

***“The Gen-u-wine Stuff”:
Character Makes
The Difference in the
Trail-Drivin’ Novel***

by

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Not always trusting his sense of direction in broad daylight, the early trail boss or a conscientious chuck-wagon cook carefully pointed the tongue of the chuck-wagon directly at the North Star before he turned in for the night. Then, as readers of cowboy fiction know, the trail-driving cowpunchers “followed the tongue” next morning, confident that their longhorn charges were pointed in the right direction when they hazed them into line for another day’s drive. The herd’s destination might be Abilene, Dodge City, or Ogallala, but the cowboys knew that if they generally moved north, they were on course during the two or three-month drive. For more than two decades in the history of the westering movement of the American frontiersmen, the Texas cowboy rode determinedly cross-grain to the prevailing direction of western expansion. But not many novelists have seen much significance in the counter-movement. In 1923 Emerson Hough pointed out that already there “is a comprehensive literature covering our westbound expansion, but of the great north-and-south pastoral road almost the contrary must be said, such is the paucity of titles.”

Hough might not revise his opinion much today. Popular western paperback writers have employed the trail-drive motif more often than other novelists,¹ but most writers concerned with the westering of Americans have either ignored or avoided the possibilities for fiction that these cowboys who rode north between 1860 and 1885 offer. The ready-made structure and limited time element of the trail drive may not challenge the serious writer of western fiction, but he is guilty of literary short-sightedness if he fails to perceive that these sturdy men, as well as several women, cutting across the established patterns of movement in America often had personalities as cross-grained and complex as the trails they laid out and followed.

Reading the first-hand accounts of trail drivers collected in 1920-23 by the Old Time Trail Drivers' Association of Texas³ reveals rich diversity of concerns, motivation, and personality in those who went up the trail. In a recent critical survey of criticism of western fiction, Don D. Walker observes that the novelist "seeks to represent not the maximum concreteness of a particular past time and place, but the universal concreteness of all men in all times and places."⁴ These men who drove cattle north so soon after the Civil War sometimes rode with companions who had been their enemies only several months before. Many sought the protection of Yankee cavalymen. They encountered border ruffians, predatory Indians, and irate farmers, whom they had to outwit or pacify. Often they were lonely, homesick, or ill. Some saw good friends drown, or die under the hooves of two thousand stampeding longhorns on a stormy night. Some were able to joke about bad luck and dangerous experiences. Others "emigrated" and headed home in the middle of a drive. Although rhetorical styles of these old timers vary, they tell much about themselves as human beings by what they choose to relate and by what they imply. What they say is concrete: they tell their stories and leave the reader to generalize. What one reads between the lines, however, gives universal significance to their adventures. When Douglas Branch discussed Emerson Hough's *North of 36* with an ex-cowboy, the old puncher appraised character in the novel this way: "Don't forget Jim Nahours and old Alamo . . . They are the gen-u-wine stuff—and they make the book."⁵ To judge those novels which have already been made and to create any other significant trail-drive fiction in the future, critics and writers will do well to read these first-person narratives, not only for historical background, but for insight into the narrators' personalities. The general experience may have been similar for the tellers of these tales, but their responses to the job of going up the trail are individual and unique. These raconteurs are the "gen-u-wine stuff."

In his introduction to the 1963 reprint edition of *The Trail Drivers of Texas*, Harry Sinclair Drago calls the book the "bible of historians and fiction writers." Verification of the aptness of the label is not difficult. In *North of 36*, Hough gives *Trail Drivers* credit for providing the story of how the cowboys fooled the cow buyer by tying mature horns on a yearling steer. The cowboys assured the gullible Yankee that the water down on Laguna Del Sol "sort of makes the cows in there run to horn, like."⁶ Trail-drive novelists are equally indebted to the old cowpunchers for historical authenticity and plot development, but most need the advice Gene Rhodes gives in his essay, "The West That Was." He says, "The cowboy was not other

than yourself, except by his hard training. As has been said before, and I shall say again, 'cowboys are just like humans, only bow-legged.'" There are no stock characters nor stereotyped responses in the Old Trail Drivers' narratives.

The cowboy characterizes himself in these accounts by the details he recalls from his experience and by his assessment, often implied, of that chapter in his life. The style with which he narrates his story often tells even more about the writer. J. M. Hankins' first projected trip up the trail as a twenty-year-old never materialized. After gathering cattle, sometimes afoot, in the almost waterless Nueces River country for nearly three months, Hankins has a run-in with the outfit boss, who tells him he can't go home before the other cowboys return from their leaves. Hankins says, "I rebelled, 'cut my bedding,' rounded up my 'crow bait' and pulled out for home, where I stayed for two days." His father sends him back, but the trail boss fires him before they head up the trail. Hankins ends his story simply: "Smith Bros. went 'busted' that year." He does not add that he feels that this is poetic justice, but the reader senses a grim satisfaction in his statement of the fact (111-13).

George F. Hindes remembers that he had "about the usual amount of trouble" when he took a herd up the trail to Wichita from San Antonio in 1872. He coped with high rivers, night storms, several stampedes, and a tribe of Osage Indians who scattered his cattle and killed about one hundred beeves as the cowboys looked on helplessly. But the cattleman does not dwell upon adversities—they were routine. What he remembers best is that when he returned home he had \$15,000 in gold, a \$10,000 life insurance policy, a stocker herd of cattle and horses, all of which made him feel as "chesty as Croesus, in his palmiest day, ever dared to feel." Hindes continued to prosper, organizing a bank at Pearsall, Texas, in 1903. His account concludes with his admitting much personal satisfaction with his part in "the upbuilding of this section of a wonderful state" (823-25).

As Hindes did, many trail cowboys became prosperous cattlemen, but a witty, unsentimental old puncher from Del Rio gives no credit to the trail-driving experience for any prosperity he may enjoy. G. J. Burrows remembers:

I had my share of the ups and downs—principally downs—on the old cattle trail. Some of my experiences was getting hungry, getting cold and wet, riding sore-backed horses, going to sleep on herd and losing cattle, getting "cussed" by the boss, scouting for "graybacks," trying the "sick racket" now and then to get a night's sleep

But it was not the legendary "big times" at the northern end of the trail that made the tiresome trip worthwhile. It was his triumphant arrival back in "good old Santone rigged out with a pair of high-heeled boots, striped breeches, and about \$6.30 worth of clothes." Soon he was broke and back at the range bragging about what he had seen up North. In the spring, he would "have the same old trip, the same old things would happen in the same old way, and with the same old wind-up." He repeated the cycle for nearly twenty years, but what came of this experience was not a well-stocked ranch and presidency of a bank. Burrows says, "All I had in the final outcome was the high-heeled boots, the striped pants and about \$4.80 worth of clothes, so there you are" (20). No romanticized tale of courageous adventures is this, but Burrows obviously still has a sense of humor and a philosophical acceptance of things as they are.

Experiences of W. E. Cureton were varied. He drove cattle west to California as well as north, but one experience he relates with relish. A doctor from Baxter Springs, Kansas, bought a herd of cattle from him in 1869 in Palo Pinto County, Texas, and the doctor chose to boss the herd through to Kansas. Cureton was an experienced trail driver; the doctor was not. After exhausting himself, the cowboys, and the horses trying to start the herd across a swollen river early one morning, the doctor finally gave up and asked Cureton's advice. Only then did Cureton point out that cows will not take to water with the sun in their eyes. At one p.m. with the sun moving westward, he says that the cattle crossed without mishap. Cureton remembers with obvious pleasure that the doctor "looked at me and said, 'Well, I'll be damned- every man to his profession'" (55). After a cowboy had been up the trail a few times, he considered himself a professional.

Branch Isbell is not only a professional cowboy, he is obviously a raconteur who analyzes many of his experiences with psychological insight. After Kansas was becoming settled and plowed, Isbell rode away from the trail north of Great Bend to hunt some strays. He rode too late to get back to camp with his men, and he knew the farmers disliked cowboys. He posed as a farmer following some Texas cowboys whose cows had destroyed his crop, and a young couple fed and bedded him and listened with interest to "fictitious yarns" about his Illinois childhood. Next morning he admits "repentance came to me like a clap of thunder from a clear sky," and he told them who he was. They seemed to have remained friendly. What interests the reader here is that Isbell continues with his own observance that these were "good people at heart," and that they and the drovers "misunderstood each other badly, each side in selfishness failing to grasp the other's viewpoint" (579).

Witty, laconic, exaggerated, or philosophical, the stories these trail drivers relate about their own experiences erases for the reader any stereotyped ideas or images he has about the so-called mythical cowboy. Their narratives never bore the reader, but it is rewarding also to focus at times upon single revealing observations of the cowboy writers. When George Hindes describes his encounters with Comanche Indians in the 1860's, his description is poetic in its implications. He says, "A good run always suited me better than a doubtful stand, but either one was lonesome and frightful" (882). Amanda Burks, one of the few women to belong to the Old Time Trail Drivers' Association, went up the trail with her husband in 1871. Her lively account includes many details of her trip. In Ellis County where civilization was skimpy, Amanda visited with an old woman she found stringing beans in the doorway of a cabin near the trail. The frontier woman's tenacity and acceptance of her fate, as well as her sense of humor, are reflected in her comment upon her presence there. She says, "Yes, sir, I'm the first woman that made a track in Dallas County, and I would be back in Tennessee now, only I would have to go through Arkansas to get there. I guess I'll stay right here" (299).

The stereotypical response of the cowboy to the Indian who steals his horses is to chase the Indian or outwit him and recover the horses, no matter the cost. J. B. Pomphrey describes such a chase as "the hardest ride of my life." He adds, "We did not overtake the Indians, and I am now glad that we did not" (27). Like several of the cowboy writers, P. J. Jennings chooses his words well. He remembers his futile efforts to separate a herd of cows from their calves this way: "I was two or three days getting away from where we cut the cows from the yearlings; we moved like a snail climbing a slick log, so far up in daytime, slipping back at night" (535). Another stylist, cowboy-philosopher Branch Isbell, sums up what he learned about living life well when he says, "If work kills half the people and worry the other half, my chance should be good to survive indefinitely—for I have quit both" (582). Consciously or naturally, many of these cowboys knew how to express themselves with considerable flair and insight.

There are more than three hundred accounts in *Trail Drivers*, most of which are first-hand. Writers of trail-drive novels surely have read some of these and other personal accounts of early-day cowboys. It is not the intention here to verify such a connection, but if these novels are to be assessed intelligently, the critic himself must be cognizant of the rich materials which the novelist has at hand. Among the writers of novels which are structured upon the events of the trail drive north are at least five which have merited critical

attention. Andy Adams' *The Log of a Cowboy* relates day-to-day events of the drive authentically with understanding and humor. Twenty years after Adams' narrative appeared in 1903, Emerson Hough introduced a variation to the trail-drive theme by allowing a woman to make the drive. In 1937 Walter Gann chose to give a steer named Sancho equal billing with a cowhand named Bill Sanders in *The Trail Boss*. Texas writer Benjamin Capps won the Western Writer of America Spur Award in 1965 for his account of a cowboy who should have been trail boss but is not in *The Trail To Ogallala*. Robert Flynn's novel *North to Yesterday*, which parodies, with compassion, the traditional trials of the cowboy on a drive, appeared in 1967.

If the character makes the difference in whether a trail-drive novel is worthwhile, Capps and Flynn seem to have come closest among these novelists to understanding what the early cowboy saw and felt. J. Frank Dobie's assessment of *The Log of a Cowboy* establishes for that narrative its proper relationship to the novels which were to follow. His familiar critique says:

If all other books on trail driving were destroyed, a reader could still get a just and authentic conception of trail men, trail work, range cattle, cow horses, and the cow country in general from *The Log of a Cowboy*. It is a novel without plot, a woman, character development, or sustained dramatic incidents; yet it is the classic of the occupation.

According to Dobie, Adams was critical of Hough's novel when it appeared because he had added a woman to the trail-drive outfit in *North of 36*. Adams thought this addition "violated reality." Stuart Henry's attempt in 1930 to set readers straight on what Abilene, Kansas, was really like in the beginning also attacks Hough's historical accuracy of this novel.¹⁰ But neither of these criticisms pinpoint the novel's chief inadequacy. Jim Nabours and the old Alamo, the lead steer, may be the "gen-u-wine stuff," but Taisie Lockhart is not. Taisie's personality fluctuates from that of a sentimental, weeping, clinging girl to that of a determined, courageous, frontier woman. When Taisie and Jim resolve to make the first drive up the Chisholm Trail, Jim asks her, "You'll take it fair, child, if we do the best we can fer you? You'll never holler?" She declares, "You know I never will, Jim. And you know I'll go along and I'll go through" (55). But that resoluteness disappears when Taisie must deal with the men who love her. She is far from forthright here. Hough deals more than any other trail-drive novelist with the complexities of the problems of the Reconstruction period in Texas, but he reincarnates the Virginian as his hero Dan McMasters, and he never makes up his mind who Taisie really is--Southern belle or frontier woman?

Dobie recounts the tales of Sancho and Old Blue, two longhorn steers, in *The Longhorns*.¹¹ but Sancho was not a lead steer as Old Blue was. He was Maria Kerr's pet, who somehow found his way back home to Southwest Texas after being trailed to the Big Horn Mountains. Old Blue, however, made many trail drives because of his abilities to lead the willful longhorns. Sancho in *The Trail Boss* is a combination of the two legendary steers. Bill Sanders, ranch hand, cattle inspector, and finally trail boss, has watched Sancho survive where others could not, and he becomes protective of the star-crossed steer. Sancho leads Bill's herd up the trail only to suffer an ignominious death at the hands of a cattle thief who needs transportation and cinches his saddle so tight Sancho can not swim. Bill leaves his reward for catching the thief with the sheriff to have a statue of Sancho carved as a monument and heads home to Texas to marry the school teacher who is still waiting.

Gann's creation of working cowboys are realistic portrayals. Sancho, however, is the dynamic character in this novel, and his antics give continuity to the plot. Bill's attachment for Sancho is plausible. However, Gann manipulates rather than develops his plot when Sancho, who is determined to leave the trail and go back to the ranch and who has to be tied to a tree every night to prevent his sly departure, suddenly turns into a lead steer at the river and saves the herd. Old Blue accomplished such miracles in his lifetime, many trail bands remembered, but he ambled to the head of Charles Goodnight's herd the first time he was put on the trail. Old Blue was born a leader, according to Goodnight.¹² But whether Sancho is true to steer nature or not, Gann does make Bill Sanders' admiration and defense of Sancho credible and sympathetic.

Both Capps and Flynn seem to have consciously chosen what seems at first to be stereotyped characters for their novels, but their intent differs. Among the cowboys who go up the trail in Capps' novel are Dandy, Professor, Scratchy, the Kid, and the Colonel, who is trail boss. The choice of the trite nicknames is deliberate. Capps depicts characters who, although their names lead the reader to expect the usual stereotyped cowpoke headed up the trail, are motivated, believable, and three-dimensional. On the other hand, Flynn, who names his trail hands such names as Preacher, Pretty Shadow, June, and the Kid, exaggerates his characterizations to satirize the trail-drive stereotype.

In Capps' novel, Bill Scott is crushed to find that the wife of his late boss has named the Bible-reading, inflexible, Southern Colonel Kittredge to boss a herd up the trail instead of himself. The job had been promised to him, and the dead rancher's associates want Bill to

look out for their interests, even though Bill ends up riding drag. On the trail the Colonel dies, and the stupid *segundo* Blackie takes over the herd. Capps' psychological insight is clearly demonstrated in his development of Bill's character. Bill himself understands human nature, so that he is able to make the difficult decisions during the drive without seeming to usurp Blackie's titular power. As the drive progresses, the reader learns the background of each cowboy. Their origins and motivations for becoming cowboys are widely different. Their reasons for joining the drive vary from Juan Martinez's (Johnny to the cowhands) traditional one of escaping prosecution for knifing his sweetheart's other lover back in Mexico to the Professor's need to escape the memories of Civil War service and his urge to see the West. As he rides, the Professor compares the herd's weight to that of the Greenland whale Melville describes, which leads in turn to his comparing his job to Ishmael's. His soliloquy here, were it audible, would startle the Professor's comrades. He decides his job of following "three thousand individual wills" is harder than Ishmael's whale-chasing. He thinks

And, note, Ishmael, no blubber. It's all horn and rawhide, lean muscle, sinew, bone. No, you soft fellows can go whaling. Ishmael, but we who are tough, who love hard work and a hard life God! What am I saying? If that damn old goat Kitredge doesn't let up on us pretty soon, I'm going to quit this outfit when we pass Fort Griffin.

Reading all these books has given the Professor not only knowledge but self-knowledge. Capps succeeds in writing the best traditional trail-drive novel to date because he creates cowboys who feel, think and change. Even the stupid Blackie becomes a sympathetic character by the time Bill declares his rights at the end of the trail as the valid boss of the drive.

North to Yesterday is a very funny novel. As the title indicates this is a latter-day drive organized by an old storekeeper Lampassas who has longed all his life to go up the trail. The longhorns are skinny outlaws the ranchers want to be rid of. The cowboys lose their horses in a stampede instigated by members of the Brazos County Cattleman and Stockraisers' Association to stop a drive which is fifteen years too late. But Lampassas, his broken-down cowboys, and the runaway girl Covina and her baby, stubbornly chase the longhorns and their dreams north on foot toward Trail's End. Exaggerated though their character portrayals are, the cowboys are very human. They accept their fate and support each other against unbelievable adversities. Flynn's comic touch is sure—there is a laugh a page—but he does not create literature, despite his sensitivity to human con-

cerns. Had he controlled the slapstick comedy and developed the muted tragedy implied in this situation of a motley bunch of has-beens searching for their impossible dreams, Flynn might have written the best trail-drive novel yet. Typical of Flynn's shading of the serious into the farcical is the scene where the thirsty cowboys decide to pray for rain one evening. They press the girl Covina to lead. Her prayer is a general petition, but the cowboys want her to get specific. They pray with her then for buckets of water, beer, whiskey, gin, rum, and rye. Finally, Covina adds "buckets of buttermilk." "That's way to hell too much buttermilk," Pretty Shadow interjects.⁴ Most of Flynn's initially serious scenes on the trail dissolve into comic relief. He never seems to decide whether he wants to keep his readers laughing, make them more aware of some of the absurd ideas the modern reader may have about the old-time trail driver, or explore the tragedy implicit in the situation he has created.

Each of these novels makes a contribution to trail-drive fiction, but there is yet to be written a novel which incorporates fully the results of the writer's perceptive reading of the old trail-drivers' narratives. The facts and the adventures of the trail drivers are there, but more important, the human concerns of the cowboy are evident. Jesse M. Kilgore ends his account in this collection with this appraisal: "If it had not been for the president of our association, George W. Saunders, there would have been nothing left for the younger generations to know who opened good old Texas for them to live in" (678). Sources for the would-be trail drive novelists would also be impoverished.

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NOTES

1. *North of 36* (New York: D. Appleton, 1923), p. 56.

2. For example, Louis L'Amour's *North to the Rails* (New York: Bantam, 1971) and Harry Sinclair Drago's *Sun in Their Eyes* (New York: Pocketbooks, 1962).

3. The first edition of *The Trail Drivers of Texas* was compiled and edited by J. Marvin Hunter, under the direction of George W. Saunders, second president of the Old Time Trail Drivers' Association organized in San Antonio, Texas, in 1915. A two-volume edition was published first in 1920-23. A second edition appeared in one volume in 1925. In 1963 a limited number of reprints of the first edition were published. Subsequent references in the text of this paper are to the second edition.

4. "Criticism of the Cowboy Novel: Retrospect and Reflection," *Western American Literature*, 11 (Winter 1977), 294.

5. *The Cowboy and His Interpreters* (New York: Cooper Square, 1961), p. 206.

6. See pp. 372-76.

7. *The Rhodes Reader*, ed. W. H. Hutchinson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), p. 272.

8. *Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest* (Dallas: SMU Press, 1969), p. 94. Originally printed in 1952.
9. *Dobie*, pp. 107-108
10. See Appendix, *Conquering Our Great American Plains* (New York, E. P. Dutton, 1930), pp. 353-381
11. New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1941. See Chapters XV and XVI.
12. *The Longhorns*, Chapter XVI.
13. *The Trail to Ogallala* (New York: Duell, 1964), p. 47.
14. *North to Yesterday* (New York: Knopf, 1967), p. 271.