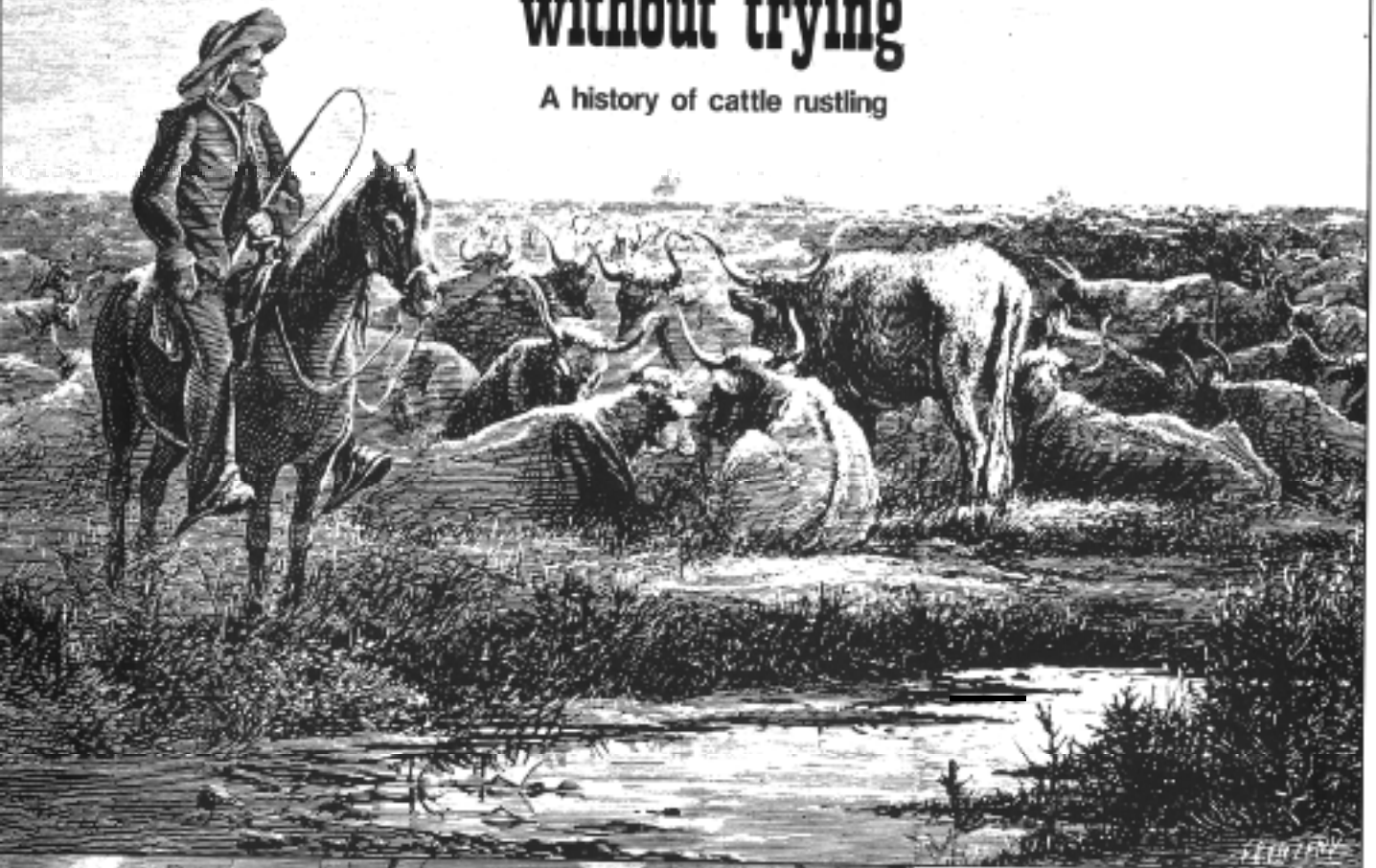


How they succeeded in the cattle business without trying

A history of cattle rustling



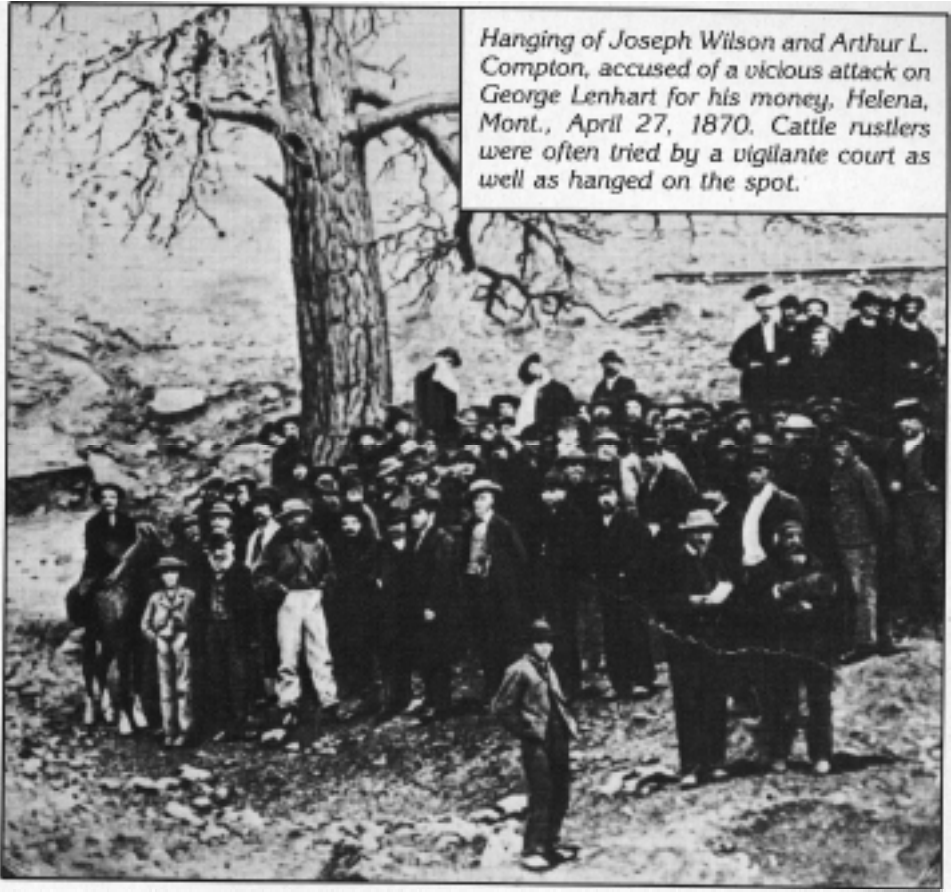
It was inevitable. A gigantic herd of 6,000,000 mostly unbranded, cows roaming the southwestern plains in the mid-1800s would embroil the budding cattle industry in thievery. Even branding and fencing failed to thwart the banditry.

Cattle rustling, of course, did not originate in the American West. It probably had been done long before the Christian era, but it reached its zenith of guile and mass stealing during the early American Wild West days where some unemployed cowboys might read the Bible at Christmas, and then only casually.

Many historians claim before the Civil War cattle rustling was little known in the West. Some claim this was so because of an old-time sense of honor among the strong-willed pioneers. Others claim most of the menfolk were away at war and the remaining crew could only brand one out of three steers, leaving the rest unmarked

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Hanging of Joseph Wilson and Arthur L. Compton, accused of a vicious attack on George Lenhart for his money, Helena, Mont., April 27, 1870. Cattle rustlers were often tried by a vigilante court as well as hanged on the spot.



and a tempting target for the unscrupulous cowpokes that roamed the hungry ranges.

A lot of rustlers drifted over from the ranks of the buffalo hunters (which also contributed a number of famous sheriffs and outlaws). When the hide business folded, the men who hunted and made a living on the shaggy beast were suddenly jobless.

Transferring skills

In Kansas, cattle rustling began in just such a way. During one cruel winter, thousands of cattle froze to death and a gang of men skinned the hide of the dead critters and sold them for two dollars a skin, splitting the profits with the owners. Which was all right at the beginning. But some of the owners became suspicious at the huge mountain of steaming skins and rode out to the knifing where they found a few skimmers calmly shooting a few not-so-stiff steers. When the stockmen threatened to shoot the skimmers, the skimmers threatened to burn down the prairies.

Undoubtedly the cruelest of the rustlers were the hide stealers. Some would be armed with scythe-like lances used to hamstring the steers, so they could peel the hot living skins while the animals still lived. Their profits were smaller, but their chances of detection were less.

The next logical step in the evolution of cattle rustling was stealing live cattle for both the hide and the meat. At first it was easy because no one knew within a couple hundred just how many steers

they did have. They just didn't go out and count them every morning. There were always victims of the wolves, or bad water.

At first it was the Indians Apaches and the angry Comanches-who raided along the Texas border, especially from the huge John Chisum herd. Comanche Indians were trained by conniving rustlers who would accumulate a wagonload of fancy trinkets and firewater to trade the Indians for any stolen cows they brought by.

And then the Mexican bandits would sweep up from the border to take their share of the cattle loot. When the Spanish army needed provisions, they would contact Mexican authorities who would dispatch a group of riders to Texas to gather a few thousand beeves for the contract.

Border Wars

The Texas Rangers one time caught a band of Mexican raiders moving 300 head of cattle across the Rio Grande near Brownsville. After a fierce gunbattle, all the rustlers were killed and their bodies dumped in the city square of Brownsville as a warning to other rustlers. Little by little the Rangers, under the fiery leadership of Captain Leander H. McNelly, put a stop to rustling along the river. At no time was rustling on so grand a scale, so fierce, so intense, so bloody as that along the border of Mexico.

It was said of those days that all it took to become a cattle baron was a lot of grit, a long rope, and a hot branding iron.

Some rustlers undoubtedly resented the huge foreign holdings in the American West. In 1886, an investigation showed 29 foreign companies controlled 20,000,000 acres, much of it public land, on which they grazed huge herds of cattle. Envy fueled the fire.

At the beginning, stealing a few mavericks* or even branded cows was not considered a serious offense, certainly not as serious as stealing a man's horse and leaving him to the mercy of Indians, thirst, slow starvation, and the buzzards. But under such complacency, rustling grew until entire spreads were sent to the fertilizer factory by mass raids of well-organized rustlers who funneled the cattle to quick markets for huge profits.

A respectable beginning

Often an enterprising cowhand would try to jump on the gravy train by starting a small spread of his own and stocking it with a few strays or "mates of a twin calf" and quite mysteriously increase it faster than the natural laws of animal procreation would allow. One man with only two bulls suddenly emerged as an owner of a hundred head of fine cattle. You might say he was a rustler, but he would say that he was just "building" his herd. Many big ranchers got started that way, but they would avoid hiring such a waddy for fear he might be borrowing cattle too regularly for comfort. No man wants to feed his competition. In any case, it made a closed shop out of cattle raising and posed difficulties for a newcomer starting in the business.

The western prairies at one time were a melee of cattlemen-posse chasing homesteaders and settlers banding together to protect themselves against incensed cattlemen fearful of rustlers or potential rustlers. Men were burned to death in their cabins. Many a stiffening corpse swung in the breeze from a cottonwood or pecan tree with a note pinned to his still breast: RUSTLER'S DOOM! The homesteaders retaliated too and many a rancher sent his family home to mother for protection.

Around the 1860s the cattlemen began organizing into associations to protect their cattle from the hot iron boys. By the 1870s, Wyoming, Texas, and some of the other western states formed Stock Growers Protective Associations which made rustling a felony and in fact, put the power of life and death of a cattle thief into the hands of the individual cattle ranchers who happened to catch or suspect a rustler. Yet, the thieving went on.

Like catching the wind

Texas cattlemen estimated that when rustling was at its peak between 1865 and 1875, Texas alone lost between 200,000 and 250,000 cattle to the rustlers. Records of the famous King Ranch reveal the astonishing figure of almost 35,000 head

of cattle lost to rustlers in just three years from 1869 to 1872. King had to man his ranch like a medieval castle. He spent \$50,000 to fence his land and post guard similar to the Great Wall of China on all sides of the ranch. He hired dozens of armed riders whose only job was to patrol the ranch, and like an international spy ring, he had men posted as far away as Mexico to spot his brand in stolen herds. Still they stole from him. Raising a huge herd of cattle was like scattering \$20 bills in the wide open spaces and not expecting anyone to pick some up. There were even lady cattle thieves like Ella Watson and "Cattle Kate" Maxwell.

Sometimes the recovery of cattle actually led to an extra profit by the owner, for when he formed a trailing posse, he might come across his stolen herd of 200 steers in a vast herd of 3,000 stolen cattle and drive the entire bunch to his ranch for keeps.

The flexible laws

And then there was the sheriff, they used to tell about at the border, who never quite caught the rustlers who were stealing his neighbors' cows but 'who somehow managed to run a well-stacked butcher shop in town-that is, until a prying rancher dug up a cattle skin in the

butcher's backyard with the rancher's brand intact.

Not to forget the rustler who took the trouble to ship his stolen herd out of Louisiana by boat up the Mississippi River to St. Louis, and lost \$2.50 per head in the process.

Not all rustlers stole in the night. There was the great "legal rustling" job that Robert D. Hunter pulled on John Chisum when he swiped a huge herd of 20,000 steers which could be the largest rustle in history. Certainly it was the slickest.

Hunter learned John Chisum reputedly had a large number of cattle and packing house debts which he bought at 10 cents on the dollar. Then he gathered together 50 of the toughest gunslingers he could find in Dodge City and rode to the Chisum ranch. "Sure," Chisum would sell him the cattle. It took more than a few days to gather up the herd and when it came time to pay, while Hunter's men started to move the herd North, the wily Hunter invited Chisum into a lawyer's office and dumped a bag full of Chisum's old notes on the table.

Modern methods

Well, you might relax that you don't have to worry much about rustlers today. Not likely. He's still operating but in a different manner. He has traded in his horse for a truck and his running iron for a butcher shop. He is now a rubber-tired rustler.

Here is how one sly outfit operated. A moving van drives to a ranch which borders a big highway. With lights out, the fence is cut and the truck moves out onto the range. Three horses ride out of the truck end, a dozen cattle rounded up, driven to a ravine, shot with silencers, or tranquilizer guns, and butchered for the market. By morning the bloody rustlers can be 250 miles away selling the meat to a struggling butcher.

In southern Louisiana, below New Orleans, cattle rustlers are suspected of working in gangs around small ponds and streams into which they dispose of the evidence. They wait in clumps of woods until a cow moves close, then fire into the back of a cow's head. After the kill they carve up haunches of beef, dump the remains into the water, and disappear in a pickup truck with their ill-gotten meat. The Southern Cattlemen's Assn. estimates that 1,000 head of cattle are lost each year to such rustlers. The sheriff in that district pegged the thefts on amateurs at work packing their own freezers with the beef instead of selling for a profit.

An Oklahoma paper reported how some rustlers "cased the joint" before they moved in. One rancher had a corral and loading chute at the end of his pasture, as far away from his house as he could place it, and still have it on his land. These rustlers rode the range roads for several days to learn the action of the cat-

tleman. Then on the night of the theft, they had two cars patrolling the roads armed with high-powered rifles while a truck picked up the cattle.

Not too long ago the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers -Association demanded that state police in Colorado and Texas take stronger measures against modern-day cattle rustlers. These clever thieves used helicopters to stampede the herds while accomplices on the ground cut out the best and trucked them out of the state for sale to packing houses. The losses, the association says, ran into millions of dollars a year—more than when there was "no law west of the Pecos".

When one considers the cattle business is worth billions on the hoof, it's certain the criminal element is going to put its hooks in somewhere. The only thing the cattleman can do is to exert greater vigilance, record his brand, and support vigorous law enforcement efforts.

* The word "maverick" originated from a real Mr. Samuel Maverick who in the early days of ranching refused to brand any of his cattle, and although he lost a few to ranchers and crooks that did use a branding iron, he was able to claim any cow that went unmarked—of which there were millions. Soon any cow without a brand was called a "maverick". In 1861, it seems that this wise old Mr. Maverick owned more cattle than anyone in Texas.