The Cattle Guard

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The Cattle Guard: Its History and Lore.

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Cattle guards are associated with two of my favorite childhood memories: shipping cattle and Wilbur Countryman's yearly rodeo. I grew up on a small ranch in the Flint Hills near Cassoday, Kansas. From the time we started school, my sister, Rita, and I were helping to drive three- and four-year-old Texas steers from summer grass in Western Greenwood County to the Santa Fe stockyards at Cassoday. Our father would wake us at 3:00 A.M. to do chores and load horses, then we would drive fifteen miles east to Frank Klasser's ranch. I would usually doze during the first half of the trip, but the cattle guard at Harsh's Hill Pasture, where the flats gave way to the open-range roads of the Flint Hills proper, always jarred me awake, and the other guards, into and out of the Turney and Mosby pastures, kept me awake.

We would be in the pastures by daylight, rounding up the steers and holding the cut for Jake Jordan or Olin Weaver; then we would head the selected fat cattle back toward Cassoday, driving them through the gates at the sides of the cattle guards that we had bounced across only a few hours earlier.

We drove cattle almost every weekend from late June through September, but Countryman's Rodeo came only on the Fourth of July. Wilbur Countryman lived in the middle of a section pasture a few miles south of Cassoday, and he and his family staged a genuine ranch rodeo, one of the last in the nation. He had his own string of brahma bulls and bucking horses, and his herd of Herefords provided some salty times for calf ropers and wild-cow milkers. The large arena was covered with buffalo grass, except for a little natural
gravel near the chutes, where bulls and broncs had worn the grass away. At each end of the pasture, north and south, was a cattle guard. My sister and I would enter the pasture at the gate at the side of the cattle guard, having left home at dawn to ride to Countryman's in time to help round up the stock. Our parents were secretaries for the rodeo, so we always stayed late; usually it was after dark before we loaded our horses into the truck to go home. Driving across the cattle guard on the way out signaled the end of an annual event that was surpassed in our young lives only by Christmas.

Thus, in my mind, cattle guards have always been linked with ranches and cowboys. Most people have given little thought to cattle guards. I hope that this book will help others to see the cattle guard as I see it, as a symbol of the modern West.

Footnotes can be exasperating; so can lack of them. Because of the non-traditional nature of much of the research for this book and because most of my information has come from oral sources, I have decided to use a non-traditional method of documentation. I have chosen to list, chapter by chapter, both the published and the unpublished sources, along with appropriate commentary, in a section called Sources of Information. This section should allow those who might be interested in doing so to trace my exact use of published material and my general use of unpublished material while simultaneously presenting to the reader an uncluttered text, one free from the distractions of numerous footnotes to oral sources. More complete information about the people listed in the Sources of Information can be found in the List of Contributors.

No author writes alone, although authors are often alone when they write. My first and greatest debt is to my wife, Cathy, my daughter, Farrell, and my son, Josh, for their help as planners, researchers, travel companions, and critics. I could have written this book without their help, but I would not have had as much fun doing it.

Because no previous scholarship on the cattle guard exists, I have had to seek out nontraditional sources of information. Many people have helped in this search, more than six hundred of whom are named in the List of Contributors. Many others, I fear, must share the anonymity of the inventor of the cattle guard, for it is impossible to name all who deserve mention. I do, however, want to note certain areas of assistance and give credit to those whose help was especially timely or whose suggestions proved especially fruitful.

Finding potential informants for this study was greatly facilitated by cooperative members of the media. I sent a letter of inquiry to every county-seat newspaper in the seventeen western states, as well as to dozens of farm and ranch magazines, petroleum and railroad publications, and scholarly jour-

A scholar cannot work without libraries and archives. I want to thank the personnel of the many historical societies, museums, and libraries who helped me gather information. The following people deserve special mention: John Creasey, of the Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading, England, who first told me about Cornish stiles; Mae Andrews, of the William Allen White Library at Emporia State University, and William Longenecker, of the National Agricultural Library, Beltsville, Maryland, who conducted computer searches of relevant bibliographies; Vicki Phillips, of the Oklahoma State University Library, for her help in searching patent records; Larry Remele, of the North Dakota State Historical Society, who first told me about Andrew Johnston's cattle guard; Steve Hanschu, Nannette Martin, and Kathy Mitchum, of the William Allen White Library; and cooperative interlibrary-loan librarians everywhere for tracking down and making available scores of obscure books and articles.

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My special thanks go to Ace Reid for permitting me to use his cartoon from the June 1981 edition of the Cowpokes calendar.

Finally, I want to thank Mel Storm, Dick Keller, and Tom Isern, friends
and colleagues, whose frank criticism and good judgment kept me honest and whose tolerance and good humor kept me human during this five-year undertaking.
THE CATTLE GUARD
Yet a barful strife!

Shakespeare, Twelfth Night