

Why Cowboys Sing

By Wylie Grant Sherwin, courtesy of Russ Sherwin

Wylie Sherwin was my dad. He worked as a cowboy from 1909-1921 as a young man in the country of Wyoming, just across the state line from Montana. He wrote about his experiences in a set of handwritten journals. The following is an excerpt from those journals. I have not changed anything other than minor correction of spelling and punctuation. ~ Copyright 2010, Russ Sherwin

It was mid-afternoon and the herd was dry. They were traveling good and strung out for a mile for they could smell water. We were heading for Lodgegrass Creek a couple of miles away. Walter and I were bringing up the rear. There were no drags, for they were all anxious to travel. And then we heard a dog bark behind us. We looked back up the freight road and there came an Indian in a wagon. He was coming at a trot and approaching pretty fast. The dog was running ahead to bark at us.

Now you can imagine what that would do to a bunch of wild steers. They were hardly used to men on horseback, and they had never seen a dog, and the clatter of that wagon coming up behind was a sure way to start a stampede. A good cow hand doesn't have to take time to think through a situation like this. That is the difference between a cowboy and one who never will be, he knows and he acts by reflex, I suppose. So we both wheeled our mounts at one and the same time and headed for that Indian on a run. I waved my hat and Walter pulled his rope loose. He could shake a loop faster than any man I ever saw, and as we met that dog, he dabbled a rope on him and dragged him about a hundred feet to that wagon, and swung him up and into it before the dog or Indian knew what had happened. We scared the tar out of the Indian and turned him out across the prairie.

A bunch of big fat steers like this is a touchy proposition. They can blow up awfully quick and with very little cause. Once, a jackrabbit jumped out of a bush just to one side of the lead. About fifty steers broke sideways and jumped a deep wash. There was no place nearby for us to get across to them, and it was too wide and deep to jump with a horse. We had to hold up the herd for about an hour while two of us went a long way around to get over there and bring those cattle back around the way we had gone in, for they weren't interested in jumping back.

We were always having little flare-ups like that and sometimes a pretty good run would develop. In daylight these are not serious except they do run off a little fat, but at night a stampede is a cowboy's nightmare. And we had one on this drive.

I remember we were loading at a little siding called Aberdine that year. There were several places where we could load, but Johnny chose that one because we could get there with fewer fences, and there was plenty of grass close by. We held the herd four or five miles out until Johnny made sure there were enough cars there to take care of us, for eight hundred big steers and heifers makes a pretty good train load. Then we got word to move in close, for we would start loading at daylight the next morning. The agent assured us there would be no more trains that night, and it would be safe to hold them close to the pens.

Cowboys have the reputation for singing quite a lot. And this has led to the belief that a cowboy's life is a happy and carefree one. And maybe it is or was for some, but how many people ever stopped to think why a cowboy did sing? Sometimes it was because he was lonesome and singing helped to while away the long hours, but on night herd, regardless of any other reason, he sang because that was the best assurance against startling the cattle.

The darker the night the more nervous they were apt to be, and singing warned them of our approach and they were not startled. If I wasn't singing or humming, I always talked to the herd at night. I don't mean I held forth at great length to the herd in general, I mean I spoke to them more individually, each one, as I came to them on my rounds of the herd. You see, out at night, you usually keep moving all the time, slowly, quietly circling the herd so that none would slip away. As for the cattle, if they were not hungry or thirsty, they usually were all lying down quietly. You didn't dare make a quick move or snap your bridle reins. The flare of a match was a sure way to cause trouble.

On this particular night, it had been dusk when we moved the herd in. We bunched them on a grassy slope about a quarter of a mile from the yards. And because we wanted to corral them early the next morning, we were holding a little tighter herd than usual.

It was cloudy and threatening to rain that night as we ate our supper around the campfire. We had been on the trail eight days and everyone was pretty tired. The cattle had become much more gentle and easier to handle and so we decided to stand one-man guard that night. That meant one and a half hours instead of three. We rotated the guard each night and Walter and I would have had twelve to three, but by splitting it up, I took twelve to one-thirty. We only had one time-piece in the bunch and when Charley Moore turned the guard over to me, he gave me the watch and said, "Here you are, Boss, be careful you don't spill 'em, they're spooky tonight." They always called me "Boss." I guess it was because I was the youngest of the lot.

I started to put my slicker on before going too close to the herd, but it wasn't raining at the moment and I decided to just carry it across the saddle in front of me for a while. I circled the herd and sang or hummed as I went so as not to startle them. There were quite a few on their feet all right, and any that were moving out were turned back gently. I had made several circles around the herd, but I hadn't looked at the watch for I knew my time wasn't up yet, and I couldn't see without riding away from the cattle and striking a match. And then it happened.

It had been thundering quite a lot or I probably would have heard that train coming. But then, the agent had said there wouldn't be any more trains that night. The train burst around a bend and through a cut, and the headlight stabbed right into the herd. Just at that instant, the engineer pulled the whistle, and I know those cattle were really scared, for I was, myself.

I happened to be on the far side of the herd from the train, and in nothing flat, every animal was on its feet and running. I grabbed my slicker in my right hand and turned with the cattle. As soon as I was able to break out ahead of them, I started shouting and waving my slicker and at the same time I was working my way to the left, for I wanted to try to start them in a circle. I had never seen a foot of this country in daylight and all I could do was pray that there were no fences or cut banks or rims in our way. And then, before you could believe it possible, there was Walter, and right behind him the rest of the boys. Firemen with their greased pole never had anything on those boys.

We were all on one side of the lead, and I had bent them a little by myself, and now we were able to bring more pressure until finally we were really circling and the riders were well spaced now and hollering like wild Indians to keep them from breaking that circle until they had their run out.

There was no more sleep for anyone that night. It took all hands from then on, and at daybreak we corralled them and started to load. I asked the boys how they got there so quick, and from what they said, I guess that train whistle had the same effect on them as it did on the cattle. Anyway, they were all asleep one second and the next they were running for their horses, for they knew what would happen all right. The big danger in a stampede like that is, of course, a pile up. Should the lead go over a bank, or through a fence or something else to cause one or more to fall, then others fall over them and the results can be terrible. We were lucky, for we didn't lose a steer, although we probably lost several thousand pounds of beef.