

City slicker

A greenhorn rounds up the little dogies at an Athens County dude ranch

by Rich Warren

The first thing I did when I recently mounted a horse for the first time was look for the seat belt. I guess that's the biggest sign of what a city slicker I've become.

Half an hour later, terrified and adrenaline-charged, I was riding in my first cattle drive, chasing unruly dogies across cloverly pastures on my trusty steed Stoney, a caramel-brown gelding who had rather different ideas than I about the speed we should be traveling.

The Smoke Rise dude ranch is 2,000 acres of wooded hills and open meadows in Athens County, just a few miles outside Nelsonville. It's run by the Semingson family, real-life Montana ranchers from ranges so remote they had to drive 75 miles to buy underwear.

Aspiring ranchers come to Smoke Rise from as far away as Canada to watch or participate in rodeo events like roping, team penning and cattle cutting, or to help round up the herd. Greenhorns can also just go riding or camp out, shooting the breeze around campfires with other cowboy wannabes.

I fell head-over-heels in love with the place, even though at first I was sure I was just going to go head over heels—flung from the horse's back and stomped into mush by pounding hooves. When I called the Semingsons for this story, it was their idea for me to go on the cattle drive to get a real feel for Smoke Rise. The only riding I'd ever done was on a tethered pony in a circle at the county fair when I was eight, hardly a qualification for bronco busting in my opinion.

They were unconcerned. "Come on down," they drawled. "We'll show you the ropes."

So off I went, deliberately leaving at home the cowboy hat I once purchased out West (I didn't want to project any false illusions about my competence). Besides, I suspected this "cattle drive" was really a staged event with real cowboys doing the work and tourists like

me sitting in saddles and looking pretty.

When I arrived, I met Lynn Semingson, a tanned, easy-smiling man with intense blue eyes and a belt buckle the size of South Dakota. He exuded confidence and horsey know-how, and I immediately felt safe in his hands.

Lynn gave me a mini-lesson in horse psychology, telling me they were prey animals whose instinct is to run and who were all too happy to look to humans for leadership. "You're their security," he told me. "But they will definitely try to test your leadership skills."

Then we moseyed over to meet Stoney, a handsome 10-year-old that Lynn assured me was as gentle as the day is long but who kept staring at me suspiciously. I met Stoney's gaze, trying to adopt an "I'm the boss" attitude, but he saw right through me.

Ten minutes later, a pretty young woman named Ashley was giving me a rudimentary riding lesson. It turns out the instructions to the horse are rather simple; getting the animal to pay attention is not. Stoney walked wherever he wanted, often stopping altogether to graze.

"He's not sure what you want. He's testing you," Ashley kept telling me. She urged me to be assertive using the reins. "Each little battle you win makes it easier," she explained.

Then it was time to round 'em up. About 30 cowboys-for-a-day set off at a leisurely pace. Stoney occasionally heeded my orders, although I assumed—wrongly—that he would allow space for my knees as we passed a tree. When he broke into an unauthorized trot, my heart flew into my mouth, and I was sure my thighs would be pulverized into a pulpy mass.

Kindhearted cowboys and cowgirls offered more impromptu equine psychology: "Horses need a sense of purpose. They look to you to provide that," one lady told me. I did-

n't know horseback riding was so existential.

Then we rounded a bend and saw the object of our quest—a herd of grazing dogies—in a pretty little valley with a picturesque lake. Lynn started issuing orders as though we were an invading army. I was unnerved to discover I might be expected to help out, but the lust for the hunt was rising in me—a sensation quickly lost when Stoney took me over the crest of a steep hill and started descending swiftly. It felt like Cedar Point, only bumpier, and I started to hope I'd left my will in a place where my heirs could find it easily.

When we reached the bottom, the cattle started rushing about in a mad froth, beset by a pack of riders and barking dogs. "A herd

when we closed the gate on the corral, our round-up completed. I wanted to spend the whole afternoon cheerfully chasing cows.

The rest of the day I just hung around the corral with my new partners. One of them even offered me chewing tobacco (I declined). Even the horses kept walking up to me and introducing themselves, apparently now recognizing me as one of their leaders. I was so intoxicated with the goodhearted camaraderie, I began courting illusions of trading in the writing life for the open range.

When I took my leave, the cowboys urged me to stay for the evening's campfire, but I was concerned someone would shatter the spell by yodeling. There are limits, you know.

As I left, I saw Stoney tied up to a hitch,



Rich Warren and partners at home on the range

of cattle is like a bowl of Jell-O," Lynn had told us. "You probe it in one place, and it bulges in another."

I wasn't much help in prodding the Jell-O, though, since Stoney was dashing willy-nilly, hither and yon, all over that pretty green valley. But I didn't mind because, daggone it, I was starting to have fun. I longed for my cowboy hat and a festive blue bandanna.

All too quickly we pushed the cows back toward the corral. At the last minute, about a dozen of them ran into the woods, a dramatic escape attempt quickly thwarted by riders more adept than me. I was actually upset

and I walked over to say goodbye. Lynn had told me, "When you see their eyes go soft, you've got them." I didn't know what he meant, but as I stroked Stoney's muzzle, I saw his inquisitive look dissolve into a velvety softness, and he actually reached out and nuzzled me. My heart melted. I made a lot of new friends that day. One of them weighs about a half ton more than me.

I'm not the first or last city slicker to succumb to the romance of the open range. But at least when I need my fix of the Wild West, I won't have to drive any farther than Athens County. **Ca**

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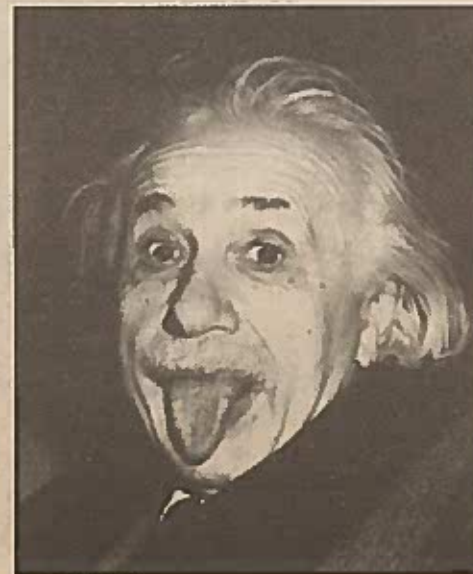
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