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One Man, One Dog, Forty Steers

The water level dropped, late spring. I rode up the ranch to put more boards in the dam.

The meadow smelled like thousands of wildflowers mixing their fragrances in slow spring breezes. Small flowers that look like purple elephant's heads, complete with upward curving trunks, foreheads, and large ears, densely covering stems a foot to two feet tall, grew everywhere among the wild meadow grasses.

Wild iris bloomed and blue camas, and blue widow grass. Above the irrigated ground, tall yellow buttercups flowered.

The first year I irrigated the meadow, there were steers on the ranch above, so I rode through the gate, put the bike on its kickstand, shut the gate behind me and remounted and rode.

Steers came out of the willows in groups at a gallop to see what was going on. I didn't know they wouldn't gallop right over me and stampede me and the machine to dust. I didn't think they would; one doesn't read newspaper accounts of herds of steers stomping ranch hands to death, but I wasn't sure. The lack of certainty was difficult. If I was sure they would try to trample me, I'd flee from their territory.

John and Mike love a good laugh. They'd throw their heads back and roar if I said, "I can't get in to work on the log-crib dam. The Ricos put a herd of steers in there, and I'm afraid they're going to gang up and trample me if I try. I think you'd better send up a couple of guards to get me through."

Ha ha ha. I know it would be funny to tell it, but at the moment, I'm having trouble mustering a laugh, because about thirty steers have me nearly surrounded, six or eight feet from me. They average about six-hundred pounds each, and even if they're not aggressive, I want to be sure they're careful with all that weight and all those hooves. "Go on, dog. Move 'em out of here. Clear me a road."

For all I know, they keep it hushed up when herds of steers stomp ranch hands to death. Newspapers don't print everything that happens.

I was used to herefords, who would leave my work area after a half-loud suggestion, who were curious, but only from at

least thirty feet away and only if I didn't move fast, who would bunch up and flee at a mere suggestion of action by the dog.

The dog was used to herefords, too. These steers puzzled him. He ran back and forth in front of them. Herefords would have bunched up and turned away from a dog galloping past their noses, but these steers obviously find the dog an interesting novelty, and they all surge forward to get a closer look.

This mass movement doesn't lend the dog any great sense of confidence. Me neither, since the dog retreats behind me. "How many times have I told you not to retreat to me in times of danger but lead the danger away from me? Obviously, the Ricos don't use dogs to work these cattle."

Now I'm starting to wonder if I might be marooned here for days because nobody will back up from a face-off. I get off the bike and yell and wave my arms. The steers in front of me back up a step or two. The ones I'm not directly facing move a step or two closer, curious about what I'm doing. "Do it again, dog. Bite some noses."

When dogs work with men on horses, everybody reinforces everybody else. The dogs start motion in the herd, and the men on horses increase and organize the motion. Or the other way around. The cattle learn the cues and react to any one of them. One man on a horse, wanting cows to move means move. A dog, moving like a dog does when it wants cows to go, means move.

These steers aren't trained at all. The dog circles, nips noses, gets most of them turned around, nips flanks and heels and moves them twenty feet before their curiosity overcomes their fear of this running, nipping, insistent dog.

He can only bite one steer at a time, and the bites are painful, but curiosity is a more powerful stimulus. The steers' escape dwindles, and they turn back to get a closer look at this grey, white, black and blue, stub-tailed dog. He can't tell the desire to get a close look from the desire to stomp him to death any better than I can, and he breaks and runs, with thirty steers thundering close behind him.

It's almost funny when it's the dog they have on the run, because I'm sure they aren't going to stomp him. If his nerve hadn't deserted him, they wouldn't be after him. But it isn't quite funny, because I still remember forty-five seconds ago, when I was the one having trouble keeping my nerve.

He takes them away from me, out across the meadow, so I jump on the motorcycle, start it, and ride to the log-crib dam.

I'd rather flee off the meadow to avoid another confrontation, but the log-crib does need my attention, and I'm more and more convinced the steers will not attack, though it's easiest to believe that when they're a hundred feet or farther away from me.

I climb down into the log-crib and work behind the boards already in place. I drop two wide boards into place, step on top of them, and drive them down underwater, and the current and the weight of the water hold them in place. The river above the dam rises.

About forty steers stand on the bank above the crib, looking down at me. "Hi, you guys. Don't you have any grass to go eat or any cud to chew or anything like that? What's so entertaining about one ranch hand and one dog?"

I guess anything is entertaining when you're stuck in one pasture all summer on your way to becoming beef.

I climb over the boards and around the bank upstream of the crib, where workers dumped large rocks down the bank years ago to protect the dirt against erosion. Steers won't walk on the rocks.

I sit on the steel headworks of the ditch and wait while the water rises. I check the level by standing my shovel on the bottom and looking at how high up the handle the water marks. It's about three inches higher than I planned for, and that much over is no problem.

My dog lies in the shade of a willow bush and waits for me. As long as the steers aren't stampeding after him, he isn't afraid of them. Neither am I. This takes a little work in my thoughts to convince myself. They haven't knocked over the motorcycle, though they've milled all around it. I look at it like this: I have to come up here a lot, and the steers are going to be here until fall. Logically, I'm convinced they won't hurt me. There are two clear memories that are of some help to me.

We separate male from female calves in the big corral. Mike Rouse and I are on foot, and we're talking about something. I can't remember the subject of the conversation now, but two hands on horses keep about forty calves going full gallop around and around the corral.

Mike stands with his back to the calves going by full-speed behind him. They get closer and closer to him, and he arches his back a little, to give them an extra six inches or so of room to go by. His arched back is both a joke, kind of look out, there they go again, and a serious motion. He knows they won't hit him, and he demonstrates his knowledge.

The other memory comes from that same day. Ranchers get together and neighbor, as they call it; they help each other with the work that takes more workers than each has in his crew. A small man, bent with age and slow-moving, stands in an open gate to keep calves that shouldn't go through from going through. The herd heads for the gate at a gallop. He flips up his hands without raising his arms more than a few inches, and all the calves skid into a turn and gallop by the gate without trying to go through.

Of course, the calves we worked with were herefords, smaller and younger, but herefords or simmentals, these steers here are about the same. Eventually, my sense of reason pretty well wins out over that small reservoir of fear I'm trying to work out, and I leave the headworks and walk over to the motorcycle.

The steers retreat and give me eight or ten feet of space. I start the bike and ride toward the steers, and they move enough to give me space to ride through, and then they come along with me, still intensely interested in what I'm doing. I ride slowly. It's when they're at a gallop that I'm afraid they'll misjudge and trample me by mistake.

We form a dignified procession, one dog leading, one man on a motorcycle next, riding as slowly as he can ride and still maintain his balance, forty steers patiently pacing just behind and on both sides of the man on the motorcycle.

I open the gate just wide enough to squeeze through. I shut it behind us, relieved to be back in hereford country.

It might be nice if I could say I was never afraid of the steers again, but I was always a little edgy around large bunches of them, because they liked to get so close, but I worked through them for nine irrigation seasons, and the only thing that ever caused me any problem was my own fear.