The Log of a Cowboy: A Narrative of the Old Trail Days

Andy Adams · *1903 · original English text*

In the spring of 1882 young Tom Quirk helps drive a herd of Texas cattle more than a thousand miles north to the Blackfoot Agency in Montana. Andy Adams writes from his own years on the trail, so the book reads like a working diary: river crossings, stampedes, thirst, small jokes, and the steady business of getting a herd to market. It is a plainspoken picture of the cattle drive.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does it take to bring a herd and a crew through a long, dangerous job, and what do the men learn about each other on the way?

The book answers by showing the work. The trail boss, Tom Flood, the owner, Don Lovell, and the cowboys depend on each other at every river and every storm. Tom Quirk grows from a hand on his first drive into a trusted rider. Adams has no villains and little melodrama. The drama is in the drought, the flooded rivers, and the stampede, and the book respects competence and good humor as much as courage.

KEY CHARACTERS

Tom Quirk
The young narrator, a new hand who learns the trail.

Tom Flood
The trail foreman who guides the drive.

Don Lovell
The owner of the herd, who rides with them for part of the way.

Forrest
The segundo, or second in command.

Bull Durham
A cowboy whose jokes keep the men in spirits.

Joe Stallings
A hand who rides with the outfit.

Grades 6–12

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01

Hiring On and Receiving

CHAPTERS I–II

Tom Quirk leaves his Texas home to sign on with Don Lovell's outfit. The crew gathers, gets its horses, and receives the herd at the Rio Grande.

- His father's farewell is brief and dry.
- The rough humor of the outfit appears at once.
- Receiving the cattle is a legal as well as a practical job.

02

Setting Out

CHAPTERS III–VI

On April 1, 1882, the Circle Dot herd starts north. The crew learns the daily order of point, swing, and drag. A dry drive tests the herd.

- The herd is described as a long moving line.
- The men sort out who does what.
- A dry drive shows how little room there is for error.

03

Rivers and Rain

CHAPTERS VII–XII

The herd crosses the Colorado, Brazos, Wichita, and Red Rivers, and enters No Man's Land. A boggy ford and a North Fork crossing are dangerous.

- River crossings need cool heads and strong horses.
- Storms bring stampedes at night.
- Doan's Crossing is a gathering place for outfits.

04

Dodge and the Plains

CHAPTERS XIII–XVIII

The crew reaches Dodge City, passes Slaughter's Bridge, and follows the Beaver, Republican, and Platte northward. Other herds and trail towns appear.

- Dodge is the great cow town of the age.
- Lovell sells off part of the string and keeps the main contract.
- The men take what rest they can.

05

North to Montana

CHAPTERS XIX–XXII

The herd crosses the North Platte, runs through a moonlit drive, and comes to the Yellowstone. The last camp-fire marks the end of the route.

- The moonlight drive is a high point of the book.
- The Yellowstone is the last big river.
- The crew thinks ahead to the delivery.

06

Delivery and Home

CHAPTERS XXIII–XXIV

The herd is delivered at the agency. The crew is paid off and takes the train back to Texas.

- Delivery is a quiet scene after so much travel.
- Lovell's generosity to the men shows in the last scene.
- The return trip closes the log.

Work · The Road · Rivers · Fellowship

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 6–12

1. Adams writes in the first person, as a log. Notice how much of the book is plain information.
2. Look at how the crew handles each crossing and storm. What qualities matter most?
3. The humor often comes from teasing the new hands. Ask what the jokes accomplish.
4. The book is a record of a way of life that was ending. Look for signs of change.

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