

## Cowboy on the Coconino

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The Coconino National Forest, located in north-central Arizona, has some of the best year-round grazing on the North American continent. It is also a fine example of multiple use land management. Its ponderosa pine forests provide an annual allowable cut of 54,000,000 board feet of choice timber and 16,250 cords of pulp wood. It is a primary source of water for three-quarters of a million people living in Phoenix and the Salt River Valley. It is also a recreational paradise, supporting large herds of deer, elk and antelope.

My family came to the Coconino in 1926, in the days of open range. There was only one drift fence on the Forest, running roughly east and west, dividing the range between the Little Colorado drainage on the north and the Verde on the south. Our ranch was on the Verde side.

Our country was divided into several units, each of which operated wagons during the spring and fall working seasons. We belonged to the Oak Creek wagon, named for the famous canyon that now attracts over a million tourists a year.

Our cattle were driven to points on the Santa Fe railroad, and frequently sold by the head rather than by the pound, as we do now. I missed most of the drives because I was away at school, but I do remember making one to Flagstaff, where we found the railroad pens full of cattle, making it necessary for us to night herd our bunch in 10 below zero weather.

Calf crops in those days were often below 50%. Death losses were high. Bulls were mostly "natives". Salting was casual. Some did. Many didn't bother. Wild horses, wild cattle and wild burros were plentiful, available to any wild cowboy who had the guts to run 'em—and there were plenty who did, and some who made a fair living at it.

Our ranges were terribly overstocked, and I never heard the term "range management" until many years later.



FIGURE 1. Cattle on north Arizona mountain ranch, fall, 1965.

The cattle were small and lean, and it was a good thing because they had to walk a long way to water. For many years we had just one dependable source of water on our summer country, a dam my father built at the headquarter place.

The Forest Service began fencing the open range into individual allotments in the late 1920's, and by the time the Great Depression rolled around most of the Coconino was fenced. Our allotment was called "Foxboro".

The Depression brought about a lot more changes. The banks soon found themselves in the cow business in a big way and by the mid-thirties many of the old outfits had new owners—with new ideas.

Our own little outfit came close to going under. We had to strip it of every cow we could find to pay off what we thought was a small mortgage, and then had to borrow money at an exorbitant rate of interest to keep going.

By this time my father had concluded the cow business was a sorry way to make a dollar. When a neighbor offered him cold cash for our range rights he was all for selling out.

I was graduating from college about this time, and I begged him for a chance to try my hand at running the outfit. That was in June, 1935.

I spent that summer and the following fall and winter gathering the remnants, 14 head in all. Six of the

14 were bulls, which I sold to a butcher for 1.5¢/lb (an average of \$18.00 per animal). A few shelly, half-wild cows brought 2.5¢. I was glad to get 5¢ for the calves.

Fortunately, it didn't cost much to live in those days. Beans and spuds were a couple of dollars a hundred. Flour was cheap, and I never threw away a biscuit. My home was a primitive one-room shack, with only pieces of corrugated iron between me and the elements. How I got through the winter I'll never know, but when you are young, you don't ask silly questions.

Things picked up the following fall. During the winter I had renewed acquaintances with an old friend who had lost his ranch but had managed to salvage some money from the sale. He had cash, but no range. I had range, but no cash, so we decided to throw in together.

Scouting around for some cattle, we heard about a bunch of old cows for sale at \$27 per head in the stockyards at Clarkdale. We went to see them, but wound up buying 100 head of young cows instead at \$30 per head. They were sure worth the extra \$3.00.

It took two days to drive the cattle home, and I got bucked off my horse when a big tumble weed came roaring under his belly, but it was worth the pain and indignity. They were a fine bunch of cows and a good nucleus for the herd we were trying to build up.

We picked up other cattle in

smaller lots. I remember one bunch in particular. There were supposed to be five head, three cows and two yearlings. The owner wasn't exactly sure; he hadn't seen the cattle for a couple of years. If we could find them—and catch them—they were ours at \$20 for the cows and \$10 for the yearlings. We spent all winter looking for these cattle, but could never find a trace. We were beginning to think they existed only in the owner's imagination when one evening a man rode in from a neighboring outfit to tell us his crew had found the cattle and had them tied up in a juniper thicket about five miles away. We got them the following morning, and, although one of the cows later got away and was gone two more years, we eventually sold them all at a good profit.

That second winter I "graduated" from the shack to a tent—my winter home for the next five years. It had a wood floor and a pot-bellied stove, and, all things considered, was a great improvement over the shack. We spent most of that winter and the following spring and summer building dirt tanks. My partner brought six good saddle horses with him, plus a number of unbroke horses. He also had two big, gentle work horses. We built many a tank with a four-horse team, using the two gentle horses in the middle, with a bronc on each end. We found this was a pretty good way to break the brones.

On one of these tank-building expeditions, we broke an axle on the wagon, luckily within sight of the place where we planned to make camp. We decided to work on the tank all week, then take the axle out and drag it to a point where we could load it on a pickup. On Saturday morning I was given a choice: I could ride the one work horse gentle enough to ride and drag the axle or I could ride one of the brones. I chose the gentle horse, but that was an awful mistake. We had gone only a few hundred yards when the rope got under his tail and he bucked me off. I decided riding the bronc might be safer, and it was. We got to the ranch without further incident and in time to clean up for a dance that night at the community school house.

We were not only building tanks and improving our water situation,

we were also taking the first, faltering steps towards more intensive management of our cattle.

Purebred bulls were introduced into the herd. Old cows were carefully culled. Our calf crop was now averaging well above 50% and the calves were heavier and of better quality.

Bob-tail trucks were coming into use, and this made another big change in our lives. Now we could haul calves to the railroad instead of making the long drives. It was a lot easier on all concerned, the cows, calves and the cowboys. And more profitable too.

Even bigger changes began coming after World War Two. And they can be summed up in one term—range management. All the outfits on our part of the Coconino run cattle in the summer in the high country on top of the Mogollon Rim and winter in the Verde Valley. June 1 is the usual date for going from the winter to the summer country.

This created a problem for me. My cattle would drift from their winter range into a narrow canyon connecting the two ranges and hang up along the fence waiting for me to let them through. I spent many a hot, disagreeable day driving cattle from this fence back to water, only to see them return a day or so later. One spring I didn't catch them soon enough and lost eight head.

About this time I had an opportunity to buy some 20 sections of summer range adjacent to our old range. Included in the deal was some 400 acres of private land.

This purchase provided a chance to suggest a bold experiment. I proposed relocating the summer headquarters on the newly-acquired private land, where there was a fine spring and some wet-meadow pasture. The Forest Service was requested to build a fence from this point to the Rim. I would build a fence across the mouth of the dry canyon. These two fences would create a new unit, a range that could and should be used in the spring and fall. In effect, the ranch would now be divided into three main units: a winter range (House Mountain), a spring-fall range (Jack's Canyon-Jack's Point), and a summer range. See Fig. 1 of the following article by Ranger Perry. The cattle would spend roughly 4½ months each on

the winter and summer ranges, the other 3 months on the spring-fall range. Cattle could enter the new unit around April 15, gradually moving, on their own, through the canyon to the higher country. In the fall the process would be reversed.

The Forest Service was enthusiastic, and the plan was soon put in operation. Later I added a well and a branding corral at the mouth of the canyon and built a bull pasture.

The plan has proved to be very effective. The cattle now pretty much move themselves. Death loss has been cut to about 1%. My calf crop is never less than 90% and has been as high as 97%, with most of the calves coming in February, March and April. Calf weights at shipping time have jumped from around 395 lb to 480 lb (Fig. 1). Instead of branding at three different points on the winter range, we now brand virtually all the calves as they enter the spring-fall unit and, because we brand early, we rarely have a case of worms.

About the same time I was putting this new management plan into action I was converting the old-worn out and abandoned farm lands I had acquired into good holding pastures, using various types of wheatgrasses, the best of which was the Amuir strain of intermediate wheatgrass.

I make it a point to sell about 20 head of cows each year, replacing them with carefully-selected heifers. Heifer calves are taken off the cows at the summer headquarters, trucked to the lower ranch, then put on high-protein feed for three months. This gets the heifers off to a good start. They breed as yearlings and get to be big cows. I rarely ship a cow weighing less than 1,000 lb and not infrequently a shipment will average over 1,200 lb. And, since the calves are fed in a corral at the winter headquarters, they develop no fear of people. I now work all my cattle afoot in the corrals, which saves a lot of time.

No cow outfit is, of course, without its problems, and mine is no exception. After 30 years of building tanks and drilling wells, I still find portions of the range that need more water. Juniper is a problem on some 5,000 acres. In my own lifetime I have seen lots of good grass land eliminated by the spread of pine thickets. A noxious plant, pingue, is

a problem on perhaps 2,500 acres. My winter and spring-fall ranges get a rest during the summer growing season, but the summer range doesn't. It would be nice if we could work out a rotation system to accomplish this.

Perhaps the greatest problem of all, and one faced by all range cattle people, is the rising cost of production. I feel confident all these problems can be licked eventually, and I look forward to running cattle many more years on my favorite National Forest—the Coconino.