

# The Spirit of the Herd

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Published: 1918  
in »Atlantic Narratives«



## I

We were trailing the riders of P Ranch across the plains to a hollow in the hills called the "Troughs", where they were to round up a lot of cattle for a branding. On the way we fell in behind a bunch of some fifty cows and yearlings which one of the riders had picked up; and, while he dashed off across the desert for a "stray", we tenderfeet drove on the herd. It was hot, and the cattle lagged, so we urged them on. All at once I noticed that the whole herd was moving with a swinging, warping gait, with switching tails, and heads thrown round from side to side as if every steer were watching us. We were not near enough to see their eyes, but the rider, far across the desert, saw the movement and came cutting through the sage, shouting and waving his arms to stop us. We had pushed the driving too hard. Mutiny was spreading among the cattle, already manifest in a sullen ugly

temper that would have brought the herd charging us in another minute, had not the cowboy galloped in between us just as he did—so untamed, unafraid, and instinctively savage is the spirit of the herd.

It is this herd-spirit that the cowboy, on his long, cross-desert drives to the railroad, most fears. The herd is like a crowd, easily led, easily excited, easily stampeded—when it becomes a mob of frenzied beasts, past all control—the spirit of the city 'gang' at riot in the plains.

If one would know how thin is the coat of domestication worn by the tamest of animals, let him ride with the cattle across the rim-rock country of southeastern Oregon. No better chance to study the spirit of the herd could possibly be had. And in contrast to the cattle, how intelligent, controlled, almost human, seems the plainsman's horse!

I share all the tenderfoot's admiration for the cowboy and his "pony".

Both of them are necessary in bringing four thousand cattle through from P Ranch to Winnemucca; and of both is required a degree of daring and endurance, as well as a knowledge of the wild-animal mind, which lifts their hard work into the heroic, and makes of every drive a sage-brush epic—so wonderful is the working together of man and horse, a kind of centaur of the plains.

From P Ranch to Winnemucca is a seventeen-day drive through a desert of rim-rock and greasewood and sage, which, under the most favorable conditions, is beset with difficulty, but which, in the dry season, and with anything like four thousand cattle, becomes an unbroken hazard. More than all else on such a drive is feared the wild herd-spirit, the quick, black temper which, by one sign or another, ever threatens to break the spell of the riders' power and sweep the maddened or terrorized herd to destruction. The handling of the herd to keep this spirit sleeping is oftentimes a thrilling experience.

## II

Some time before my visit to P Ranch, in the summer of 1912, the riders had taken out a herd of four thousand steers on what proved to be one of the most difficult drives ever made to Winnemucca. For the first two days on the trail the cattle were strange to each other, having been gathered from widely separated grazing grounds—from Double-O and the Home Ranch—and were somewhat clannish and restive under the driving. At the beginning of the third day signs of real trouble appeared. A shortage of water and the hot weather together began to tell on the temper of the herd.

The third day was long and exceedingly hot. The line started forward at dawn, and all day kept moving, with the sun cooking the bitter smell of the sage into the air, and with sixteen thousand hoofs kicking up a still bitterer smother of alkali dust which inflamed eyes and nostrils and coated the very lungs of the cattle. The fierce desert thirst was upon the herd long before it reached the creek where it was to bed for the night. The heat and the dust had made slow work of the driving, and it was already late when they reached the creek, only to find it dry.

This was bad. The men were tired, but the cattle were thirsty, and Wade, the "boss of the buckaroos", pushed the herd on toward the next rim-rock, hoping to

get down to the plain below before the end of the slow desert twilight. Anything for the night but a dry camp.

They had hardly started on when a whole flank of the herd, suddenly breaking away as if by prearrangement, tore off through the brush. The horses were as tired as the men, and, before the chase was over, the twilight was gray in the sage, making it necessary to halt at once and camp where they were. They would have to go without water.

The runaways were brought up and the herd closed in till it formed a circle nearly a mile around. This was as close as it could be drawn, for the cattle would not bed—lie down. They wanted water more than they wanted rest. Their eyes were red, their tongues raspy with thirst. The situation was a difficult one.

But camp was made. Two of the riders were sent back along the trail to bring up the “drags” while Wade, with his other men, circled the uneasy cattle, closing them in, quieting them, and doing everything possible to make them bed.

They were thirsty; and instead of bedding, the herd began to “growl”—a distant mutter of throats, low, rumbling, ominous, as when faint thunder rolls behind the hills. Every plainsman fears the growl, for it too often is a prelude to the “milling”, as it proved to be now, when the whole vast herd began to stir—slowly, singly at first and without direction, till at length it moved together, round and round a great compact circle, the multitude of clicking hoofs, of clashing horns and chafing sides, like the sound of rushing rain across a field of corn.

Nothing could be worse for the cattle. The cooler twilight was falling, but, mingling with it, rose and thickened and spread a choking dust from their feet which soon covered them, and shut from sight all but the wall of the herd. Slowly, evenly, swung the wall, round and round, without a break. Only one who has watched a milling herd can know its suppressed excitement. To keep that excitement in check was the problem of Wade and his men. And the night had not yet begun.

When the riders had brought in the drags, and the chuckwagon had lumbered up with supper, Wade set the first watch.

Along with the wagon had come the fresh horses—among them Peroxide Jim, a supple, powerful, clean-limbed buckskin, that had, I think, as fine and intelligent an animal-face as any creature I ever saw. And why should he not have been saved fresh for just such a need as this? Are there not superior horses as well as superior men—a Peroxide Jim to complement a Wade?

The horse plainly understood the situation, Wade told me; and though there was nothing like sentiment for horse-flesh about the boss of the P Ranch riders, his faith in Peroxide Jim was absolute.

The other night-horses were saddled and tied to the wheels of the wagon. It was Wade's custom to take his turn with the second watch; but shifting his saddle to Peroxide Jim, he rode out with the four of the first watch, who, evenly spaced, were quietly circling the herd.

The night, for this part of the high desert, was unusually warm. It was close, still, and without a sky. The near, thick darkness blotted out the stars. There is usually a breeze at night over these highest rim-rock plains which, no matter how hot the day may have been, crowds the cattle together for warmth. To-night not a

breath stirred the sage as Wade wound in and out among the bushes, the hot dust stinging his eyes and caking rough on his skin.

Round and round moved the weaving shifting forms, out of the dark and into the dark, a gray spectral line like a procession of ghosts, or some morris dance of the desert's sheeted dead. But it was not a line, it was a sea of forms; not a procession, but the even surging of a maelstrom of hoofs a mile around.

Wade galloped out on the plain for a breath of air and a look at the sky. A quick cold rain would quiet them; but there was not a feel of rain in the darkness, no smell of it on the air. Only the powdery taste of the bitter sage.

The desert, where the herd was camped, was one of the highest of a series of table-lands, or benches; it lay as level as a floor, rimmed by a sheer wall of rock from which there was a drop to the bench of sage below. The herd had been headed for a pass, and was now halted within a mile of the rim-rock on the east, where there was a perpendicular fall of about three hundred feet.

It was the last place an experienced plainsman would have chosen for a camp; and every time Wade circled the herd, and came in between the cattle and the rim, he felt the nearness of the precipice. The darkness helped to bring it near. The height of his horse brought it near—he seemed to look down from his saddle over it, into its dark depths. The herd in its milling was surely warping slowly in the direction of the rim. But this was all fancy, the trick of the dark and of nerves—if a plainsman has nerves.

At twelve o'clock the first guard came in and woke the second watch. Wade had been in the saddle since dawn, but this was his regular watch. More than that, his trained ear had timed the milling hoofs. The movement of the herd had quickened.

If now he could keep them going, and could prevent their taking any sudden fright! They must not stop until they stopped from utter weariness. Safety lay in their continued motion. So the fresh riders flanked them closely, paced them, and urged them quietly on. They must be kept milling and they must be kept from fright.

In the taut silence of the stirless desert night, with the tension of the herd at the snapping-point, any quick, unwonted sight or sound would stampede them; the sneezing of a horse, the flare of a match, would be enough to send the whole four thousand headlong—blind, frenzied, trampling—till spent and scattered over the plain.

And so, as he rode, Wade began to sing. The rider ahead of him took up the air and passed it on until, above the stepping stir of the hoofs, rose the faint voices of the men, and all the herd was bound about by the slow plaintive measures of some old song. It was not to soothe their savage breasts that the riders sang to the cattle, but to prevent the shock of their hearing any loud and sudden noise.

So they sang and rode and the night wore on to one o'clock, when Wade, coming up on the rim-rock side, felt a cool breeze fan his face, and caught a breath of fresh, moist wind with the taste of water in it.

He checked his horse instantly, listening as the wind swept past him over the cattle. But they must already have smelled it, for they had ceased their milling. The whole herd stood motionless, the indistinct forms close to him in the dark, showing their bald faces lifted to drink the sweet wet breath that came over the

rim. Then they started again, but faster, and with a rumbling from their hoarse throats that tightened Wade's grip on the reins.

The sound seemed to come out of the earth, a low, rumbling mumble, as dark as the night and as wide as the plain, a thick inarticulate bellow that stood every rider stiff in his stirrups.

The breeze caught the dust and carried it back from the gray-coated, ghostly shapes, and Wade saw that the animals were still moving in a circle. If he could keep them going! He touched his horse to ride on with them, when across the black sky flashed a vivid streak of lightning.

There was a snort from the steers, a quick clap of horns and hoofs from far within the herd, a tremor of the plain, a roar, a surging mass—and Wade was riding the flank of a wild stampede. Before him, behind him, beside him, pressing hard upon his horse, galloped the frenzied steers, and beyond them a multitude, borne on, and bearing him on, by the heave of the galloping herd.

Wade was riding for his life. He knew it. His horse knew it. He was riding to turn the herd, too, back from the rim, as the horse also knew. The cattle were after water—water-mad—ready to go over the precipice to get it, carrying horse and rider with them. Wade was the only rider between the herd and the rim. It was black as death. He could see nothing in the sage, could scarcely discern the pounding, panting shadows at his side; but he knew by the swish of the brush and the plunging of the horse that the ground was growing stonier, that they were nearing the rocks.

To outrun the stampede was his only chance. If he could come up with the leaders he might yet head them off upon the plain and save the herd. There were cattle still ahead of him; how many, what part of the herd, he could not tell. But the horse knew. The reins hung on his straight neck, while Wade, yelling and firing into the air, gave him the race to win, to lose.

Suddenly they veered and went high in the air, as a steer plunged headlong into a draw almost beneath their feet. They cleared the narrow ravine, landed on bare rock and reeled on.

They were riding the rim. Close to their left bore down the flank of the herd, and on their right, under their very feet, was a precipice, so close that they felt its blackness—its three hundred feet of fall!

A piercing, half-human bawl of terror told where a steer had been crowded over. Would the next leap carry them after him? Then Wade found himself racing neck and neck with a big white steer, which the horse, with marvelous instinct, seemed to pick from a bunch, and to cling to, forcing him gradually ahead till, cutting him free from the bunch entirely, he bore him off into the sage.

The group coming on behind followed its leader, and in, after them, swung others. The tide was turning. Within a short time the whole herd had veered, and, bearing off from the cliffs, was pounding over the open plains.

Whose race was it? Peroxide Jim's, according to Wade, for not by word or by touch of hand or knee had he been directed in the run. From the flash of the lightning the horse had taken the bit, and covered an indescribably perilous path at top speed, had outrun the herd and turned it from the edge of the rim-rock, without a false step or a tremor.

Bred on the desert, broken at the round-up, trained to think steer as his rider thinks it, the horse knew as swiftly, as clearly as his rider, the work before him. But that he kept himself from fright, that none of the wild herd-madness passed into him, is a thing for wonder. He was as thirsty as any animal of the herd; he knew his own peril, I believe, as none of the herd had ever known anything; and yet, such coolness, courage, wisdom, and power!

Was it training? Was it more intimate association with the man on his back, and so, a further remove from the wild thing which domestication does not seem to touch? Or was it all suggestion, the superior intelligence above riding—not the flesh, but the spirit?

