for bringing everyone together and making us all feel like old friends.

The cowboys gave us lots of entertainment. They tackled their work with great energy, galloping up and down the lines of cattle, whooping, hollering, and whistling. They rode hard, and one would expect them to drop with exhaustion during breaks. Instead they would start playing and putting on a rodeo show for us—chasing down and roping calves. The cowboys rode mostly two-year olds, green horses that had been ridden perhaps only a few times. They changed mounts often, roping and saddling a new horse, and riding out the bucking until the horse settled into the work. These boys were hard working, polite, cheerful, and professional. If they're the future of America, we're doing all right.

As we became accustomed to the work, the rides got longer. The second day we did about ten miles, ending up at Bench Creek Ranch headquarters. Another great dinner, another great fire. The wind came up, so we all went to bed early and awoke the next morning to news of an arctic storm moving in. We had to wind up the drive that day or risk getting stranded at a remote camp in a snowstorm. That day was the most challenging ride, but also the most scenic. We drove the cattle about ten miles through the roughest country I'd ever ridden in. The views were spectacular, the landscape constantly changing as we wound our way over the alpine hills to Horse Creek Ranch and on to deliver the cows to the hills above Dixie Valley. Then we turned our horses around and they carried us the ten miles back to Bench Creek Ranch. The next morning we awoke to a carpet of snow veiling everything in sight. It was lovely, but we were sure glad we weren't riding that day.

Instead, we returned to Middlegate Station and stayed on for the Halloween party that night. Boy, those Nevadians sure know how to party! We enjoyed dancing to the fiddle music of two-time Nevada fiddle champion, Jake Wise. The Halloween costumes were clever and hilarious. It was an unforgettable time with great company, good food, and lots of laughter.

Looking back, there are many things I learned from this experience. I learned there are still communities where strangers are welcomed with a generosity beyond words. I learned a little bit about the cattle

business, and gained a lot of respect for the ranchers and cowboys who do this work. I learned that Nevada is more gorgeous than I ever imagined, once you get off the highway. I learned my horse can be trusted to carry me safely through country rougher than I would ever have dared to ride.

As I mentioned before, I had to twist Mike's arm to get him to go with me. After we'd been home a few days, imagine my surprise and delight when he said, "I'm glad you made me go. It was a very worthwhile experience and I had a great time."

—Jill Owens, November 2003