Chapter 21

The Roundup

The term *roundup* is a pretty common term, but it has special connotations when applied to cattle or horses. In the case of cattle, it is the spring and fall gathering of herds from the ranges. In the early days of cattle ranching, the purpose was to brand, ear-mark, inspect and wean the calves. At the same time, the herds were sorted for ownership and animals selected for driving and shipping to markets to sell. Another term used for *roundup* and working cattle, used mainly in the southwest is *spring work* and *fall work*. [1]

Rounding-up livestock is a little more difficult than it looks. The prized asset is experience and most of that is learned by knowing most of all what *not to do* rather than *what to do*. Whether you are an old, seasoned cowman and ranch hand or a greenhorn just getting started, working with cattle and horses can be a dangerous occupation. Adult cows and horses can run fast and outweigh the cowman by an average of five to six times. As the old cowman said, "Cows have more time than cowboys so cows always win". And then there is that never-to-be-forgotten rule, 'If you break the cow's rules, the cows will make you pay". It is with these thoughts in mind that cowboys start the roundup.[2]

There were a number of historical changes that came along and redefined the livestock industry of the Big Bend area in a relatively short period of time. The coming of the railroad in 1882, the introduction and accepted usage of windmills to pump groundwater in the middle 1880's and the invention and patenting of barbed wire by Illinois sheriff, Joseph F. Glidden in 1874 [4] **revolutionized the cattle industry. It was a costly and time-consuming undertaking to string miles upon miles of the wire on the frontend, but once the wire was up the cost savings in labor were immediate.**

By 1886, more than 60,000 cows grazed in the Big Bend. The winter of 1885-1886 had been unusually severe. Drifting before the northerners, the Davis Mountains herds moved into the lower Big Bend. By spring all of the stock was scattered and badly mixed. It was vital that the herds be untangled before the new calves were weaned, for only through the mother's brand could ownership of calves be determined.

In August, 1886, all of the cowmen in the Big Bend cooperated to stage a general roundup. They organized two parties: one under Den Knight, which contained sixty men and a remuda of 400 horses, was directed to work west of Alamito Creek, the other, under Tom Ellison, was considerably smaller for the lesser area east of the creek. Beginning at the Rio Grande, the cowmen swept northward on a wide front. About noon each day, with the stock gathered during the morning, they rendezvoused at an appointed water hole. They passed the afternoon and if necessary, the next day, cutting out animals that belonged in the vicinity and in branding calves.

Branding was a free-hand operation performed with a running iron instead of the modern stamp iron, and the brand was quite large, often covering an entire side of the animal. Moving out the next morning, part of the men drove the accumulated cattle that belonged on ranges farther north, and the rest spread out to comb the countryside looking for more strays. Leaving neatly segregated and fully branded herds in their wake, the roundup parties averaged about fifteen miles a day. At the end of two weeks they reached the southern foothills of the Davis Mountains and there disbanded. Collective roundups continued for several years, until barbed wire made them generally unnecessary. [5]

The town of Marathon, gateway to the Big Bend area, was founded in 1882 when the Galveston, Harrisburg and San Antonio Railway reached what is now Brewster County and bought the transportation facilities necessary to bring in and ship out livestock to the vast unsettled area of far West Texas. The addition of the long-sought southern transcontinental railway to this area was thus the new beginning of a rapid expansion of the livestock industry that heretofore was centered in south and central Texas. The unsettled areas west of the Pecos River began to see big ranches with big herds of cattle, goats and sheep. Ranches extended in all directions from the railroad line. The land rush was on. The only limiting factor was that age-old problem of water.

At each stop along the new railroad there were cattle pens and loading facilities that were quickly built to accommodate the new business of transporting livestock. It didn't take long for the settlers and new ranchers to arrive. Once the infrastructure was in place, the cattle, goat and sheep drives in both directions rapidly followed. Small towns along the line grew from 50 to 400 inhabitants in short periods of time along with new schools, hotels, banks, mercantile stores and other needed necessities including the-not-to-forgotten saloons. The bigger stops along the line were fortunate to attracted doctors, hospitals, lawyers and dentists. These communities grew into towns such as Alpine and Marfa that were designated as county seats of county governments.

One of the early cattle ranchers in the Big Bend area was Waddy Thompson Burnham, Sr. who started ranching at Government Springs, 75 miles south of Marathon in 1908. The only way to move cattle from the railhead down to his ranch or from the ranch to the railhead was by horse. Depending on the number of cows, which would be less than 200 because of the large number of pasture acres allotted per cow for the available acreage, it is estimated that it would take six to seven days to patiently move the herd to their destination overland on the rough roads and terrain to their destination of either the ranch or railhead. Between eight to ten drovers with extra horses were needed to escort the herd.

Undertaking a roundup required expertise in planning. Cowhands and horses for the remuda were selected. Horses chosen for the remuda were selected by the cowhands who would need to switch mounts, usually multiple times a day. Ranchers and their foremen planned for all the necessities required for the duration, whether it was days, weeks or months. Planning and securing food for the cowhands, medical supplies for both human and

animals, and any other miscellaneous supplies that might be needed were important parts of successful drives. Additionally, ranchers and the foremen carefully considered each cowhand that would be on the drive and assigned tasks and responsibilities according to individual experience and capabilities. Cattle drives were dangerous; many men died on the trail. It was essential that those employed for cattle drives possess all the varied skills needed for a safe and successful drive.

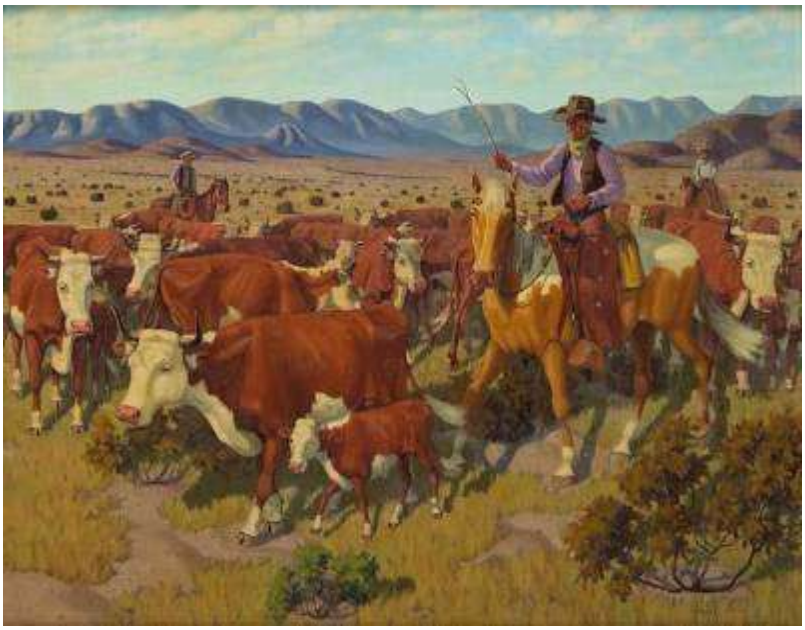
In the close-knit area of the Big Bend, necessity dictated that neighbors worked together, including lending cowhands to work roundups. In that era, half of the drovers plausibly worked directly for the ranch and the extras could be from neighboring ranches or Mexican vaqueros in the area. Labor and qualified ranch hands were not needed all the time, but roundups and cattle drives required extra help. When it came to roundups, ranchers as well as cowhands moved from ranch to ranch as needed. That is one part of ranching that has never changed and seems unlikely to do so. This method of cooperation works well for everyone participating because it is economical and ranching is a business of making sure dollars are carefully spent.

Beginning of the Day, 24" x 32", Oil on Canvas, Circa late 1930's, The John L. Nau III, Collection of Texas Art

Beginning of the Day **may have been painted on the Sam Nail Ranch. Although the day's planned work is not revealed in this piece, there is the suggestion of work that required the use of horses. This scene could also be one that horses were being saddled for use by others. Remember from Chapter 7, Sam Nail was fond of horses because they could be rented to people who were looking at the proposed park. The extra income was welcomed as additional money could always be used for some necessity.**

The Roundup, 12" X 16", Oil on Canvas Board, Collection of Jim and Sherri Carey, This painting could possibly have been done on the Buttrill Ranch south of Marathon

In *The Roundup,* **Darge has captured the faces on the white faced Herefords like no other artist. Notice the ever so slight difference in the faces and the eyes; they are not all the same. Darge seemed to know each one personally. Notice the horns, some point up and some point forward. When it comes to cows and horses, he was a very keen observer of the individual characteristics of the animals he painted. This dramatic sky, another example of Darge's expertise in painting the Big Bend's clouds, looks as if the chance of rain is certain. In the dry and parched desert land, rain is always a welcomed event.**



Cutting the Herd, Big Bend Country, Marathon, Texas, Buttrill Ranch, 24"x 32", Oil on Canvas, Circa late 1930's, Courtesy of David Dike Fine Arts 2005

Painting a moving horse is an art that requires a lot of skill and practice. Painting cows with the different shading of the shoulders, flanks and hind quarters like Darge has done in *Cutting the Herd* is difficult. Darge should to be admired for his skilled ability to bring life-like features to canvas. This painting is an excellent illustration that Fred Darge was a master at his profession.

Breaking Away from the Herd, 12" x 14", Oil on Canvas Board, Circa 1960's, John L. Nau Collection of Texas Art

Breaking Away from the Herd **is Darge's perception of when things go wrong during a roundup. It is possible that during his early art career he may have seen or remembered this spooked cow from a day on a Big Bend ranch. He did a number of paintings identifying this old brown and spotted Longhorn in situations of distress. She has probably been on the open range long enough to become pretty smart and wiley. She looks like the type that the more you chase her, the faster she runs, which is what Darge intended for you to see.**

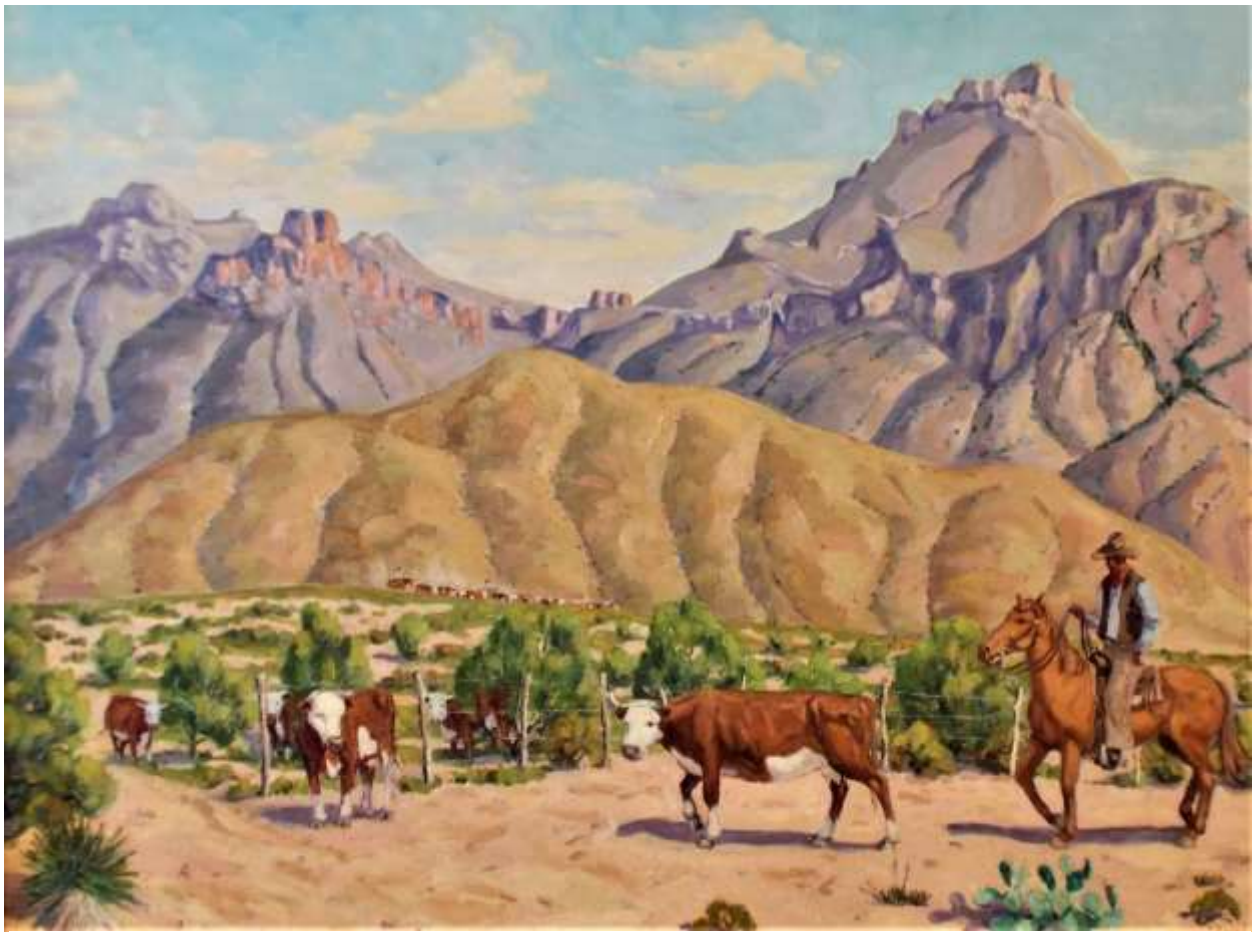
In A Bad Fix, 12" x 16", Pala Duro Canyon area, Oil on Canvasboard, *Courtesy Auction Santa Fe, 2012*

The painting, *In A Bad Fix***, further depicts a cowboy who no doubt suffered an unseating that was not expected. Those spotted Longhorn range cows can be tough hombres on occasion! Some days they just don't feel like cooperating. Darge should be recognized for his skilled depiction of an upside-down horse.**

The Big Bend, 24" x 32", Oil on Canvas, Collection of Konrad Shields to Sam and Karen Pemberton

Darge is depicting several things in this panoramic painting emphasizing the immensity of the Big Bend. The Hereford cattle that likely have been free to graze in a very large area of open range without fencing. There also appears to be no more than 20 to 25 head because of the vast number of acres required to support this small herd in the dry arid climate of desert conditions.

Darge did a large number of paintings of ranchers rounding up their cattle. That is what cattle ranching is all about. These pieces have always caught the eyes of collectors for a very good reason. It is part of the preceived romance of the early West, but it is still being done today as in the early days. When it comes to rounding up cattle, the best asset is a smart well trained horse and a ranch hand with plenty of cattle experience. There are no substitutes.



Name Unavailable, Big Bend, 30" x 40", Oil on Canvas, Circa Late 1930's, Collection of Doug and Jalaine Mackinnon

Round Up Days, Morning, U Lazy Ranch, Post, Texas, 12” x 16", Oil on Canvas Board, Collection of Doug and Jalaine Mackinnon