

Return of the Cowgirl

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The Double E guest Ranch in southwestern New Mexico is 30,000 acres of scrub-covered hills and sandy creek-bottom land, broken here and there by steep ridges from which the landscape unrolls to the horizon in smoky vistas. But the scenery, at this particular moment, is lost on me, as I scramble to stay on the back of a horse named Buster, who has just shot several feet into the air.

Being on a bucking horse is profoundly disorienting. My field of vision collapses; the horizon swings back and forth, like a stormy sea seen through a porthole. The familiar polarity of head and tail vanishes. Suddenly, at a slapping trot, Buster recovers the earth, like a drummer emerging from a solo.

Preston Johnson, a 19-year-old ranch hand with a drooping mustache and sad, sky-blue eyes, materializes at my elbow. "Have you ever been on a bucking horse before?" he asks. He floats serenely in his saddle, regarding Buster and me with benevolent concern. "If that happens again," he says, "whatever you do, don't lean forward. Reach behind you and grab the back of the saddle." I look at my hands, in which I am clutching a snatch of Buster's auburn mane.

I have come to the Double E for a dose of the cowboy life. I first ventured out West a decade ago, from North Carolina. On a whim, I accepted a poorly paying job in Santa Fe, packed a suitcase and pointed my truck toward the Pacific. On the high desert plains of northern New Mexico, after four days of driving, I stopped on an incandescent stretch of grassland, and stepped out into a silence so broad and deep my ears rang. Beneath the atomic blue of the sky, my unfocused restlessness intensified, like a pinprick of light under a magnifying glass. This was cowboy country.

And so I discovered Johnny Cash, rode around in pickup trucks, wore big belt buckles and a red leather shirt. For a while, I lived in a teepee. At roadhouse bars on Saturday nights, I stomped around the dance floor with quiet men in tight jeans and pointy boots, unsure whether I wanted to be with a cowboy or simply be one, scraping out a living in exchange for the good loneliness and indisputable cachet of the cowboy life.

In the end, I went back East. I took a series of jobs in a series of cities. I learned about subway systems, "business casual" and cubicle etiquette. It wasn't boring, exactly. There was a soothing regimen to my days that crowded out peskier impulses. Still, I missed the West, so when I had a chance to spend a few days at a working cattle ranch, I leapt at it. This, I thought, dreaming over the dusty, sun-dappled trail-riders on the Double E's Web site, would deliver me to the true heart of the cowboy life.

I doubt that at this moment I much resemble a cowboy. I have arrived at the ranch during a rare rainy spell, and rather than risk getting us soaked on the trail, Preston has been shepherding me and several other guests around the ranch's big arena, which is sloppy with mud. Our horses are soggy and our boots spattered, and there is not a steer in sight.

Preston is a 2004 Silver City Team Roping Champion, as his belt buckle, a gleaming rococo platter, declares. He is trying to teach us the finer points of a sport called

barrel-racing, a speed-and-agility rodeo event in which riders weave around a triangle of barrels in a loose cloverleaf, flogging their heaving steeds with the leathers, leaning into the turns like motocross riders, knees almost touching the ground.

But my nerves are rattled from the bucking, and Buster is twitching peevisly at the bit and dancing in place. Better that I walk him along the fence for a while, listening to Preston patiently explaining the routine. I shift in the saddle, trying to find a comfortable bone to perch on. Underneath me, Buster exhales wearily.

What kind of person takes a vacation on what is, essentially, a glorified farm? We are a motley bunch -- the horse-obsessed, the congenitally adventurous, the alpha athletes -- but we share a Mitty-esque infatuation with the cowboy life. Jerry Heck, who is here with his wife, Betty Anne, and has just returned from a stint as a civilian contractor in Iraq, trots endlessly in circles wearing a look of boyish delight. Through determined leg-flapping, he coaxes his horse into a higher gear and jiggles gamely through the barrel course in a pattern of his own devising. A couple from Illinois tell me they run a mobile home park, and lead trail rides in the summertime.

After a while, Preston removes the barrels and sets up a line of orange poles, through which Buster and I execute a halting slalom, like a sot listing down a sidewalk. The woman from Illinois, through constant cajoling, urges her mount through a nimble run. "You almost knocked down that pole," her husband teases when she lopes up.

"Almost only counts in horseshoes," she retorts.

"And grenades," Betty Anne points out, from the fence. There is a general murmur of agreement from the group.

I haven't ridden since I was a teenager, so it is nice to be on a horse again, but there is a limit to the charms of riding around a ring. When it is time for dinner, our entire company, horses included, seems relieved to return to the barn. After putting away the horses, we drive, in most uncowboy-like fashion, the 100 yards or so up to the house where meals are served, on a rise overlooking the barns and the horse pens. I catch a ride with the couple from Illinois in their extra-cab diesel pickup, hoisting myself into the back seat and arranging my muddy boots carefully on a newspaper.

A WORKING CATTLE RANCH since the 1920s, the Double E was, until recently, Hooker Ranch, cobbled together from failed homesteads by a man named Joseph Hooker. In 1996, Joseph's son Donald sold it to Alan and Debbie Eggleston (the two E's), whose lifelong dream was to run a cattle ranch in their retirement. The ranch came with the old Hooker homestead and 100 Herefords, to which the Egglestons added 150 Texas longhorns. But the beef market, then in precipitous decline, barely earned them enough to pay the mortgage, and a lengthy drought made it tough to expand the herd. In between branding and calving, Debbie and Alan fixed up a few of the buildings as guesthouses and posted a Web site, and people began to come.

Debbie and Alan are not ranchers by trade -- Alan was a commercial airline pilot for years, and Debbie worked as an administrative assistant -- but they are the kind of durable, resourceful people to whom outdoor pursuits come easily, and with the Double E they have put together a fairly realized vision of the cowboy life. "Some people golf," Debbie told me. "Some people play tennis. We wanted to own a ranch. We weren't planning on running a guest ranch, but we just decided to do it like a place we would want to visit."

Meals are served, boardinghouse style, on two broad plank tables in one of the ranch's newer structures, a brick ranch house. Like all the ranch's buildings it is decorated in a charming Nouveau West style: fringed leather pillows, lamps wrapped in what look like pieces of lariats, and cowhides, the hair still on them, thrown over the sofas.

It is pleasantly noisy and chaotic at the table. Two British couples, who spent the day shopping in nearby Silver City, nod knowingly as we describe our attempts at barrel-racing. "Yesterday," one woman says, "Preston showed us how to rope cattle. We figured it out right away, didn't we, Helen? We picked three that were lying on the ground and began shuffling them down the fence. Everyone thought we were brilliant for doing three."

"Poor things were almost asleep," says Helen.

"I roped four," says Helen's husband, Colin, beaming. He and Helen raise cattle, as it turns out, and the other couple, Peter and Ann, raise sheep. They have always, they tell me, wanted to try their hand at being cowboys. (Helen and Colin also run a B&B. "This is a bit of a busman's holiday for us," she acknowledges.) I ask Colin if he uses ropes when he herds his cattle at home. "Oh, no," he says. "People would think I'd gone mad if I started roping my cattle. I use four-wheelers and a dog."

After dinner, I return to my cabin, which was one of the first structures built on the ranch, a low clapboard house with creaking floors and a wide porch. In its new life as a guesthouse it has horseshoes nailed to the walls, the collected essays of Frederic Remington on the shelf, and a bed with a fluffy meringue of a down comforter. It is barely 8 o'clock, but a wind is whipping up, and the bony places where I connected with the saddle are beginning to complain. As I slip into bed, I give thanks that I did not choose to go on one of the more authentic cattle drives, where guests sleep on the ground in bedrolls. All night, the wind blows showers of little nuts onto my tin roof. I dream of tiny cattle, stampeding in the distance.

SADDLING UP BEGINS at the barn at 7 a.m. At that hour, the sun has yet to clear the ridge, and the ranch's low white buildings are bathed in a bluish half-light, as though they were underwater. The day is clear and chilly. Dressed and ready, the dried mud knocked off of my boots, I see a light in the barn and head over a few minutes early, but it is just the glow from the Mountain Dew machine. There is no one around. After a minute or two, Preston's purple Ford F-250 motors over the ridge, its diesel engine thrumming. In the pens beside me, the dark shapes of horses prick their ears and snort softly.

After breakfast we scrape to our feet, stiff from yesterday's exertions, and make our way down to the barn. Our group is sharply turned out: felt Stetsons, crisp white hats, shirts with pearl snaps. A young actress from California has on a battered straw hat and a faded red bandana knotted charmingly around her neck, and a physician from Albuquerque and his wife are wearing matching fringed chaps. I have on an old pair of cowboy boots saved from my last tenure in the Southwest, but I have been too self-conscious to affect any other cowboy gear, and I am wearing a wool stocking cap and a sweater.

"Welcome to the Wild West," one of the ranch hands announces as we mount up and jockey for position in the road. "Everybody got their Chapstick?"

We take a trail that winds back through narrow canyons and shallow washes, a landscape shaped by water but dry as a bone.

The horses pick their way placidly through sand and rock, sometimes hitting a trot in the open stretches. Riding on the trail is a far cry from riding in the ring. The ranch's vast acreage swallows us. Cottonwood trees shiver over the creek beds, and the hills are a thatchy expanse of what Preston tells me is cat's-claw -- a bush with hooked, needle-sharp thorns. I have no idea where we are going or how far we have come. There is nothing, down in the wash, that an urban person can use to orient herself: no receding four-point perspective of streets and buildings, no clear dichotomy of "here" and "there." Progress is made imperceptibly, each scene replaced with one subtly different. This is oddly soothing. You are at the center of the visible world; wherever you are feels like your destination.

We see one cow today, in a stand of cottonwoods. It lumbers to its feet and watches us as we pass. Our guide leans over to get a look at it. "That's not one of ours," she calls.

"Where are ours?" I ask. She shrugs.

"There's 30,000 acres out here," she says. "They could be anywhere."

This is, I am beginning to think, a hell of a way to make a living.

The Egglestons run a cow-to-calf operation, which means that they make money by producing calves. The number that matters the most in this business is the number of cows that are retrieved in roundups with a calf tagging at their heels.

Well-fed, healthy cattle breed better, of course. On this kind of land -- rocky, largely barren, and dry -- each animal needs at least 100 grazing acres to get enough mesquite and grass to eat. This is a very high number -- Colin's cattle, in the rich grasslands of northern England, require only one acre apiece -- and during a drought, the number can be even higher. In a good year, the Double E's grasslands might support 350 cattle. This year, the Egglestons are running about 200 head. For a ranch the size of the Double E, with all its operating expenses, the income from a herd that size no longer covers the cost of raising it.

At dinner, Alan Eggleston tells me that cattle ranching, unlike many other animal-production businesses, has not been corporatized. This puts ranchers at a disadvantage when dealing with monopolized industries such as meat packing, he says; the selling price of beef has not kept pace with packing costs and the expense of raising cattle. These days, Alan says, almost the only successful ranches are run by families who own their land outright.

Alan sits back in his chair. He has the sort of mug that belongs on a cowboy: long and lined, with a wide Pace Picante-style mustache and slightly jug-handled ears. He is tall and narrow, and as ranch boss presides with a soft-spoken gravity. He rubs his cheeks with both hands. "Used to be," he says, "ranching was a way to make a living."

The glory days of cattle ranching were the decades following the Civil War, when some 40,000 young men were making their living on the Western range. After the invention of barbed wire in 1873, farmers gradually began fencing their wide-open spaces, and by the late 1800s, the days of the huge cattle drives were over. In the dusty Southwest, squatters and homesteaders competed with cowboys and Spanish families for control of the grasslands.

In 1877 Donald Hooker's grandfather began homesteading on a pretty parcel of farmland near what would become the town of Gila, N.M., in what was still just a territory of the U.S. government. In the ranch's heyday, in the mid-20th century, it was

nearly 70,000 acres. Donald and his father ran 1,000 head of cattle and branded 900 new calves a year with the Hooker brand -- the gripsack, a square with a handle on top. But times changed. Donald's father died, and it became harder for Donald to run the ranch, much of which was accessible only on horseback. By the mid-'90s, the beef market was in the gutter, southwestern New Mexico was in the middle of an epic drought, and the market for picturesque ranch land was booming. The idea of selling was too hard to resist.

Donald lives with his wife, Betty, in a sunny double-wide trailer on the site of his grandfather's original homestead, on the 11,500 acres of farmland he kept for himself when he sold the ranch to the Egglestons. When I visit them one morning before a trail ride, there is a fire in the wood stove, and we stretch our legs in front of it. Donald, who was a county commissioner and a state official for many years, is a cowboy-statesman in his mid-seventies, snub-nosed, tall and rangy, with a neat white pompadour. Dude ranching, he says, was something that never interested them. "I used to take people hunting with me in the hills. But I never took them for money, because then I'd have to wait on them."

Donald may be a rancher because he was born into ranching, but he is a cowboy because it suited him to work nearly his whole life in the saddle, shoot mountain lions when they were eating his herd and turn thousands of acres of unfarmable scrub land into a long, independent life. He is a cowboy because he is the same kind of man as his distant ancestor, the Rev. Thomas Hooker, who was run out of England like Roger Williams in the early 1600s and whose maverick individualism found, in the rough, unrealized potential of the new world, its natural home. Donald is a cowboy because, at 75, he still brands his cattle -- still has cattle to brand -- and at 10:30 in the morning on his day off, he is wearing spurs.

AT BREAKFAST the next morning, Alan announces over a plate of eggs that he has gotten a call from a neighbor, who has penned 12 cows and a bull of the Double E's, and that we will be driving the cattle back to the ranch today. It is unclear to me at first if we are going to drive them in vehicles or if we are going to drive them in the cowboy sense, but then Preston comes around with our horse assignments, and I am saved from having to ask.

As we assemble in the yard I realize that everyone besides me is wearing a cowboy hat, and the sun is already strong. My face and the backs of my hands are sunburned enough from the last two days. It is time for me to get a hat. I dash over to the Mercantile -- the Hookers' thick-walled old food cellar, now housing a collection of silk neckerchiefs, chaps, some of those fringed leather pillows, and hats -- and pick out a stiff, wide-brimmed number.

"You're going to want a stampede cord with that," one of the ranch hands says when I return, meaning the horsehair toggle that cinches the hat securely under one's chin. A stampede cord! This sounds promising.

My stampede cord cinched, the hat's wide brim gives my head an exaggerated equatorial wobble, as though I am at the center of a hat-sized gyroscope. I have been told that Buster is taking the day off, and I will be riding a horse named Gonzo, who I have been promised is comparable to Buster. British farmer Peter also has been transferred -- to a stout little horse called Lefty, so named for a tendency to list to the left, like a

shopping cart with a stuck wheel. He is taking it hard. He slouches up next to me, looking sour. "New hat, eh?" he inquires. "Well, it suits you. Of course, it's hard to tell from down here."

"Peter's sulking because he couldn't have his horse," says his wife, Anne.

"This is a pony!" Peter cries. "My feet will get wet when we cross water."

We are headed to the HW Ranch, once owned by relatives of Donald's, and a half a day's journey up Bear Creek. Almost immediately the going turns laborious. In the absence of any clear path, we head straight through the stripling willows that clog the creek bed, tucking our heads and presenting the tops of our hats to the whipping branches. The patch of waist-high shrubbery I take a shortcut through turns out to be cat's-claw, and the hooked thorns embed themselves in my legs through my jeans.

After a few hours of fighting the underbrush, we reach a wire gate that marks the beginning of the HW. A dirt road appears in the sand. Our horses prick up their ears, and a moment later a chorus of agitated bellows floats down the hill. Preston grins, and spurs his horse up the road. By the time we reach the old ranch house, he has dismounted and is standing in a cattle pen making notes on a pad, a slight figure in a sea of heads and wide, shining horns. Standing motionless in the middle of the bunch is a massive bull. Preston squints at its ear tag and scribbles on his pad.

"We're going to sell you, you big son of a bitch," he says under his breath.

The wire pen holding the Double E's cattle has a gate opening directly into the wash, and we gather below it in jumpy anticipation. On the other side of the fence, Alan and his horse are working to crowd the cattle against the gate. The possibility of freedom broached, a state of unease has filtered through the groups on both sides of the fence. Alan appears at the gate. We regard him anxiously. I, at least, have no idea what to expect. I tighten my stampede cord to the point of near-asphyxiation. Perhaps herding cattle will be self-explanatory. Perhaps he is about to give us some last-minute pointers.

"When I open this gate," Alan calls, "here they come."

The gate swings open. There is an electric pause, as the herd considers its situation, and then, of a piece, it lumbers toward us, swerves and heads down into the wash.

Herding cattle, I quickly find, is a little like herding marbles on a hardwood floor: Each animal barrels along a trajectory, ricocheting off obstacles and off of the others. The cattle crash through dense underbrush, and get themselves hung up on rocks and logs. They bellow inconsolably.

"Bully-bully-bully," shouts Colin, smacking the white bull on the hindquarters with a sound like shoe leather.

"Gerrowt," snarls his sweet wife, Helen, fearsomely.

"Boo-yoo-yoo-yoo," warbles Peter, materializing from the woods.

"Gee-yah," I try, tentatively. The doctor from Albuquerque snickers.

The Brits, as it turns out, are fantastic herders. Colin, whooping and hollering, takes the natural lead, flushing the bull out of a couple of tight spots and maneuvering the whole herd through a bottleneck as we near the end of the trail. Ann and Helen are eagle-eyed wingmen, dashing after wanderers, and Peter and the low-riding Lefty pull a few surprise ambushes from the rear. I manage to goad Gonzo into a couple of timely blocks. Now and then, the herd coheres into a unified bunch. It even kicks up a little dust.

We head into the final stretch, sweating and stiff, funneling the herd through the

creek and up the dirt road toward home.

At dinner, Alan estimates that we traveled a good 20 miles on our ride. I am sitting next to Jerry, the contractor from Iraq, who took a day trip with the beginning riders today. He shows me his handheld Global Positioning System, into which he has programmed the barn and the cabin. I have never seen one of these before, and he does a quick circuit through the functions.

"This was our max speed today, 12.3 miles an hour," he says. "That was a trot. This is the distance of the barn from the airport in Germany, our stop in and out of Iraq. This is the dining room's latitude and longitude."

We watch the screen, waiting for the satellite to deliver our elevation above sea level.

MY FLIGHT HOME LEAVES from Silver City in the evening. After taking us on a last ride in the morning, Preston is heading into town to run errands, and Debbie has arranged for him to drop me at the airport. He and I drive around for a while, picking up a tire he was having repaired, lifting a hand at each passing driver. This is the New Mexico I was once intimately familiar with: the vast expanse of the flatlands, hemmed by blue mountains, framed by a wraparound windshield and split by a two-lane highway. "You and me and the lights down low," croons Gary Allan from the stereo. "With nothing on but the radio." Two long rifles and a few boxes of cartridges are lying on the bench seat behind us -- Preston has recently begun leading guided hunts at the Double E, for deer, bighorn sheep and mountain lions.

We stop at Wal-Mart, where Preston picks up a roll of pictures. He shows me one, a view of the wood-paneled interior of a mobile home. The Egglestons have offered to let him live on the ranch, and he is shopping around for trailers. Like Donald, Preston comes from several generations of ranchers and farmers; his father now works for a local copper mine. He recently graduated from high school with honors and a 4.3 GPA. "I had options, you know?" he shrugs. "But I do this because I want to."

Preston went dancing last night, at a bar called the Blue Front Cafe, an hour north of town. He is limping slightly, and as he eases back behind the wheel, he shows me a hole in the toe of his boot, where he stuck a pitchfork into his foot doing chores the day before. "I had to take 1,800 milligrams of ibuprofen just to be able to dance," he says. When he left, to catch a few hours of sleep before the morning feeding, the bar was still hopping. It was a quarter to 2 in the morning.

I wish that I had gone dancing at the Blue Front. I wish that tomorrow were not Monday, and that I did not have my entire year planned, a tidy grid of pay periods and federal holidays, on a laminated calendar push-pinned into the gray flannel of my cubicle wall.

The sun is setting, and from the parking lot of Wal-Mart the clouds stand out like red flares over the darkening hills.

"You know," Preston says, "most people have Sunday off." He steers out of the lot. The road arrows toward the horizon, disappearing into the velvety twilight. He tugs on the brim of his hat, which hasn't budged since breakfast.

"But not cowboys," he says.