Trail Boss James Cook's Description of Life on the Texas Trail

James H. Cook trailed Texas cattle in the 1870s and later established a ranch at Agate Springs, Nebraska. On May 23, 1907, Judge Eli S. Ricker interviewed Cook, and what follows is a heavily edited transcription of that interview. The entire interview can be found in:

Voices of the American West: The Settler and Soldier Interviews of Eli S. Ricker, 1903-1919
ed. Richard E. Jensen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005)

A drive always occupied the season — never but one drive was made the same year. . . . The cattlemen had their foremen for the drive, and under these were all the other employees. . . . [A] drive of a thousand miles to 1,800 miles, cover[ed] a whole season of six months. The drive began usually about the first of March from southern Texas...

It took about 12 men to handle a herd. There were the Caporal or Foreman or Boss, the Cook, the Horse Herder or Wrangler, the Point Drivers, the Swing Drivers, and the Drag Drivers. When on night service they were divided into three watches. When all was quiet, the cattle were easy and contented, and there was no danger from the outside, three men stationed around the herd-circle, were enough to control the herd through the night, but if the cattle were restless, were lying upon their briskets and sniffing the air . . . then it might be that the whole force would be required to be on their horses . . . From six to ten horses to the man were used; these were furnished by the owner, for experiment had shown that when the rider owned his horses he had such a personal interest that he would not ride hard enough, when sometimes it was necessary, to prevent the cattle from getting away. There was always a wagon in the outfit, drawn by a four-ox team; occasionally six oxen were used.

The right way to drive these cattle was to run them in a long, narrow column which tapered toward the front end to half a dozen in width. On each side and some distance in rear of the leaders, or "pointers" as they were called, was a single driver, and these two foremost drivers were called respectively right and left "point" drivers. Behind these on either side and nearly midway of the column were the right and left hand "swing" drivers; in rear of these at the proper distance were two more "swing" drivers, and in rear of the column were two "drag" drivers whose duty was to bring up the laggards. The drivers kept the cattle in column by riding from their stations rearward till they reached the driver next behind. Two opposite drivers riding backward and pressing in toward the center overcame the tendency in the stock to spread out and kept the procession in narrow width. When these riders had gone the length of their beats they swung out boldly and riding back in a more distant line from the column toward the front, then turning inwardly, rode again rearwards a short distance and recovered their proper positions. In this way two thousand cattle could be held in compact line extending two or three or more miles in length. . . . At some distance in advance rode the caporal or foreman who was the general guide picking out the trail and on the alert . . . to discover grazing spots, find water holes, cross rivers at proper places, and this personage was carefully followed by the point drivers who had the direction of the herd.

When it had been decided by those in front to give the cattle a spell of grazing, supposing the grass was on one side of the trail, the point driver next [to] the grazing plot swung outwardly, giving room to the cattle, while his partner on the opposite side of the line pressed in upon them riding up and down, thus changing their direction to the desired point; and the swing drivers pursuing the same method, the whole line was gradually turned toward the place where they were to refresh themselves. As the hindmost ones came up they all spread out to feeding.

In starting out from one of these places or from the bed-ground at daylight in the morning, the way of putting the herd in motion . . . was to relax the cordon of drivers on the side whence the cattle were to move, and let them graze out slowly in the direction of the day's drive. . .Two or three hours in the morning spent in this way filled their bellies and braced them up to stand the travel, as well as to maintain their accumulated flesh and to lay on a particle more. At an early hour usually by seven o'clock, if conditions were ordinary, the herd was in full swing along the trail. . . .

Let us suppose that we have reached one of the large rivers which smite the season's pathway. . . . With all due prudence the caporal has selected the crossing; but why did he mark a point just at a bend in the stream — a little above it — where the suspicious animals are to be

decoyed down to the brink and into the water? When I asked one of the experienced [drovers], he replied like this: "Don't you know that swimmers cannot make a straight course across a wide swift current, and that they invariably come out on the opposite side lower down the stream than where they entered it?" So it was with these cattle. Often, in spite of all exertions of the drivers concentrated on the lower side trying to keep them headed and struggling up stream, they would land half or three quarters of a mile below the starting point. . . . As the water bore the beasts down it would have been an easy matter for them to turn back toward the bank from which they started and land on that side.... When the crossing was made [at the top of the bend in the river] the head of the line was guided so as to bring the whole of it back upon the trail. . . .

By eleven o'clock the inclination of the cattle to graze would be apparent, and they were allowed to slacken their pace and swing out into the grass skirting the route of travel and fill up. The cook with the wagon continued on the trail to a point a mile or two in advance where he halted and prepared dinner. A part of the men perhaps trailed along with him, and while the cooking was going on, they were catching a little rest and their horses were out on grass. As soon as they had their dinner they were off to the herd which by this time was in the vicinity of the wagon; the other men were set free and came up for their repast, and when that was over, and they had helped the cook lift any heavy articles into the wagon and to hitch up his team. . . Some two hours were generally given to midday grazing. Towards six in the evening the cattle would be turned again upon the grass to fill up before winding up the bunch on the bed ground. Two to three hours sufficed for this; and then the process of putting the cattle to bed. . . followed. This feat consisted in the drivers, who were on all sides of the herd, riding round and round in a circle, gradually contracting the circuit until the cattle were in a compact body with just enough room to lie down.... The three reliefs or watches have been mentioned, but it is in order to explain that these went on duty successively at regular intervals, the division of the night into three periods giving opportunity for all to obtain needed sleep. The riders' horses were hobbled and turned loose at a little distance from the herd of cattle, the wagon most always standing between. One man kept watch over the horses, but in the course of the night two changes of the guard took place.

The last of these guards, when he saw the light coming in the east, threw the saddle on his pony, drew the cinch, and in the twinkling of an eye slipped the bit between his pony's teeth and the bridle over his ears; and when he had brought the other horses in and tied them to the wagon, he vaulted into the saddle and was off to the herd to assist the last relief in spinning the stock out for grazing in the main direction of the final destination of the season's drive. . . .

The horses required in these picturesque enterprises formed a herd of seventy-five or a hundred; five or six, and sometimes more, being the quota for each rider. One horse for every man was always under saddle for instant use and these were kept picketed when not on duty....

The last of these guards among the horse wranglers, when he saw the light coming in the east, was the archangel of the new day and announced its approach with great freedom of voice, usually with this proclamation: "The bulls are in the pen! Arise and shine! Give God the glory!"

At other times when the enthusiasm of the wrangler had soared to celestial or anti-celestial pitch the form of words and the utterance were such as would have melted the type in which these sentences are printed. . . . Then uprose all the stalwart cowboys. The horses had to be brought in and have their hobbles removed. This was something of a task and took a little time — ten or fifteen minutes. Ropes were run out from the wheels of the wagon, and a man at each end drew them taut and flaring to receive the horses when the wrangler drove them into this improvised corral. Others stood and closed the mouth so none could run out. The rest of the men took off the hobbles. These hobbles were made of strips of rawhide and were three and one-half feet long. They were so fashioned that the parts were flat which wrapped the fetlocks and those

coming between the feet were twisted.

The cook was busy meantime, and soon part of the men had eaten their breakfast and gone to relieve those who were attending to the herd. By seven the cattle were strung out in a grand line and moving majestically northward at the regular pace.

The ordinary routine furnishes themes of more easy description than do the irregular events which bring endless anxiety, labor and distress. Slight things threw the cattle into confusion and then a hurly burly scene followed. A horse wearing his saddle lies down to roll; when he rises the stirrups fall, and striking him in the sides give him fright; he springs to the length of his tether, snaps it and dashes into the herd. Up jump the steers in alarm; every one that comes to his feet causes a dozen others to bound to theirs; and now, as if by electric impulse — quick as lightning — the whole herd shaken with terror, plunges in one direction. . . . The alarm has brought every man to his feet. Stopping for nothing, caring for nothing but the one supreme object of overtaking, following, and at the first practicable moment turning and controlling the stampede, those quickest to think and act, seizing their saddled horses, and if no bridles be on them, taking a short-hitch on the lower jaw or the nose, with the rope that holds them, are instantly off, followed by the slower starters as fast as they are ready, each going at break-neck speed in the darkness, following the sound of the panic-stricken mass. The flight is so swift that some of the riders lose the herd entirely. Others overtake them; and then these begin that slow, soothing, reassuring wordless song with its long sustained notes peculiar in quality of sound, known to every cowboy on the Texas trail. . . .

The results of the chase are various. Sometimes the cattle are brought under control in a short while. The advance drivers head the foremost steers, turning them in their course so as to describe a circle, and presently the whole herd is running round and round; and this is continued till the crowding by the drivers on the outside has so compacted them that they wind up in a close body and come to a standstill. Daylight may find them several miles from where they started. But a single stampede may not be the extent of the night's disasters. After having been once brought to bay a second, a third, a fourth outbreak and race may take place before morning. . . .

Another character of the very highest importance upon these cattle driving trips was the cook. He was the keystone of the arch. The hardest worked of all the men. His hours of service were generally from three in the morning till eleven or twelve at night. Good natured, patient, experienced, long suffering, addicted to strong drink . . . This man of the menial position is a factor of such consequence to the business that the caporal has given more time to his selection than to that of any other one connected with the drive. He is the central figure of the group for six months and many hundreds of miles. . . .

The most trivial details had attention. Fresh water was not passed on the road without the barrels were refilled; it might be forty miles to the next water; it might be farther. Across those expansive deserts the trails wound without sight of tree or wood for hundreds of miles. But the faithful cook . . . carried a large hide beneath his wagon, stretched between the two axles, upon which he carried a store of cow chips for his fire when fuel could not be picked up in the neighborhood of the camp. . . . It is well to observe that the cook was the highest paid servitor connected with the drive, the foreman alone excepted. There was another distinction attached to his position, more sobering and less alluring; this was his greater danger from the Indians . . . because of his frequent isolation from the rest of the party could easily be cut off, and was always an inviting object of attack.

One of the most highly interesting transactions of his ordinary experience was the putting of his culinary department across the rivers which traversed the trail. Every conceivable mode of

passage was used to meet the ever changing circumstances. If trees had grown on the banks of streams it would have been easy to make rafts from them. Such rafts as could be made with parts of the wagon were sometimes put together and small weights taken over at each of several trips. Parts of the luggage like a sack of meal would be carried across on the back of a horse that swam high in the water. The wagon went over piecemeal. Ropes were attached to a wheel or an axle which was dragged from bank to bank by the riders' horses. Utensils were transported one at a time. Numerous trips were required to complete the transfer. When it was possible to get the cook's outfit over in advance this was done; it was of some advantage to have the camp across and established so that hot coffee and steaming viands might greet the drenched and chilled laborers when they had brought everything over. The draft oxen swam over with the herd. . . .

Having spoken of the "smoking viands" it ought to be explained that the food enjoyed by these men consisted of black coffee without sugar, corn bread baked in a Dutch oven, and fried pork. This menu was occasionally varied with fresh meat when an antelope or a buffalo was killed, or more rarely a fat cow which had been picked up along the way and smuggled into the herd, was shot down to garnish the plain ration of these men with abnormal appetites. In their riotous cheer, when they drew up in a little circle around the coffee kettle, sitting upon the ground or resting on their knees, and loaded their tin plates with Johnny cake and grease and long slices of ancient hog meat . . .