

The Border and a Modern Cowboy

by STEPHEN L. WILMETH

The heat was building as the little Robinson flashed and then disappeared again behind the low ridge. Occasionally dust would appear and the pop, pop, pop of the rotors cutting the air in the turns could be heard over the two miles of space between the mounted cowboys and the working helicopter. The big end of the first calf heifers in this 120 section "trap" would soon appear and the mounted cowboys would trot in behind them and take them on to the corrals.

Another day in the lives of Hurt Cattle Company cowboys was at hand. A blend of old and new was fully in play. Two way radios, helicopter, cow dust and saddle leather all played a role in this drama. Other than the high tech components, the sights and sounds of bawling cattle were no different from a century earlier in this far corner of New Mexico. The ramparts of Big Hatchet and Big Animas Mountains flanking the Playas Valley were the same dark blue that any old time cowboy could remember.

As the cattle were penned and the cowboys dismounted, the helicopter landed nearby. Dust covered everything and everybody.

Without knowing, the crew was debriefing itself like a military operation following a mission. Had the bunch of heifers on the lake bottom been picked up? Was there any likelihood that cattle were left in the heavy brush at the Thompson or the Whitmire? Looking closer an outsider would have been struck by the banter and the

accents.

Spanish and English were used interchangeably. These modern-day cowboys were not different from their counterparts of years ago.

Spurs jingled, horses stood hocked up on three legs in the shade, and the heat of the Southwest influenced the dress and the style of the hats.

From the cockpit of the helicopter the pilot traded his helmet for a wide brimmed palm leaf and stepped out. Richard Hays, Hank as his friends know him, is a native New Mexican. To those who know him he looks more like his maternal grandfather than he would admit. He is a true son of the American West and a descendent of pioneering families. His mother's family settled in the first half of the last century in Catron and Grant County (ies) New Mexico. His father, a "greatest generation" war veteran, a gifted cowboy poet before they became recognized, a saddle maker, a well driller, a roper, and a superb cowboy came from a ranching family in Kansas that had ties to settlement that dated to the Civil War era.

Hank is retired from the United States Border Patrol. His duties were numerous, but his defining duty was as Chief, Flight Operations, United States Border Patrol. Following his retirement from the Border Patrol he settled in Deming, New Mexico and returned to his love of flying in an interesting way. He is employed by the Hurt family where he works cattle in a helicopter in the rugged expanse of New Mexico's Boot Heel where he had worked as a rookie Border Patrol agent in early 1970.

This is an area of the United States that in many ways has been left in time and space. It was added as part of the Gadsden Treaty that, in 1854, secured by the United States as a southern railroad route to the Pacific Coast. It is remote, it is sparsely populated, and the natural surroundings are spectacular. It has also become one of the most active and dangerous corridors of illegal human and drug smuggling along the Mexican border.

In his duties, Mr. Hays flies constantly in this remote corner of southwestern New Mexico. He sees issues of illegal immigration through the eyes of a veteran Border Patrol professional, but through the prism of a modern cowboy. His views are interesting, they are esoteric, and they are insightful. He worries about America's future.

"Every time we work cattle I find evidence of dope running," he says. "If and when we find a load there will be a spotter somewhere in the vicinity. He will be in a position to guide whoever is supposed to pick up the load into the area. He will be equipped with either a cell phone or a radio and he will call the shots on the pickup."

The spotter serves as liaison between the "mule" who has packed the load from the border to the pickup point and the individual who will move the load to the next point. He is the communication link and security agent for the transfer. If there is danger of being detected he communicates that information. His job is to get the load through and into the distribution system. He has little patience for any excuses from a lowly "mule".

"We are seeing a lessening of human smuggling, and, if anything, an increase in running dope," Mr. Hays continues. "This could be a combination of the economic situation in the United States and the further development of soft entry access in the Boot Heel."

What this observation suggests, however, is that with all the intensified border efforts illicit drugs are still being brought in at an accelerating rate in the Boot Heel corridor. Violence is not just a newspaper article subject, either. "On a game camera photo, we have a picture of a Mexican national carrying an AR-15," he continued matter-of-factly.

Evidence indicates that the Sinaloa (drug) Cartel is operating on the north side of the border and attempting to wrestle business and product away from the northern Chihuahuan and the Sonoran cartels.

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Everyone in the area is amazed that more armed confrontations haven't occurred. "The dope rings are still very leery of American law enforcement, but it is only a matter of time before something erupts that will lessen that respect. When it does, it has the potential of escalating into something none of us can imagine. This is a very serious deal down here."

It is also something that Americans had better take seriously.

Politics and administration policies are something that can become life threatening to the people who make their lives in this border area. For example, efforts to designate wilderness on federal lands

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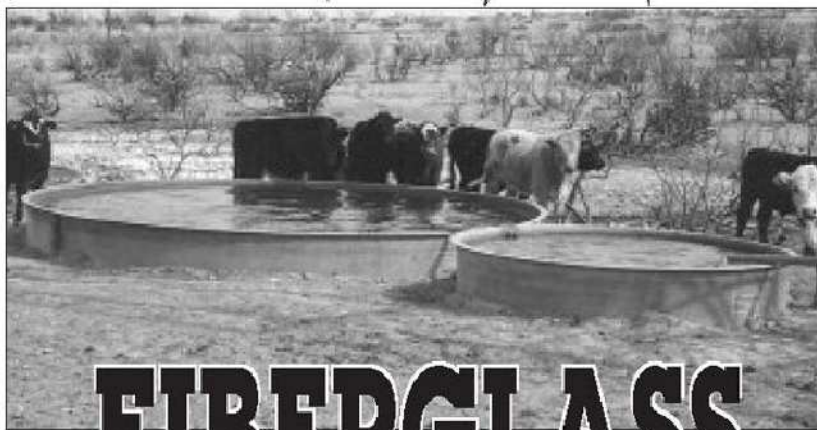
along the border by several border congressional representatives is a serious and consequential matter. As described in the organic act, wilderness is a place that roads and motorized access are not allowed.

Regardless of proposed steps to mitigate access concerns by the Border Patrol, wilderness will limit full interdiction efforts.

Confining and limiting such activities in any way is not only dereliction of Congressional responsibility it is an affront to the American people. It must not be allowed to happen. The Border Patrol needs full and unencumbered authority to do whatever is necessary to protect the American border and not be sidelined or confounded by a political agenda.

"Our congressmen need to come work some cows with me and see what is taking place," Hank says and then smiles and contemplates what he just said. "There might be a different perspective on this whole border deal." The fact is that, if America could come and hear the views of border ranchers, there might be a whole different perspective on a lot of things.

Editor's note: This article is one in a series written by members and friends of People for Preserving Our Western Heritage. See www.peopleforwesternheritage.com for more details.



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