

Cottonwood Cowboys  
by Marsha Ward

The week ran along fine until Thursday night.

Then the big cottonwood came crashing down on the corral.

It about ruined my weekend.

I guess I didn't mind so much that I was stuck on the two-man saw with Curly, but Saturday afternoon working toward evening was a poor time to pull tree clearing duty, especially this Saturday, with the dance all laid out at the school house, and a new schoolmarm to gaze at.

I reckon it wasn't Curly's fault; there wasn't a finer hand than Curly, except maybe for me, on the whole Four Rivers, Arizona, spread. It was just that I was itching to get to that dance, having caught a beforehand sign of that schoolmarm when last I was in town.

The trouble was, Curly was just as anxious to get duded up and out to the school house as I was, and I didn't want him to get an edge on me.

I guess it wasn't Amos Ramsey's fault neither. But I sure cussed him some under my breath while I worked that saw back and forth as fast as I could stand. Old Amos owned the Four Rivers Ranch, and I thought sure he was going to leave that old, rotten tree for another day or two, seeing as how it had been laying there since the storm brought it down on Thursday night, and he hadn't seen fit to give orders to clear it away.

Old Amos changed his mind along about Saturday noon, and decided he surely could use some firewood from that stringy tree, and while Curly and me were at it, we might as well clear the whole mess from the corral. And after that, if we didn't mind, we could fix the section of fence that got mashed with the tree atop it.

"Tarnation," I said, along with a few other little things, once Old Amos was safely out of earshot. "I reckon I hired on to do just about anything, as long as it could be done from the back of a horse."

Curly growled something in reply, and yanked on the handle of the saw.

"Well, I allow as how I hate to dig postholes about as bad as anything," I came back.

Curly wasn't thrilled, neither.

We spent a long part of the early afternoon just pulling and pushing on that saw, getting hot under the collar from the work as well as the aggravation. Somewhere about three p.m. we commenced to dragging the cut sections of log out toward the wood pile with the horsepower of Africa and Asia.

Them horses were a matched set of bays, and good workers where there was a load to pull, but Asia was a mite tetchy about his heels. Let the slightest little thing come against those heels, and he would be off a running, with Africa right alongside, and he'd run like he got spooked, too.

Well, I'd sat down, taking a breather and letting the horses do the same, while Curly unhitched the rigging from around the last log we'd hauled over to the wood-stack. I was a-fanning my head and chest with my old hat, seeing as how Mrs. Ramsey and her daughters were all in town helping set up the dance, and I'd long since rid myself of my shirt.

Curly unwrapped the last turn of the chain and gave it a toss in the direction of the team.

That chain came down on the heels of Old Asia. One minute he was there, blowing kind of peaceful like and enjoying the rest. The next minute he was tearing up the sod alongside the pasture fence, with Africa keeping step next to him. The harness and rigging were bouncing along behind, liable to catch on any old thing sticking up in the way, and Curly was hoofing it

and puffing behind the team, trying to get to where he could catch the ends of the lines, hoping to halt those animals.

Old Amos Ramsey took pride in those two beasts, and Curly knew he'd be out riding between chuck-wagons if they came to any harm.

There wasn't a thing I could do, what with the head start everybody had on me, so I spent my time wisely by rolling on the ground, holding my sides to keep my laughter from busting my gut, and making myself a candidate for cowboy most likely to need a bath in the near future.

About then, Old Deaf Peters, the cook, stepped out the back door of the cook shack and turned loose a bucketful of potato wash water.

That bucket load rained down on the dirtiest cowboy, and then I was the muddiest hand, as well. The water did damp down my laughing fit some, though, and I scrambled to my knees to see what was happening with Curly and the team.

Old Asia was slowing down, but he'd managed to get through the open gate to the lower pasture, where he was circling back from the far fence. Curly was pounding after the team, trying to cut them off before they hit the gate for the return trip.

I got to my feet to see Asia and Africa turn again to run back the other way, and Curly sprinted across the pasture to intercept them. Tarnation, if he didn't catch right up to them and skinny up on Old Africa's back. It was so rare a sight I almost started in to clapping, until I remembered I'd best get myself down there to help Curly, now that he had the team going in tight circles.

Cowboy boots aren't the most logical footgear for walking, and they're a sight worse for running, but I took off anyway, doing the best I could to get down to the pasture in a hurry. By this time, Curly had them two horses slowed down to a walk, and he slipped off Africa's back and ran around to the front to lead them back where they came from.

Africa and Asia were a-heaving and a-blowing after that little bit of exercise, and Curly looked about like he would drop right there in the pasture, but they kept a-coming toward me, and I kept a-going toward them, and we met just a tad bit this side of the pasture gate.

Curly swore at me, and added, "You could of come help me sooner!" His face was all twisted from the effort to get a breath down his lungs.

I laughed to see his expression, and Curly like to take a poke at me.

"Hold off, now," I said, ducking his fist. "I had a poor start. We best run this race again."

Curly glowered and puffed, and kept walking in the direction of the corral. "Damn! Old Amos'll have my hide for this. Lucky them two beasts found the gate instead of busting through the wire." Curly puffed some more.

I looked the team over and winked at Curly. "They don't appear to be hurt none."

"I reckon the Good Lord loves me, then," Curly replied, slogging through the torn-up turf.

"I reckon we still got a pile of work to do. Some folks will do anything to get out of their fair share," I chided, grinning.

"Shut up, Slim," Curly returned.

I whistled a tune, and tramped along beside Curly, and hoped we wouldn't be too late to the dance.