

**"MAKES ECONOMIC SENSE"
SAYS SOUTH DAKOTA RANCHER**

Cattle Drive Saves Tradition, Money

By Kevin Woster

Belvidere, So. Dak. — Except for the Ford pickups, sturdy metal horse trailers and the paved highway, it might have been 1890.

The cowboys — and two cowgirls — looked and sounded the same as they urged 1,000 head of yearling steers through the shifting grasslands of Jackson County.

"Heeyaaah. Heeyuup. Heeyooh. Get back there. Come on. Heeyaaah."

The sounds of a cattle drive. A century beyond the settling of this rolling rangeland, they still echo in the daily lives of ranchers.

Even in this age of high-tech agriculture and exotic hybrid livestock, the cattle drive lives on as more than just a well-kept tradition. Rancher Eugene Christensen, trail boss of this particular one-day drive, says that moving cattle by horse is a management tool that saves money and stress on livestock.

"It would have taken a dozen truckloads at \$150 a load," Christensen notes.

So it makes economic sense. But Christensen, a 40-year-old West River native who broke into the livestock trade through years of hard work, admitted that there's more to a cattle drive than good business.

The leather chaps, broad 10-gal. hats and murmuring livestock are the trappings of a cherished lifestyle, of open country, chilly spring mornings and trail campfires. The Christensen



Sitting tall in the saddle, Eugene Christensen brings back an image of the days when cowboys had no choice but to move cattle by horse.

family, ranch hands and neighbors touched that tradition during the drive, and cemented an enduring friendship.

Just after sunup, 20 experienced cowhands began ushering the sometimes temperamental yearlings along country roads. Seven hours later the work was finished, with all hands and cows accounted for.

No money changed hands for the hours spent on the trail.

"They helped me and when they need a hand I'll help them. That's just

**FARM
SHOW**



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the way it is," Christensen explains.

"It's a time when you get together with your neighbors. When the cattle get strung out and are moving along good, you get a chance to visit about things you might not have a chance to talk about any other time," says Christensen. He feels it's still possible to make a living raising cattle. But today's cowboy must be able to predict market trends and manage a balance sheet as well as he can mend fence and handle a branding iron.

"You really have to diversify your

operation and be a good manager," he points out. "I made some money last year. It's not like the old operation. The old cow-calf man used to be able to get along pretty well."

But if the old days in the cattle business are dead, some parts of them survive. And Christensen believes that cattle drives will be part of the ranch future.

"I think there's always going to be a place for them out here."

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Argus Leader photos by Kevin Woster



Twenty cowboys moved about 1,000 yearling cattle down old Hwy. 16, between Kadoka and Belvidere, in Western South Dakota.