



WHEN A CITY GIRL

goes country

By Annette Bridges

When Cattle Rode the Rails



Thousands of cattle were rounded up, gathered into cars, and sent off to destinations unknown. (Courtesy photos)

During one of our annual Colorado escapades, an escape from Texas's blazing summer heat, we found ourselves pulling over to get a closer look at a long row of abandoned rail cars once used to haul herds of cattle to eastern markets. This particular trip had us exploring parts of Colorado I'd never seen, en route to Creede, a

mountain town my husband fondly remembered visiting as a child.

We learned the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad laid tracks through Creede in the early 1880s. Just a couple of decades earlier, ventilated wooden stock cars had been developed as a more humane way to transport livestock across long distances. Their use

peaked by the mid-1900s, but by the 1970s and '80s, trucks had taken over as the faster, more efficient option.

As we walked around those weathered wooden relics, we tried to picture the process. Thousands of cattle rounded up, guided into these cars, then sent off rocking and rolling to destinations

unknown. We even read that the railcars had built-in water troughs. That detail stopped us both.

You see, hauling water and filling troughs is something we know all too well. During drought summers on our ranch, when stock ponds dry up, we find ourselves scrambling to provide for a hundred thirsty cows and calves. It's



exhausting, relentless work, and that's just within a few pastures. Trying to imagine water stops for entire herds aboard rattling trains over hundreds of miles is a kind of rancher grit we could hardly fathom.

I'll confess, I grumble more than a little on sale-day mornings. Whether the wind is biting cold or the heat is suffocating, separating those ready to be sold takes time and a strategy my husband has perfected over the years. We have our routine down pat, each of us with a role to play as cows or calves are guided down the narrow chute and into our stock trailer.

But there's always preparation before the big day. The evening prior, the chosen animals are gathered into a pen, making sure they're well-fed and watered. Then it's time to hitch up the trailer and back it into place in front of the chute, ready for that early-morning drive to the sale

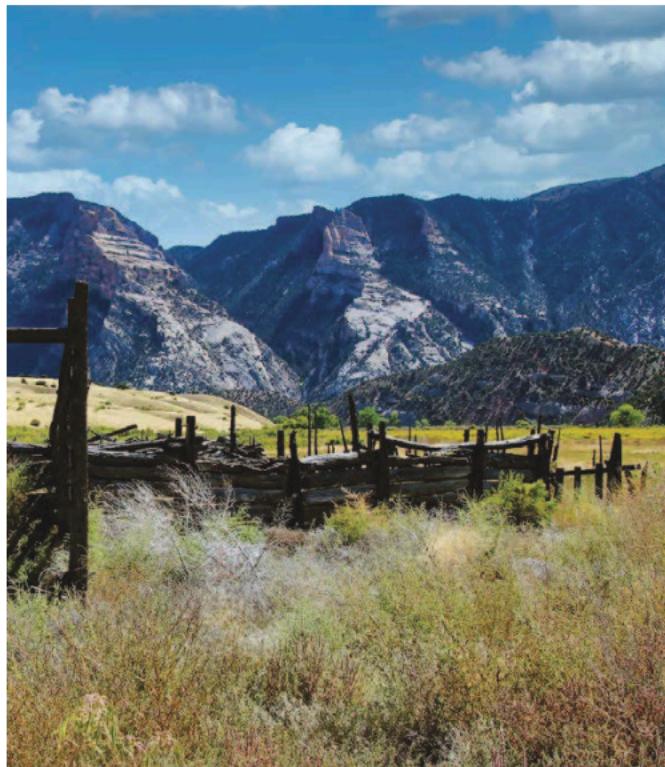
barn, about an hour away.

Convincing calves to walk into that narrow chute is where things get tricky. It's also when my usually calm cowboy is known to lose his cool.

I learned during our railcar research that goats were often used to coax cattle up the ramps and into the darkness of the stock cars. Some of our neighbors today use cow dogs to lend a hand. Us? We've got little more than sheer determination and a shared commitment to get the job done.

Standing there beside those faded railcars, we felt oddly connected to the ranchers of long ago, those who rode the rails instead of the highways, yet faced the same challenges of caring for livestock with heart, grit, and hard-earned know-how.

Maybe we're not so different after all. Just a cowboy and his city girl, doing what needs doing, together. ☺



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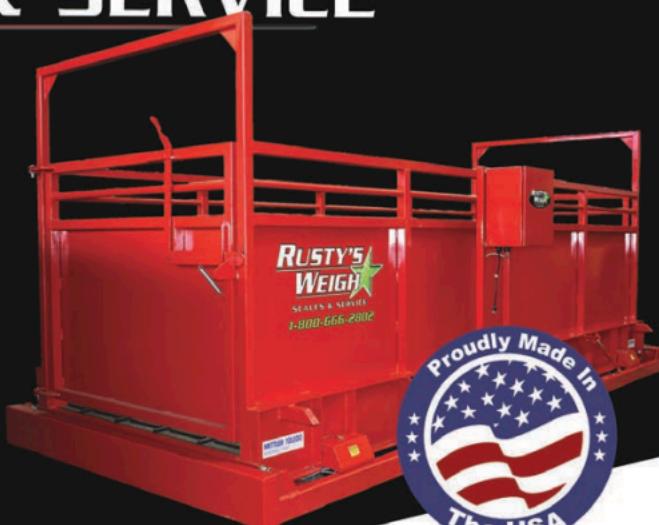


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