

Harry J. Rutter Reminiscence, 1931

We started north in 1884 just after the spring breeding season with a herd of about three thousand head a part of one of the last big cattle drives from Texas. Our herd was about a fourth of the whole herd which came up in four sections . . . making about 12,000 head. . . .

All cattle starting north on the trail were given a trail brand and there would be a man left at the central points along the way for a number of days after the herd had pass through; this man would look over the other herds that came in and he could claim all the cattle bearing the brand of his outfit no matter who brought them in. . . .

We had a crew of ten or twelve cow-boys to handle 3,000 cattle. When it was near time to bed down for the night the point men would lead the herd off the trail, the swing men would allow the cattle leeway and the herd would start grazing. The trail boss usually had the camp spot picked out hours before it was time to turn off the trail. . . . Having a water place spotted we could judge the rate of speed the herd would have to make. Within about two miles of the camp spot the crew threw them off the trail and the cattle started grazing and by the time the spot was reached the cattle were full and the leader was ready to lie down. Then the swing men closed in and sometimes the entire herd would follow the leader and lie down. That was a sight to see a herd of 3,000 stretched out over several acres but this was unusual as it was generally a slow job to crowd the herd into the bedground so gradually that they were all given time to lie down.

Beside the crew of cow-boys and the trail boss there was the cook and the horse wrangler. The horse wrangler, usually a young boy, looked after the remuda which might consist of from

five to ten horses to the man. Besides this he was expected to rustle wood for the cook. . . . The remaining member of the crew was the cook and he was a character.

His official position while we were on the trail was at the helm of the . . . mess wagon. . . . It often had to be loaded for as many as three hundred miles and that meant a limited supply of everything and careful vigilance on the part of the cook. For the most part the supplies consisted of coffee, bacon, beans and flour. The coffee that was carried was unparched coffee bought in 100-pound containers. Part of the kitchen equipment was a dutch-oven and the cook used this to roast the coffee as it was needed. The oven was really built for service and even the familiar beans and bacon weren't so bad when they were baked in it.

The fire was burned down to bright coals then the coals were raked out and the oven was buried in the embers, full of beans and bacon while the live coals were heaped over it. When the contents were done the red-hot lid had to be lifted off with long tongs.

The cook never had to sound the dinner gong more than once. When we heard the fist bang of his big cooking ladle on the dish pan we were ready to line up and by the time the echo was dying away we were ready for beans and bacon.

The daily schedule was much the same. . . . During the day I kept far enough ahead of the herd to know where the next watering hole would be. We tried to regulate the speed of the herd so as to bring them on water at noon; then we grazed them until two o'clock. At two we threw them back on the trail and would make about seven miles to some dry ridge where we would set up a dry camp. The number of miles

the herd could make in one day depended on the grass and water supply. It was usually between 15 and 20 miles a day.

Lack of food or water, strange noises or prowling animals kept up the constant hazard of a stampede at night so the night watch was a very important part of a trailman's duty. The first guard went on at 10 o'clock, the second at midnight, the third at two, and the fourth . . . from

four until morning. If a member of the crew was responsible, . . . if he had imagination, if he was highly sensitive or had a depth of emotion the night guard brought it out and gave him some of the greatest experiences of his life. . . .

Source: Small Collection 35. Montana Historical Society Research Center. Archives. Excerpted in *Not In Precious Metals Alone: A Manuscript History of Montana* (Helena, 1976): 97.