

Chapter 18

The Remuda

Remuda is a herd of horses that have been saddle-broken, from which cowhands select their mounts for the day. The word is of Spanish derivation for *remount*, i.e. change of horses, and is commonly used in the American West. The persons in charge of the remuda are generally known as wranglers, although they can be in charge of other livestock as well as the horses.¹

Longhorns are direct descendants of the first cattle in the New World. Beginning in the 1500s and for the next two centuries, the Spanish moved the cattle north, arriving in the area that would become Texas near the end of the 17th century. Some of the cattle escaped or were turned loose on the open range where they remained mostly feral for the next two hundred years.² By the 1850's, south Texas had an over-supply of cattle that was broadly estimated to be 5,000,000 or more.

The story of Texas becoming the home to the great cattle and ranching pioneers who created the vast empires of the 19th and 20th centuries was born because of favorable economics. Beginning in the early 1850's, entrepreneurs were driving cattle from Texas to Missouri and farther east to satisfy a demand for both food and byproducts such as hides and tallow. Cattle in Texas could be purchased for \$4.00 or less and driven north and east to be sold for 5 to 10 times the original purchase price.³ Not only was there plenty of supply, but the demand was equally as great as the supply. The new business of *ranching* evolved and in some instances became large operations. There were several that could be deservedly classified as gigantic, such as the King, JA, Gage and Swenson.

As cattle were rounded up and moved north, numerous new jobs were available for hardy young cowboys who wanted to work on the trails and become drovers. Many items were introduced to support those employed in ranching: leather saddles, boots, chaps, and miscellaneous hardware are just a few of the examples. There was a new demand for food, clothing and wagons to support the trail drives. The extensive list included supplies for doctoring animals as well as the cowhands, equipment for preparing and serving meals and many other necessities.

As more cattlemen heard about and discovered the new economics of cattle drives north, the number of cattle increased on each drive. There were several major routes from south Texas north to the Red River, namely the Shawnee Trail, the so-called Chisholm Trail and the Western Trail. There are no known written documents that testify to a trail in Texas being referred to as the Chisholm Trail nor in Kansas either. What became known as the Chisholm, named from a trading trail used by Jessie Chisholm from the North Canadian to the Arkansas River where Wichita, Kansas, stands today.

When Texas cattle crossed the river at Red River Station north of Nocona, they were then on the Chisholm Trail which played an important factor in the recovery of the economy of the State of Texas after the Civil War from 1867 to 1884.⁴ Once railroads were completed and began shipping cattle from various locations across the state, trail drives were quickly replaced by the railroads. Not only did the railroads add markedly to the economy of ranching, but they also reduced the losses of livestock on the long and tough trails drives.

Throughout the scope of recorded history change has always been an ongoing reality. Perhaps an exception is the working ranch horse. Horses were not told of the coming of the railroads or the automobile. Oddly enough, when it comes to horses around the ranch, nothing has changed during the past 150 years. Rounding up cattle, moving cattle, driving cattle or working cattle requires a well-trained horse. A skilled cowhand and a smart horse are no match for a cow, unless the cow happens to charge the horse, which sometimes happens.

Gathering cattle for either working or driving requires a lot of manpower depending on the number of head of cattle. As a general rule, each cowhand requires a minimum of at least three, sometimes four, horses for working and as many as six for long trail drives. This is where the remuda comes into operation. As strong and fast as horses are, they require rest just like humans. It is better to rest a horse than take a chance of a fall or misstep by a fatigued mount that could injure both the rider and horse. This is why an abundance of horses were required along with the fact different jobs require different horses that are specifically trained such as cutting horses.

No matter what the job of the day is, it all starts early in the morning with the wrangler and cowhands going out to gather up the day's mounts. The horses required for a day's work are referred to as *circle* horses. The wrangler gets the horses clustered together as close as possible. The cowhands circle the horses with a rope corral around them by tying lariats together. The horses never attempt to get over the rope until a lariat is thrown around their neck and the rope corral is let down for them to step out. They have been trained to do it this way since they were colts.⁵

When working cattle, it all begins with the roundup and sorting. The cattle are usually herded into a secure pen or corral.

Once the roundup is completed the cowhands change to their cutting horses. These horses are specially trained to work with the rider to maneuver cattle into the part of the working pens desired by the rider. Both the rider and horses are skilled at their profession. They have to work together because by nature, cattle like to bunch up and stay together. Top notch cutting horses are savvy animals and work hard to earn their daily ration of oats. They are also well respected by their riders, who without them could not do their job. Cowhands may use two cutting horses in one afternoon depending how busy they are.



Wrangling the Horses, 24" x 32", Oil on Canvas, Circa 1938/1940, Courtesy of William Reaves | Sarah Foltz Fine Arts.

close to the herd and keep them moving with the cattle so as to be readily available for riders when fresh mounts were needed. The remuda horses grazed whenever possible along the trail and at night to obtain adequate forage.⁶

After a day's work, the cowhands turn their cutting horses back to the remuda and choose their stake horses that will be used for the roundup the next morning before heading to the chuck wagon for a good meal and some well-deserved rest.

During the historic cattle drive era, each cowhand required approximately six horses. It was not uncommon to switch mounts once

or twice daily. Thus, the job of the wrangler was to keep spare horses



The Remuda Round-Up, 17.5" x 23.5", Oil on Canvas, Circa 1950, Courtesy of Heritage Auction Galleries.

horses were trained to turn and face the wrangler, and he would then bring each horse to the particular cowhand. Today, this system is still used on a few very large ranches that graze cattle in very remote areas.⁷

Once gathered, each cowhand would inform the wrangler which horse or horses he wanted for the day. To avoid disruption of the herd by many people with varying degrees of roping ability, the wrangler would, often from the ground, calmly and quietly rope each of the horses one by one for that day's ride. Because this was a specialized skill, good wranglers were able to rope horses with close to 100 percent success with each throw. To avoid upsetting the animals, a special overhand throw was used to bring the loop from back of the

horse over its head, settling around the neck. Once caught,



Rounding up the Strays, 25" x 32", Oil on Canvas, Circa 1938/1939, Courtesy of Fine Arts of Texas

No other artist has covered the subject of the remuda better in art than Fred Darge. As is the case in all his art work, there will never be an accurate count of exactly how many paintings he completed of each subject, but the number of works that have surfaced related to wrangling the remuda demonstrate a knowledge of one who clearly knew his subject matter. The examples he has left clearly portray the skilled wranglers hard at work rounding up the needed mounts for the day's work.

There are no better places to use as background scenery for Darge's paintings than the Big Bend, Trans-Pecos and the Palo Duro Canyon to emphasis the vastness of the ground that needed to be covered to bring in the remuda. It took a lot of horses and a great deal of ground was needed just for grazing.



The Remuda, 20" x 50", Oil on Canvas, Circa 1950, Courtesy Fine Arts of Texas

The Remuda is an award-winning painting. This tremendously dynamic painting along with *The Pack Train* were Fred Darge's two entries in the 21st Annual Exhibition of the Dallas Paintings, Sculpture and Photography exhibit held at the Dallas Museum of Art that appeared from April 30 through May 26, 1950. Darge deservedly was awarded the A. Harris and Company Prize of \$50.⁸ A. Harris was one of the Dallas businesses that supported the arts by contributing cash awards in special juried exhibitions at the Dallas Museum of Fine Art.



Mule Ears Peaks, Big Bend National Park, Photograph Courtesy of texashiking.com



Mule Ears Peaks, Big Bend National Park, Photograph Courtesy of annemckinnell.com

Once again, Darge gave us his *all* and then some with this colorful and vivid panoramic view of the Chisos Mountains in the back ground. The large remuda being gathered for the day's work, heading for the corrals somewhere not shown in the foreground illustrates a scene that was part of the routine for both cowboys and horses. Darge loved to paint in the Big Bend and it certainly shows in this piece. He painted with a very rare touch of modernism delicately

visible in the two front peaks. The peaks, lightly shaded green colors, appear to be the Mule Ears Peaks area, one of the classic Big Bend National Park views.