



MORGANS ON A CATTLE DRIVE

by Jo Johnson

Dawn came very early on Wednesday, June 21. The fact that we had all been up and working for an hour before the sun even began to creep over the mountaintop was just another interesting aspect to this cattle drive.

Three of us, John Hutcheson (Gabcreek Farms, GA), Rick Allen, and myself, had embarked upon an adventure with three of my Morgan colts that would take us over the Great Western Divide and down into the Golden Trout Wilderness, east of Porterville, CA. This drive is the longest cattle drive operating in California. Since 1918, the Shannon family has been taking herds of between about 400 and 500 head of cattle from their ranch near Porterville, up and over the mountains and down into the Grey Meadow area of the Golden Trout Wilderness. Here, on a large USFS land lease, they graze their cattle all summer in the lush meadows of the High Country.

There were a total of 9 of us on the drive - the ranch owner Jack Shannon, three of his cowboys (Walt, Andy, and Tommy), Jack's great-nephew Cory, the three of us, plus one other participant from the Los Angeles area who rides with Jack every year (Dave Gorton).

Prior to our arrival, the others had spent the previous two days branding and vaccinating the cattle down at Jack's ranch, then started them up into the mountains. John, Rick, and I linked up with Jack and the cattle at a gorgeous spot known as Long Meadow, a day's ride south of Ponderosa, CA, on Tuesday afternoon. We were briefed on what to expect during the upcoming several days, treated to a wonderful dinner cooked by Walt in the camp trailer that accompanied us for the first 2 days of our journey, and Thank Goodness we knew enough to hit the sleeping bags early!

Next morning we were up and breaking camp before daylight - as in, around 0430.

Our three Morgans (Jaf CharKoll Independence; Jaf Twilight Dream Dancer, and NVS Mi Sonnetta) met us at the gate of the meadow where they had spent the night grazing with the herd of 389 head of cattle - mostly cow/calf pairs, with a few bulls thrown in. We saddled up and finished breaking camp while the others located and caught up their horses - all immense QH's bred on Jack's ranch. Jack's horses dwarfed our Morgan youngsters. The smallest QH was easily 15-3, and the largest was a massive 17 hands and probably weighed 1750 lbs. Well, Jack is a big man at 6-5, so it makes sense he might want his horses big. Being 5-4 myself, I can't say I am particularly enamored with that much size in my horses anymore!

Our three Morgans ranged in height from 15-1, down to a flat 14 hands. All are 4-yr olds, and very, very green. Two of them had just 25 rides apiece on them, and although the 3rd had more arena time she had only a half-dozen short "trail" rides in the orange groves that surround our home. I breed and train Morgans for a living, following the methodology of Ray Hunt and Buck Brannaman, and so I was pretty confident that I had a solid enough foundation on these colts that they would be able to handle the myriad of things they were



about to be exposed to.

That first dark, chilly morning was certainly an exciting beginning to our trek. Some of the guys rode into the meadow and began to push the herd out, while the rest of us positioned ourselves along the trail in order to help line the cattle out and keep them from drifting off and down into all the little stringer meadows that line the road. There is nothing quite like having a herd of nearly 400 head of bawling cattle coming at your colt, out of the dark, to really get the blood flowing!

Jack obtains a permit each year to drive his cattle down the road for a couple of the days. It basically follows the old cattle trail, and makes a relatively easy path along the top of the Great Western Divide. The cattle started out with energy, but in the above-average temperatures we were riding in they tire easily and they can overheat. After awhile it becomes quite a challenge to hold them in a herd and keep them moving, as they want to drift off and rest in the brush or stop and graze in meadows as we pass by them. Jack had 3 wonderful cattle dogs to help, but since the herd lined out over quite a large area, our Morgans had plenty of opportunities to learn their new jobs.

Although we started out with extremely green young colts, we ended up with some phenomenally well-broke, solid, bold and trustworthy Morgans. I had what I considered a pretty good start on these colts, and am happy to report that for the most part they were in a happy and learning frame of mind. Things like jiggling on the trail, tailgating they were a non-issue for these colts. But the multitude of new things they were exposed to over the next week definitely challenged these youngsters - and absolutely helped them to become wonderful horses.

If there is a way to teach horses what they learned on this drive, without actually going on a drive - I do not know what it is. These colts experienced some amazing things - bogs (believe me, the term does NOT give them justice), having the dogs bust out of the brush right under their feet, or above their heads on a slope, having cows charge the dogs - and right at the horses, chasing cattle through brush so thick that it looks like a solid wall, going up almost vertical slopes after a cow, and then back down that same near-vertical slope, streams of every depth, deadfalls they had to leap over in order to head off a cow....then there was the added aspect of the traffic on the road those first two days. Jack tries to let traffic go through whenever possible, and because this is in the Sequoia National Forest there are tour buses that come by, as well as huge USFS rigs - all with air brakes. We were so close to these behemoths, we could reach out and touch them. Amazingly enough, they did not bother the colts except for an occasional startle when the air brakes would bleed. There were also motorcycles and many cars and pickups - no problem.

Not that our trip was without its share of excitement. The first morning, Andy was mounted on one of Jack's QH's, and went after a cow that headed off through the meadow and away from the herd. All was well - until suddenly the meadow footing changed from soggy, to boggy. At a walk, these bogs jump up at you and capture your horse very suddenly - you simply cannot see them coming. You can be walking in mushy, wet ground and suddenly out of nowhere, the bog is there and you and your horse are instantly belly-deep in soft, sucking mud.

Well, at a canter, this bog sucked Andy and his colt, Archie, down like a rock. Archie was instantly face-planted in the chest-deep mud, and their momentum threw them over. Archie rolled over Andy, who thankfully was not hurt. Just very, VERY muddy. But it was a spectacular wreck, and now all we "newbys" had quite a lot of respect for what could be lurking out there in the grass.

Then later on John, riding my filly Dancer, was in the middle of the herd as we rode down the paved and graveled road. Suddenly the herd spooked and stampeded around him, the cattle squirting watery, green manure in their wake. The stampede lasted only a minute, but the cattle covered the road with these wet spots - a road that was already slippery from the oil heating up in the hot sun. Although Dancer was not bothered by the stampede, she suddenly slipped in one of the spots of manure - and down she went in a heap - all four legs spraddled. John remained on board, figuring she would be better off if he stayed with her. Sure enough, after a moment or two, Dancer gathered herself, stood up, and calmly walked back to her place in the herd - with not a scratch on her. It was amazing.



Every now and again Jack would have us push the herd off the road and into one of the meadows, so that the cattle could rest and refresh. At about 8,000 ft elevation, and having climbed all day for the previous couple of days - rest was a good thing. After a short while though, the cattle would usually decide it was time to scatter and so we would be busy pushing the strays back into the herd - which gave us lots of great opportunities to work on our horses' skills.

At one point we were making the last hard push up to the trailhead, out of a huge meadow. The cattle are tired and hot, and getting them to start moving is no easy task. To make matters worse, though, they chose a much more difficult path than we might have liked. John went ahead on Dancer, to try and point the lead cattle in the right direction. Shouldn't have been an issue - except for the fact that John had NO idea where he was. Nor did he have any idea of where we were supposed to go! Seriously, this was the blind leading the blind. John is from Georgia, had never ridden in the Sequoia National Forest until this week, and of course had not been advised of the route Jack had intended the cattle to take..

Well, leave it to a career foot soldier to figure it out. (John is a retired Army Colonel, with more miles under his belt that I have on all my horses, I suspect). He had seen a downed wire not far back and decided that wire had to lead somewhere that there might be some form of civilization. Turns out that was the telephone line to the Golden Trout Wilderness Pack Station, which - unbeknownst to John - was what we were supposed to be headed towards. John's deductive skills proved to be excellent. He headed the cattle up the mountain, following what was basically the same direction as the downed wire.

Although he was completely alone in the middle of nowhere with over 100 head of someone else's cattle (can we spell...STRESS?), he managed to put all the pieces of the puzzle together, and send the herd of cattle in the right direction. And what's more - he and Dancer kept that entire herd of cattle together for the whole distance. Kinda shameful, when you consider the fact that the other 300 head were shared by four of us, plus 3 dogs. (The others were shuttling vehicles up to the trailhead). Clearly, John and Dancer's cattle-handling skills were growing by leaps and bounds.

Close to the end of the day, we all caught up together and arrived at the Lewis Camp Trailhead. Here we had to say goodbye to our support vehicles - the pickup and travel trailer that had been serving as our "pack horse" and kitchen. Now all our gear would be loaded onto actual pack horses for the 6-mile trek down into Grey Meadow. First, though, we pushed the cattle up over the rim and started them down the mountain, into the Golden Trout Wilderness. Once it looked like they were going the right direction, we returned to the Trailhead for a short break and a bite to eat. These first two days we had been in the saddle for between 11 and 12 hours, each - pretty quick you learn to rest when you have the chance. Once everything was loaded onto the packhorses and the

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Once everything was loaded onto the packhorses and the hitches had been thrown, we were off. We pushed the cattle down the mountain ahead of us. This trail drops you about

1,000 feet in elevation, then goes back up for a few hundred feet in elevation gain, and finally back down again into Grey Meadow, all in about a 6-mile stretch. In places, the steepness of the drop is amazing - but as we were about to discover, it can get worse. The lead cows, some of whom have been making this trip annually for several years, had missed a turnoff and headed down the wrong trailwell, as we

all had learned by now, you go where the cattle go. Suffice it to say that when we got to the bottom, my filly had sand and pine needles all over her tail dock. By this time, I am convinced these Morgans are good to go anywhere, in the absolute roughest country in the world. Oh - and did I mention they are all barefoot?

We arrived at Grey Meadow within about an hour and a half after leaving the trailhead. After unpacking and unsaddling the horses, we turned them out in Jack's fenced meadow near the cow camp. Now it was time for the first bath we'd seen in three days.....until or unless you have gone that long without one, in the incredible dust kicked up by several hundred head of cattle, it is very difficult to imagine how fabulous it feels to be clean again! Jack has a large cabin there at Grey and it easily handles several guests, but a couple of us elected to swim in the nearby creek instead of utilizing the shower in the cabin. After the heat of the last few days the cold creek water felt fabulous - it was hard to make myself get out. But by now it was almost dark and dinner was calling, and I'm not known for missing many meals.

The next morning, events conspired to change my life - and the life of one of my colts. John and I got ready to head out and move cattle down to some different meadows, and left Inde, my black bay colt behind. Well, Inde was raised with the filly John was riding, and being left behind was not on his agenda. Rather than risk him taking on the 3-wire fence that surrounds the pasture, Jack suggested leaving him inside his 5' high wooden corral, which is about the diameter of a large box stall. Then we tied a ranch colt outside, to keep Inde company.

This worked from 6 AM till about 1 PM, when one of the cowboys saw the ranch colt racing down the trail, alone. Apparently the colt had gotten loose from where he was tied, and Inde decided that was too much for him. So he jumped the fence. I knew he was athletic, but he had to take that fence with no more than one stride, if any. He didn't even leave any hair on the top rail - there was no sign he had ever been inside that corral. And he is gone without a trace. We all searched for him for the next three days, to no avail. Jack is a master

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tracker, but with nearly 400 head of cattle milling around, finding sign was pretty tough.

We rode all the major trails, searched every meadow within several miles, sent ranch cowboys off in all directions, and went back up & over the divide to notify the pack station that my colt was gone and give them a description in case someone contacted them. We reported to the District Ranger the fact that we had lost the colt, and since arriving home I have been on the phone almost constantly, filing reports, making notifications about my lost colt and arranging for people to help search, plus making posters, and contacting local auction facilities.

Apparently this is not a new thing for most of these folks. Almost everyone I spoke with had a story to tell, about having lost a horse in the backcountry. Some had been gone as long as 6 months, before turning up. Others, as little as 30 days. So my hopes remain high that Inde will wander up to someone's campsite and ask for a scratch. The best news is that there are very few mountain lions residing in the area, as there is no food for them. The underbrush and deadfalls are prohibitive for most wildlife, and so deer and other animals have moved out. There are bears, but these are not apt to bother a horse. And there is plenty of grass in the meadows, and lots and lots of beautiful, clear water. I imagine when we find him, Inde will be in excellent shape!

While searching, we moved some cattle around as needed, to take advantage of the grass in the many different meadows in the area. Jack navigates this land like most of us navigate the interior of our own homes - he knows every square inch. It is almost a part of him.

Eventually, we had to leave. It was tough to leave Inde behind, but there is so very much country back in there that trying to conduct a search is almost foolish. Our best hope is that someone will see him, or perhaps even halter him up and turn him over to Jack, or to the Ranger, or to Steve at the Pack Station near Lewis Camp Trailhead. We will see. In all the time I have spent in the backcountry over the last 40 years, I had never lost a horse. This was a new experience - one I do not care to repeat. Except for that, though, this was a truly incredible, dream-come-true week. To spend this many days on horseback in some of the most beautiful country on Earth, giving your horse jobs to do by working cattle and having to always know where his feet are in the rough terrain, helping him learn so many, many new things - it is a gift. The people are fabulous, the views are spectacular, the air is clean, and the water is clear. We laughed so much our jaws ached. We learned so much our brains felt fried at the end of the day. And our ponies - well, they speak for themselves.

For more information on the Shannon Ranch Cattle Drive, contact Jack Shannon at (559) 788-2341; or Golden Trout Wilderness Packtrains, at (559) 542-2816.

For information on our Morgans, contact Jo or Brent Johnson at (559) 787-9697, or email at jjafmorganstockhorses@unwiredbb.com.

Editor Update: On July 20th while doing volunteer packing for the Forest Service in Northern California, Jo received a phone call from her husband informing her that her horse had been found by a back packer. Two days later the colt was returned home virtually unharmed except for a few brush scrapes on its legs... Jo wept she was so happy. Only Inde knows the whole story of where he had been for those 28 days.