

WESTERN HORSEMAN®



Ranchlands

Ahead of the Storm

Story and Photography by Guy de Galard



I'VE BEEN DRIVING FOR 12 HOURS to reach my remote destination. After heading north from Wells,

Nevada, it's a straight shot to the turnoff for Cottonwood Ranch, located 30 miles from paved highway and 70 miles from the nearest town. Hungry and half-hypnotized by the bugs dying on my windshield, I make one last turn onto a gravel road, just past a sign that reads "O'Neil Basin." Large mud puddles indicate a recent heavy rain. To the west, the Jarbidge Mountains, one of the least traveled wilderness areas in the continental United States, tower at 10,000 feet, looming over this vast landscape of open, empty, sagebrush country.

Forty-five minutes later, I pull up in front of an expansive log

building. As I walk into the ranch's spacious lodge, I meet a group of six Michigan horsewomen who, cowgirls at heart, are return visitors. Later, over a hearty dinner served family style, Agee Smith, a friendly, soft-spoken man with a Santa Claus beard, fills me in on the ranch's history.

Located on the eastern slope of the Jarbidge Mountains, at an altitude of 6,000 feet, the ranch, now owned jointly by the Smith family and Tom and Alecia Maxey, rests in the historic O'Neil Basin, which was settled by the O'Neil family during the California Gold Rush. After failing to find gold in California, they moved to Ely, Nevada. A gunfight with some local ranchers forced the O'Neils north, where they established a cow camp along Cottonwood Creek, at the ranch's present location.

Agee's great grandfather, Horace, came to Nevada by train in the late 1870s and went to work for a freighting company. After marrying into a ranching family, he helped them develop their sheep and cattle operation in the nearby Star Valley. The O'Neils once sent a gunman to get rid of Horace because he was raising sheep, but Horace had the final word when he eventually bought out O'Neil in the early 1920s.

When the Great Depression hit, Horace decided to let the sheep operation go and increase his cattle herd. He died in 1951, and the seven ranches he owned were divided among his children. Agee's father, Horace Smith, took ownership of the O'Neil Basin outfit in 1952.

In the early 1980s, area ranchers increased the sizes of their herds, inadvertently introducing diseases. Cottonwood lost 60 percent of its calf crop, forcing Horace to sell the rest of his herd.

"We didn't vaccinate in those days," explains Agee.

The family began looking for other income sources. They ran cattle for other ranchers, and also created a partnership with a group of hunters from Sacramento, launching a guest operation based on leading pack trips into the mountains.

"It worked well for a while, but we wanted to get back to ranching," Agee says. "After the movie *City Slickers* came out, everybody wanted to go on cattle drives, but the interest eventually diminished, so we decided to add horse drives."

New partners came on board and the old ranch headquarters were meticulously renovated in 2003. The improvements enhanced guests' experiences, but the ranch remains first and foremost a cattle

operation. Today, the Cottonwood encompasses 40,000 acres, including Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service land, and its cattle herd boasts 400 pairs and 300 yearlings.

THE NEXT MORNING, I'm up early to watch wranglers bringing horses into the corral and catch a glimpse of the sunrise. Unfortunately, the sky is nothing but a low, gray ceiling. During breakfast, Agee announces the plan for the day.



“Depending on the pace you prefer,” he says, “we have horses and cattle to move. We have a general idea of where they should be, but it might take a while to find them.”

Knowing we'll be moving cows the next couple of days, I decide to go with the faster-paced horse-gathering activity.

“We need to bring in some of our riding horses for the season,” Agee tells me. “They're mixed in with some mares and colts. Once we've kept what we need, we'll turn the rest loose.”

The ranch has herd of 140 horses, a good portion being a mix of Belgian, Quarter Horse and Thoroughbred stock. Agee's family was involved in the Remount program, raising Thoroughbreds and Arabs for the U.S. Army until the late 1930s.

“We need stout horses for riding in the mountains, with a calm disposition for guests,” explains Agee.

As for personal preference, the family is divided.

“My parents and I favor Thoroughbreds,” he says, “but my sister, daughter and niece are Quarter Horse people.”

Outside the tack room, I meet my mount, Banjo, a 17-year-old Quarter Horse mare who “still has a lot of go” according to Agee's daughter, McKenzie. She'll lead the horse search. My other riding companion for the day is Mike Blythe, one of the ranch's wranglers. Mike left his native Minnesota two years ago to experience cowboy life firsthand.

As we leave headquarters, dark, threatening clouds start rolling in. We soon hit a brisk trot and veer off the trail to cut across a pasture. The air is filled with the scent of wet sage, and a bank of fog hangs mid-air, running across the foot of the mountains.

Every time we top a ridge, we scan the rolling, sage-covered hills that stretch to the horizon, but there's not a horse in sight.

"Let's ride into this small canyon," suggests McKenzie, pointing out some jagged, rocky outcroppings. "They sometimes hide in there."

Banjo effortlessly negotiates the steep terrain. Around a bend, we come upon a half-dozen cows peacefully grazing at the bottom of the narrow canyon.

"They're not supposed to be here," says McKenzie. "Since we're here, let's bring them back to where they belong, over to the next pasture."

While pushing our small herd, we continue to look for the elusive horses, stopping whenever we see a suspicious dark shape in the distance. While McKenzie and Mike continue to push the cows down a fence line, I ride ahead to open the gate and let the herd go through. Moments later, as I step into the stirrups, we hear the sharp crack of lightning. The sky becomes streaked in a fantastic electrical show playing out on the horizon. Within minutes of the first raindrops hitting my hat, it's a downpour.

"We'll be more protected in these willows by the creek," says McKenzie, leading the way.

Riding swiftly, we reach the creek bed within a few minutes. There, hugging a tall clump of willows, we hunch over our saddles while water trickles from our hat brims, waiting out the storm while devouring sandwiches. Before long, the storm eases, then stops, and we resume our search for the horses.

McKenzie sees them first, pointing to small, dark dots slowly moving by a distant fence line. After leaving the gate open, McKenzie and Mike approach the herd by making a big circle around them. I stay by the gate, a short distance off the fence, to prevent the herd from scattering.

McKenzie urges the horses to move along the fence, and they begin following Mike, who rides in the lead. According to plan, the herd bursts through the gate into the adjacent pasture.

"It's all downhill to the ranch from here," McKenzie says. "They'll keep on going now. They know the drill."

Suddenly, the cowgirl reins up. A couple of hundred yards away, a cow stands by herself with her head down. We ride to her and discover she has a calf, a day old at the most, lying between two clumps of sagebrush, wet and shivering with cold.

“This calf is too weak to suck and too cold,” she says. “If we leave him up here overnight, he might not make it.”

We push the pair a short distance, quickly realizing that the calf is too tired to keep up and that it would take hours to drive them both back to the ranch.

“It’ll be dark soon,” McKenzie says. “Let’s head home and come back with a pickup.”

We catch up with the horses a short distance from the ranch and splash across an irrigated meadow before reaching the corrals. After unsaddling and turning our horses loose, we jump into a pickup and drive back to where we left the cow and her calf. We load the calf into the cab and drive back to the ranch.

After laying the calf on a dry litter of straw under a heat lamp in the shed, McKenzie bottle-feeds him. The next morning, well-fed and warmed up, it’s a much healthier and livelier calf that we return to his mama. Mission accomplished.

Later on that evening, I share the day’s experiences with the Michigan gang. As it turns out, they didn’t find any cows.



“TODAY, WE NEED TO MOVE the cows to the National Forest, where they’ll spend the summer,” Agee announces at breakfast the next morning. “We got more rain this week alone than during the past four years, but it looks like today might be half-decent.” In fact, it rained most of the previous night, stopping in the early morning hours.

Today, Kody Menghini, another of the ranch’s wranglers, joins us. After we ride a trail leading to the foot of the mountains, Agee divides his crew into three groups. Half of the Michigan gang will go with Mike, the other half with Kody. I’ll ride with Agee and McKenzie. Agee issues our marching orders: “Each group will make a big circle, pushing everything down toward Cottonwood

Creek,” he says. “This is where we’ll meet, and we’ll push everything up from there.”

We soon come upon the first cows, a mix of Red Angus, Charolais and Longhorn.

“Black Angus is the wrong color for this desert climate,” Agee explains. “They attract too much heat.”

The ranch practices holistic resource management, or HRM, a grazing technique that focuses on keeping native grasses healthy by replicating with cattle the grazing patterns of wild animals.

“A lot of riparian damage happened around the turn of the century,” Agee says. “If HRM is done right, a cow can be a rehabilitator of the land. If we take care of the land, the land will take care of the cows.”

A couple of hours later, the three herds, each pushed by a group of riders, meet by the creek. A trail on higher ground, shadowing the creek, leads to the forest. Agee instructs us to point the cattle toward the trail.

I decide to stay on lower ground to chase strays out of the brush and push them uphill. Eventually the herd, flanked by riders, is nicely stretched along the trail, and moving at a steady pace. We come upon a fence and a gate. Positioned on each side of the gate, on the other side of the fence, McKenzie and Agee each point a finger and move it in rhythm with each cow that walks through the gate. Both father and daughter come up with the same count, which Agee records in a small tally book.

“That’s it,” he says with satisfaction. “We’re done.”

It turns out that our timing was perfect. Right on cue a bank of dark clouds rolls toward us. Within minutes, I’ll be drenched again, but there’s no place I’d rather be.

Guy de Galard is a Wyoming-based writer and photographer. Learn more about Cottonwood Ranch at cottonwoodquestranch.com.