

# Modern-Day Cowboy Saddles Up And Rides Into History



Chuck Schuster looks over his shoulder as he continues on the YO ranch round-up.

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KERRVILLE, TX — It began as a dream while thumbing through the Neiman Marcus Christmas 'wish book.' The two-page spread beckoned browsers to "saddle up and ride into history."

"I sure would love to do that," said Chuck, my husband and devoted Louis L'Amour fan. Looking over his shoulder, I could see that the glossy photos of cowboys, lassos in hand, in full western regalia, appealed to his love of everything western and bovine. This was a chance to "sample the west as it was before the turn of the century" as one of 150 participants in a genuine Longhorn cattle drive at the famous Y.O. Ranch in Kerrville, Texas.

The pricey Neiman Marcus chain of stores caters to those with an appetite for the extraordinary, and it is particularly well-known for its unique 'His and Her' Christmas catalog gift offerings. In past years there were his and her airplanes, ermine bathrobes, Chinese junks, submarines, balloons, parasails, bathtubs (24 kt. gold trim), camels, jaguars, designer clothes, buffalos, windmills, dirigibles, ostriches, diamonds (56 ct. and 21 ct.), robots, among others. Perhaps one of the most unusual offerings was a pair of 2,000-year-old mummy cases, "richly adorned, but gratefully vacant." And the 1989 offering was "Quest for the West."

While Chuck looked dreamily at

the photos of cattle and ranchers riding into a western sunset, I scanned the description. "It says here that it's 'no weekend for the tenderfeet' and you participate 'all out in the cattle drive.'"

"I can handle that. It would be fun," he said.

"It says you see the wide open spaces from the back of a horse. Can you ride a horse? I asked.

"I had riding lessons when I was 10," retorted Mr. equestrian.

While we talked about how fun and educational the trip would be, and looked at all the western gear sold on the adjacent pages, I decided then and there that this would be Chuck's surprise Christmas gift from the family.

Indeed, he was surprised. When the end of April came, Chuck was on a plane headed for the Texas Hill Country to take part in a cattle drive of a part of the largest Texas Longhorn herd in the world.

After he checked in, Chuck surveyed his room. He was "bunking in style" at the Y.O. Hilton. Out at the ranch, and hour bus ride away, he became acquainted with fellow travelers at an 1880's costume party.

"People were dressed in everything from authentic 1880's to modern western wear, including firearms," reported Chuck.

The crowd danced to the tunes of The Sons of the Mother Lovin' bunkhouse Band and feasted on Tex-Mex fare.

"I even ate rattlesnake," said

Chuck. "They didn't say what it was until after I ate it." He likened the taste of the skewered and barbecued meat to chicken. "It was good."

Chuck turned in early that night, back at the Hilton. No sleeping under the stars this time around. It was up at dawn the next day to head out to the Chuck Wagon for breakfast.

Chuck dressed in the suggested western duds for the trail drive. He wore a cowboy hat, boots and gloves to guard against the thorny mesquit branches along the 30-mile trail. Some also wore lambskin dusters and buskskin chaps. Everyone who participated in this 110th anniversary trail drive was issued a Neiman Marcus bandana and Trail drive badge that looks like a sheriff's star.

The bandana was suggested as part of the gear to guard against the dusty trail. Pulled up over the nose and mouth, the standard western item can keep drovers at the back of the herd from eating dust all

saddle and picked him. His name was Pumpkin. We got along just fine," he added.

With everyone either on a horse or in a buckboard wagon or authentic stagecoach, they positioned themselves around the herd of longhorns. "Their horns were about five or six feet in length from tip to tip," observed Chuck. He compared the large lean and lanky animals to the cattle he raises at his New Windsor family farm. "These were finished steers that we were driving," he explained. "They weighed about 1,700 pounds whereas a finished steer here weighs about 1,200 pounds. The longhorns look so boney."

As he settled into the saddle, Chuck took in the very different terrain of the Texas Hill country. "The ground is covered with rocks. I can see why Louis L'Amour wrote about travelers having to keep their horses still so that the Indians couldn't hear their horses' hooves clicking. And the dry washes which are dry gullies that

owned game preserves in the world, surpassing those of Africa. Chuck reported seeing many of the more than 20 varieties of exotic animals housed there, including a 300-pound ostrich.

While the vastness of the ranch is impressive, Chuck said that the comparison of acreages must be qualified when talking about the east versus the west. "It takes about an acre of land to support a cow and calf here, while in Texas it takes about 30 acres to provide enough food to support one steer."

Along the trail, Chuck said, occasionally a steer would try to break free from the herd and would have to be hunted down and brought back over the rocky terrain and through the low hanging branches.

"Some people got scratched up pretty good. My horse tried to rub me off a couple of times." Chuck reported that drovers said they carry 'cat gut' with them during regular roundups because they and



Texas Longhorn steers along the 30-mile trail. The rugged cattle vary in color with mixes of brown and white, red, and brindle. Markings range from almost solid to speckled. Finished steers like these tip the scales at 1,700 pounds.

day. But there was little dust this time. Texas was inundated with rain and week previous, with 13-inches falling in one day.

The first task for the novice drovers was to choose a mount for the long trail. "I stood back and watched a few others pick first," said Chuck. "Then I saw this almost black horse with a nice

carry water after sudden infrequent rain storms — I see how people could have hidden in them."

Chuck said that the lush spring green of the east was a contrast to the harsh brown scrub of the rough terrain Kerrville, Texas. "There is no grass except a little bit under mesquite trees. There are only short cedar trees and mesquite growing everywhere. I don't know how the cattle survive," he said. "If our cattle went to Kerrville, they would turn up their noses because they are used to eating lush green alfalfa."

As the day wore on, Chuck said he compared notes with the ranchers and drovers about farming. "They couldn't believe that we support a herd of 50 on only 150 acres."

The Y.O. Ranch is comprised of 45,000 acres — that's three zeroes! The second largest working ranch in Texas, and the home of the largest registered herd of Texas Longhorns in the country, the Y.O. is also one of the largest privately-

neir horses are often cut by the thorny mesquite as well as by the sea of horns that they ride around all day.

At lunchtime, tired riders took a break and ate hamburgers "as big as a plate" right on the trail. One of the drovers performed rope tricks. The herd took a break too, and stopped at a dry wash that had about six to eight inches of water in it from the previous day's rain.

Back in the saddle, the trail drive continued for another 15 miles. Chuck said he knew when he was near the end of the trail "because my horse took the reins. He had a mind of his own and headed home." Chuck made it back to the Y.O. bunkhouse without incident. It was time to wash off the dust of the trail and soothe the saddle sores.

"I'd love to do it again," he wished aloud. "Maybe next time on an overnight drive, sleeping under the stars, or in another part of the country. It's an experience I'll never forget."



YO ranch hand, Pete Jennings, performed rope tricks at lunchtime.

*Homestead*  
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