



John Lacey

*I think the basic philosophy is still the same —
to run a good outfit. That hasn't changed any.*

I'M NOT SURE that my grandfather ever was president of the Mount Whitney Cattlemen's Association, but I know my dad was, and I was. There have been three generations in there. I took the ranch over from my father, so the Double Circle L is three generations old so far. The original brand was just a double circle. In California, in 1958, they passed a law that no two brands on the same location could be of the same configuration. They looked at them all together, and there was a double circle brand registered in another part of the state of California that was registered before our iron. It was a matter of about four days' difference in the registration

Left: "Years ago it didn't take as many cattle for people to operate. There were just more people and more land. There was a lot of land taken for the national parks: people just had a lot smaller ranches. If a guy had a couple hundred cows, that was a pretty fair deal in those days. He could make a living, but of course nowadays it's different. You have to have five times what you had in those days to do the same thing." John Lacey

back whenever they were registered. Anyway, there were some people over in King City that had the double circle. As far as I know they still have it. My dad went over and tried to buy the brand from them, so he wouldn't have to change his. But that didn't work. But there are several double circle brands registered besides ours. The big Quien Sabe Ranch out of Hollister has a double circle registered — just the same one as ours, only it was all on the right side, rather than the left. We put an "L" on the bottom. That was what my dad thought would be the easiest way to do it, and it's been that way ever since.

I actually became active in the ranch, calling most of the shots, in 1960 when I got out of college. My dad had his first heart attack in 1943. He was fine up until about 1960, when he had another heart attack, and then he wasn't really physically able to do it all.

I was born in 1938. I was born and raised here, and I worked whenever I could. When I wasn't in school, I



Above: This cabin has a century of history of sheltering cowboys, trappers, rangers, and hikers from the changeable Sierra weather. Built by John Lacey's grandfather, its tightly chinked interior logs and earthen floor give it a frontier atmosphere.

Right: Over the years, the cowboys have established line camps to stay in overnight. Friends also put them up. It's a big night when the drive goes through the O'Leva Camp. Ethel sets a table of three meats, five vegetables, and assorted desserts. The cowboys can hear her laugh a mile off when she spots the point man. "Here come the boys," she sings, and off she'll go to set the table.



was on the ranch. Now, I didn't go to the mountains until I was nine, but anything there was to do around here whenever we were big enough to ride, you know we did it. My dad's got pictures of the first time I got on a horse. I suppose when you're three or four years old you start riding a little bit, you know, when you're just big enough so you can hang on and not get hurt.

I went to school at Cal Poly at San Luis Obispo, and I studied animal science; I just have a B.S. degree. At one time I was going to get a master's degree. I was going to go to graduate school at the University of Idaho. But about the same time, my dad was sick, and I think I probably had all the school that I could stand for a while. I also had military service that I wanted to get out of the way, so I went into the Marines and got that finished up. That's probably why I didn't finish up my education as far as any master's degree or anything. There's a lot of other things I think you gain out of college other than the animal science part. You certainly do learn some of the fundamentals that help you. Maybe not the everyday things, but you certainly learn a lot of the scientific things that could help you out. And I think that probably another very important part of it is meeting people who are in the same field you're in, who you end up doing business with the rest of your life, you know. I still meet and do business with a lot of kids that I went to school with.

Over three generations we've developed a way of running the ranch. Of course, over the years there are certain things that change an operation, whether it be the coming of the Bureau of Land Management or the

coming of the Forest Service or the coming of the city of Los Angeles. I think the basic philosophy is still the same — to run a good outfit with good kinds of cattle. That hasn't changed any. This is a cow-calf operation, and it always has been. By that I mean we have cows, and each year we raise a calf crop. In earlier years when the market dictated, we kept all the calves over until they were older and raised steers until they were three or four years old, and that's how you sold your livestock. The market demanded older steers. In the mid-fifties to early sixties the market changed. We went from a steer operation to strictly a cow-calf operation where we sold the calves at weaning time each year, and we haven't varied from that since about 1958.

It's a desert-type ranch with high mountain country. There's certainly not a real steady, dependable-type climate here for feed conditions. We have a lot of variance because of the climate. We don't have steady rainfall or large amounts of rainfall, so there can be a fairly dramatic change from year to year. It makes an outfit harder to operate. We run between 1000 and 1200 cows, depending on what kind of year we have. Years ago my grandfather used to run 150 or 200 cows. It has progressed on through my dad and on up to what we have now. It kept increasing with the times, you might say, or perpetuating the ranch or building each year — trying to do something a little bit more than what we had the year before.

I definitely believe that a larger operation (maybe 2000 head) on today's standards would do better. I think our ranch here probably really needs additional summer

country to summer the cattle in. We need to get into a higher elevation and get away from the valley entirely. Although modernization has helped us with vaccines and fire repellants and everything else so that we can keep cattle down here in the valley, it is still better to get them up out of the elements of the hot, dry climate into the lush green meadows. Cattle do better and the feed's better there. The calving season would start around the 15th of January and last 'til probably the 15th of June. We have a long season here because we're unable to control the bulls, so you could actually say that the first of the year is when we start having calves. The cattle are grazing, mostly taking care of themselves, through the months of January, February, and March; they're on their own. All we do is put out a little supplemental feed and see that they're tended to. That's the cycle of the winter. If the calves were all born in January, they would be three months old in the spring, but of course they're not. They're being born in that period of time, and our job is to do general ranch work and look after the cows. In the wintertime we clean up the ranch.

By the end of March we have to start thinking about putting the bulls out, getting the cattle branded and ready for the summer, and getting ready to go to the summer range. Then it's a matter of bringing them from the winter range down to the jumping-off point here at Olancha and getting them ready to go to the mountains. By June everything is branded and everything is shipped down the valley. We used to trail them down, but it's strictly a truck deal now. In June we start irrigating the meadows and spreading water. It's hay time and irri-

gating time, and the cattle are being readied for the mountains. From the 20th of June to the 1st of July, that's the time when we trail up to the summer country. We have to go up there, take care of them in the summer and fix fence and spread salt and take general care of the cattle. Of course, there always has to be somebody in the valley taking care of the cattle here, and it's the same procedure as it would be in the mountains.

Then in the fall of the year, we're gathering the cattle, bringing them out, and getting them ready to sell and ship to market. That's the time we wean the calves and save the heifer calves to put back in the bunch and clean up the cows. We sell all the old cows and the dry cows and keep our bunch cleaned up to continue our operation. Generally we always gather here at the ranch by the first of October. And generally all the calves are shipped someplace by the first of November. The cows that are left are all trailed back up to the winter range, and the cycle starts over again.

We have a hybrid cattle, a cross between an Angus and a Hereford. Years ago the whole valley had predominantly what they call short-horned or Durham cattle. From then on, each rancher, according to his preference, started bringing in a lot of Hereford cattle. My

family raised Hereford cattle until about 1960. That's all they had. At that time we felt that it was good business practice to crossbreed, and we chose Angus to crossbreed with. We have approximately 50% crossbred cows.

We have a Forest Service lease or permit. We also have some Bureau of Land Management land on a permit, and we lease from the city of Los Angeles. The land is mostly leased by the head by the AUM, or animal unit month, they call it. There's a certain fee. The city of Los Angeles leases by the acre, but all the government ground is on an AUM basis. They go up and figure up how much feed is there and how many cattle it can run, and they determine the AUMs that it will stand. And that's what you're billed for. The cost is approximately the same as keeping the cattle down here for the winter. It's been raised considerably in the last few years. In fact, they had a 10-year plan: the total increase from what we used to pay until the end of this 10 years is something like 400%. Typical government deal. Somebody needed to spend some more money, so that was a good way to raise it. The city land is what we lease for winter pasture, and the summer pasture is leased from the Forest Service. So most of our operation is on leased land. I'd say 80-85% of the ranch is on leased land at this time. All the water we have is free water out of the creeks. The city of Los Angeles does charge us on the lease for a certain amount of irrigation water, but it's very minimal compared to the number of acres.

Years ago it didn't take as many cattle for people to operate. There were just more people and more land. There was a lot of land taken for the national parks:

people just had a lot smaller ranches. If a guy had a couple hundred cows, that was a pretty fair deal in those days. He could make a living, but of course nowadays it's a different thing. You have to have five times what you had in those days to do the same thing. Land has been taken out of production and gone into wilderness areas or parks. I think that's true throughout the western states.

Here we have lots of kinds of swamp grasses or sedge grasses. There's a lot of native bunch grass, wheat grasses, and blue bunch wheat grass; they're mountain-type wheat grasses. There's some blue grass, and there are several varieties of clover, mountain clovers. Cattle will eat that wire grass in certain years, when it's first coming up fresh. Of course, it certainly isn't the choice of the cattle, that's for sure. It's not real browsing country. They very seldom eat any of the brush up there. The deer graze on some of it. There is a little lupine. Some little low lupine. It's a kind of a brush that the cattle do eat in the fall. Basically, there just isn't a browsing area like the Cosos, where you have a variety of different brush out there that is palatable to cattle. They could eat it and they liked it and they did good on it. There's really a lot out there — white sage, squaw tea, four-wing saltbrush, hopsage, bitter brush, and buckwheat, and those are the names of just a few of them. There's certainly more. In fact, there is purple sage out there, if you've ever heard of that — Riders of the Purple Sage.

Right: "I know my great-grandfather was a horse thief. He got hung for it. My great-uncle got shot — he went messing around with the wrong woman and got killed." Danny Torres

