

Cattle Drive ... 1920

By Rena Elizabeth Roop- Moore

The mighty Sierras loomed mysteriously against an autumn sky and miles of unspoiled wilderness beckoned. I hurried to answer that call of the wild; not guessing the trails would lead to a most unforgettable experience.

During the early 1920s, my husband Fred Moore and I lived in Independence, California. Later, in 1922, we moved south to Lone Pine, just sixteen miles away. It was a beautiful uncrowded land of sun and wind and distances. It was also cattle country. My husband worked with horses, he was an expert rider, horse-shoer, bronco buster and packtrain leader. He also helped on cattle drives, round-ups and with branding.

Just south of *Lone Pine* was the Spainhower Ranch, and is still a working cattle ranch. Today it is known as the Anchor Ranch. In the spring, cattle were driven up into the Sierras, where the meadows were green with grass and the streams were clear and cool. In the fall they were brought back down to winter in the desert. My husband helped on these drives, and was still able to handle packtrains through the tourist season and even ride in an occasional rodeo. So, he was busy doing all these things he enjoyed, and I did as I pleased. So, on this certain day, when the mountains seemed to beckon, I borrowed a horse and hit the trail. A group of riders were ahead of me, so followed them. When they stopped for lunch at Carroll Creek, I stayed around the hill out of sight, until they continued on. It was a great day for an adventure and I felt super. The air was very exhilarating and intoxicating. I didn't mind the switchbacks above Carroll Creek too much, and kept turning in the saddle to look back at the marvelous views of the valley below – Owens Lake, the Inyo Mountains across the valley, the arid miles of desert, the green oasis and the daily train chugging along the Mojave, and the warm sun over all.



Colonel Sherman Stevens' sawmill at the head of Cottonwood Canyon

Then I was in the pine tree country and the trail leveled in places. The party ahead of me stopped to explore the old mill at the top of Cottonwood Canyon, and I hung back. Later I paused there myself and looked about. In the early 1870s, a man named Colonel Stevens built the mill to accommodate the Cerro Gordo Mine, clear across the Owens Valley and up into the Inyo Mountains, where lumber was needed for

charcoal.

So, the mill was built, as was a flume down the stream in the canyon, and pines were sawed into billets and flumed down to where they were loaded on wagons and taken to the lake, where boats then

floated them across to Keeler, and other wagons the delivered them to the mine. It is a fantastic story, but true.

The mill has since burned down and the Cerro Gordo Mine has long ago become a ghost mine where only memories linger. The country beyond the mill is known as Cottonwood Lakes area, and has always been a favorite wondering-around wilderness for myself and many others. There were good trails and rain-tipped meadows where cattle graze. A person could camp anywhere. Those who wished not to camp out could find comfortable tent-house accommodations at Golden Trout Camp, with meal included. Also horses could be rented and fishing tackle. That is where the party ahead of me arrived about sundown, and I rode in behind them.

I was made welcome by our friends who ran the place, and shared a delicious dinner of venison steaks, vegetables, salad and dried apple cobbler. After dinner a roaring campfire was built and everyone sat around it on logs and listened to tall tales by grisly old hunters ad fisherman and close escapes in the bush, bear stories, snow slides, etc.

Mr. Cowan, our friend, telephone (by mountain phone) to Horseshoe Meadows, where my husband was one of the men thee, rounding up the Spainhower cattle for the drive back to the desert, and told them I was thee a Golden Trout Camp.

Thus it was, come first light, my husband was at my tent door with my saddle horse. And thus it was I joined the Cattle Drive. When we arrived at Horseshoe Meadows, Mr. Spainhower, who was a big man, handed me a pair of bib overalls, to protect my clothing, a bandanna for my head and a Levi jacket. I put them on rolling up the overall legs several times, as well as the jacket sleeves. I mentioned to him that I knew nothing about rounding-up cows, and he said “Don’t worry, you will be riding drag. The horse will know what to do, you just hang on!”



Horseshoe Meadows from Cottonwood Pass

So, I hung on, and I really needed to!

Soon after we started I was in a cloud of dust and I couldn’t see anything. The horse was on its own, and I guess he new it. Just ahead was all the bawling cattle, pounding hooves, whooping and yelling of the men and the smell was everywhere. I could scarcely breathe and was bounding around with all of the turning and twisting of the horse. Once I lost a stirrup for a terrifying moment, and another time I felt a tree limb brush the top of my head. I leaned forward and as low as I could, to prevent being knocked off and trampled to death. Occasionally, the wind would clear some of the dust away for a

brief minute, and I could see the heaving sea of cattle all around me, and I tried to slow my horse back to drag, nor did I, but the seething throng of rushing beasts was frightening to be among.

Now and then I could see we were in a canyon, and finally we were on the desert floor, and it was smooth going.

It seemed like an endless nightmare, then finally from somewhere through the swirling dust I heard a man's voice yell, "Where the hell is Rena?" So I turned in that direction where several men, including Mr. Spainhower were standing beside a pickup truck, eating oranges. At the sight of me they all burst out in laughter. I guess it was funny to them, but I wasn't laughing. One of them handed me a towel, and Mr. Spainhower helped to remove the dust-caked jacket and overall. Then one of the men whipped out a knife, cut a hole in an orange, saying, "This will help." And it did. The dust was gradually settling when husband appeared and threw his saddle in the back of the truck. He looked at me and shook his head, but did not laugh. He helped me into the cab and we drove home

And that was my first, and last, Cattle Drive!



Where the cattle drive exited the mountains at the mouth of Cottonwood Canyon.

NOTE: Items in italics are the webmaster's clarifications.