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Fall 1981

Review of *Panhandle Cowboy* By John R. Erickson

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livelihood on the open ranges of the West. Few have been written on the modern cowboy, living within fences and under vastly changed conditions.

John Erickson has provided this modern version. An excellent writer, Erickson has spiced his account of a difficult four years with a great deal of humor. To the reader who knows ranch life the story rings true. We find in its pages, for instance, the word "chousing," used in the right place with the right meaning. The word was likely invented on the range when a green hand stirred up a herd of cattle unnecessarily and was curtly ordered to "stop chousing those cows." Any such treatment of cattle costs the owner money in lost animal weight.

The setting, as the title implies, is the Oklahoma Panhandle, but it could have been almost anywhere in cattle country. However, the particular outfit, the Crown Ranch, was somewhat unusual. As the cowboy author describes it, he and his family lived "in a Greek mansion, surrounded by statues of Venus and Sappho. . . . After a day on horseback I bathed in a tub made of black marble and drew my bath water from a spigot made in the image of a swan." There is more about this "Prairie Parthenon."

This ranch was different, too, in that it was stocked with wild cattle. Why they were wild, Erickson never figured out, but wild they were and wild they stayed. This curious factor, coupled with the extremely rough country in which they ranged, was a combination that forced the panhandle cowboy to use saddle horses more than most ranches do today. The four-wheel-drive pickups, so much in use on modern ranches, just couldn't negotiate some of the Beaver County terrain.

Even the horses on the ranch presented unusual problems. The confrontations and solutions in this respect offer some special entertainment. Only the weather, which ranged from blizzards to blast-furnace winds, was of the kind cowboys from Texas to Montana grow accustomed to.

Erickson's difficulties and troubles seem almost continuous: the cantankerous cows,

Panhandle Cowboy. By John R. Erickson.
Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980.
Illustrations. 213 pp. \$12.50.

This book is a valuable contribution to the history of the working cowboy and the ranches that brought him into being. The twentieth century has furnished a wealth of books, both historical and fictional, delineating the cowboy and his way of life. Most have dealt with the old-time cowboy who followed cattle up the long trails from Texas and carved out his

bulls that try “to get into your pocket,” saddle horses with minds of their own, some truly frightening and desperate situations. Yet, when the four years had passed and the owner of the five-thousand-acre Crown Ranch grew tired of losing money on the operation and sold out, Erickson felt some bitterness and a distinct nostalgia at leaving a life that he still loved.

Erickson couldn't blame the owner for the sale. Although the ranch had a paper value of more than a million dollars, there was no reason why he should “continue to pay taxes on the land, tie up his capital in a commodity as perishable as cattle, hire someone to manage the property, and lose money at it.” To support this view he pointed to the actions of the last three presidents: “In 1973 Richard Nixon imposed a price freeze on retail beef. In 1975 Gerald Ford shut off exports of American wheat. In 1978 Jimmy Carter increased imports of foreign beef into the United States. All . . . [were] taken at a time when farmers and ranchers had begun to make a profit, and they all had the same effect: they disrupted orderly marketing trends, sent commodity prices plunging, and left agriculture floundering in an economic climate where profits were suppressed and expenses rose out of control. In each case a president of the United States yielded to pressure from urban and consumer groups and threw agriculture to the wolves.”

John Erickson leaves the reader wondering how much longer the cattle industry can survive the conditions that put the Crown Ranch out of business.

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