



12-15-1986

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Recommended Citation

Bockelman, Barbara (1986) "Cattle Killing," *Westview*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 14.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol6/iss2/14>

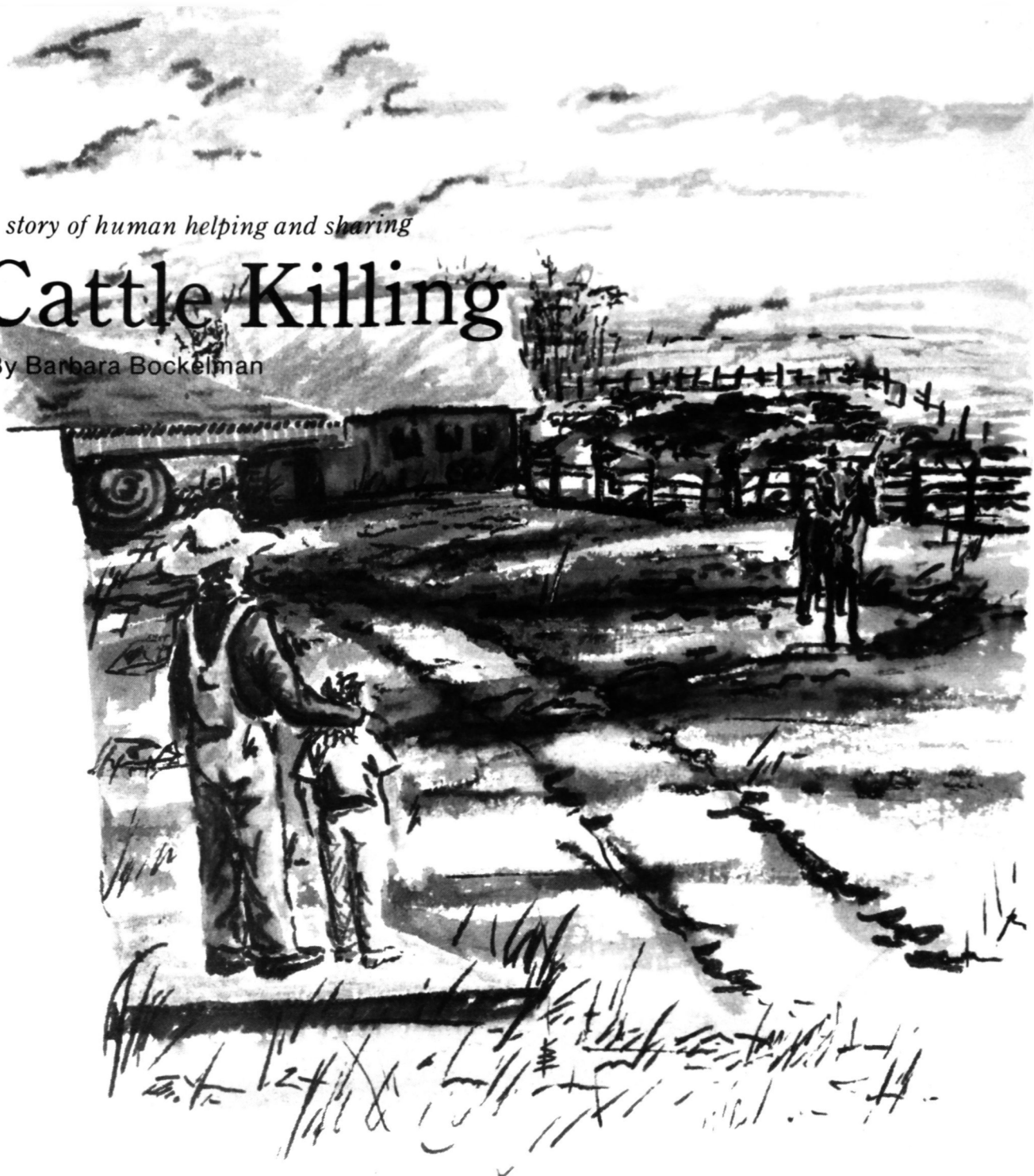
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a story of human helping and sharing

Cattle Killing

By Barbara Bockelman



The mid-thirties saw many people leave Oklahoma for what they hoped was a brighter future—at least one that could promise three meals a day. But what about those Oklahomans who stayed on the land and managed to survive somehow?

As one oldtimer put it, “We decided we’d just as soon starve here as to go off somewhere we didn’t know nobody and starve. At least here we all managed to help each other out even when we didn’t have two thin dimes to rub together.”

This is a story of one of those who not only didn’t leave, but actually came during those terrible years of depression, dirt storms, and human suffering no one can adequately describe.

In 1929 I came to live with my new stepgrandfather and grandmother, Mr. and Mrs. E. B. Sitton, at the age of two and a half years. My young life was shaped by these two as we survived the next years together through dirt, hard times, low cattle prices, debts, and one move after another mandated by a Wichita bank. Grandad had lost two fortunes already and only was trying to support us and pay off a bank debt so large the bank couldn't afford to dump him. One fortune was the price of a divorce from his first wife; another was lost on cattle in 1929 in southwest Texas. And so we came to Oklahoma in 1933 to the Black Ranch in Ellis county nine miles west of Camargo--with nothing but a small herd of cows trailed down the South Canadian River from west of Canadian, Texas and his biggest asset--a good name.

The dry land began to blow, prices kept dropping, and only a bare existence was possible. Higher education for most youth in the Dust Bowl area was even a dream. But the college degree I earned in 1963 at the age of thirty-six was paid for in part by a skinny heifer my grandad rescued from a government rifle way back in 1933. Why I waited so long to achieve the degree is another story. This is about the beginning of it all and of the courage of people in distress.

"I just don't understand it and I never will. It just don't make no sense," Grandad fumed.

"But the government says it's necessary to help the price of cattle," commented Grandmother.

"Oh, hell, that's hogwash. Killin' cattle off ain't going to solve nuthin." Them big boys sit up there in them fancy Washington offices and think up these hair brained ideas. And people are going hungry, and I just don't understand it. The world is sure enough going to hell in a breadbasket." A puff of smoke rose from his pipe--the pipe he smoked because Prince Albert was much cheaper than the cigars he loved. For a man that had fancied expensive Havana cigars when he was a livestock commission buyer on the Wichita stockyards, the pipe tasted like ten cents.

"Well, damned if I ever thought I'd live to see the day I'd let a thing happen like this on my place." My six-year old mind didn't understand what he meant. It was merely a fact to me that tomorrow the government men would appear at daylight to start shooting the selected cattle the farmers were bringing for slaughter. This was supposed, as best I

understood it, to keep the price of cattle from going down any further because there were too many with little feed available. The government considered it a humane move as well.

I remembered Grandad's voice a few days before as he told Grandmother, "I swear--I don't want to do it. But we need the money same's anyone else. They want to use our lots for the shooting and they'll pay us ten dollars for the day's use. I can't turn down no ten dollars."

"I agree, dear. Times are too bad to say no."

"Hellfire and damnation--that's what's happening to this country--this'll bring damnation on the farmer's heads. You just wait and see!"

Morning came blue and clear, with the sure promise of hundred degrees by noon. By seven it had started--a day I would remember the rest of my life. Even before daylight we heard our dog Brownie frantically barking at the first arrivals of farmer and cattle, some led on a rope behind a car, and some even tied down in wagons behind scrawny teams. The line grew up the hill from the corral--sweating, bawling, spitting, visiting, sullen, hopeless, and just blankly waiting.

One thing the cattle shared in common--hip bones threatened to puncture through scrubby hides. (The heavier cattle had already been shipped to market.) Cockleburrs clung to matted tails, flies blackened their backs, and their manure fell in splashy green piles. A stench rose from the lot.

At first Brownie stalked and patrolled the invaders of his privacy, but finally he gave up and crawled under the back step to wait for Grandad.

"Just look at 'em--that's the worst sight I've ever seen in my whole life and right now I wished I was somewhere else--like say Timbuctoo. Look at Hiram out there! Isn't that the heifer I helped him pull? I could make money on that calf if. . ."

"But you don't," reminded Grandmother.

I couldn't hear what he muttered under his breath, but she shook her head at him.

Then the government men arrived, rifles sticking out the side windows of the green car marked United States Department of Agriculture on the side. I'd never seen anything like it before. There were four of them in the car. Brownie ran stiff-legged around the tires, sniffing.

"I'll bet they're drawing down some fancy wages for this day's dirty work,"

Grandad snorted.

I was hanging out the back screen door watching the crowd part as the green car went slowly down toward the lot. The crowd came alive.

"Barbara, shut that door. You're letting in all the flies in the country," Grandmother scolded.

"Hey, can I go down by the tank and get up on the fence and watch?"

"No, you may not! That's not going to be a place for any young lady."

"Let her go. She'd just about as well see this so's she can remember the stupidity of life sometimes."

"But she might get hurt."

"I'll keep an eye on her. I'd best be getting down there myself, or I won't have no lots left. Wished I'd never gotten into this durned mess in the first place. Ten dollars isn't gonna wipe out this day."

"All right--we're ready for the first one," the man at the gate hollered above the push of men and animals. "Get in line!"

No pause in the noise.

"Quiet, I said!"

Still no pause.

"Here, I'll stop 'em!" a man in the center of the lot shouted and pointed his rifle at the sky.

The rifle crack cut the hot air and even the hungry cattle were momentarily startled into silence. Brownie, who had been standing by Grandad with tongue lolling out, tucked in his bushy tail and made for the barn.

"Now, that's better. I'll open the gate and you push them animals to the center of the lot where Jim will take over. Report to the car and give your name and appraisal slips to the boys there."

It had been announced earlier in the government letters received by each farmer and rancher that the carcasses would be available free for meat to anyone wanting to butcher it or haul it away. The carcasses left would be burned. The farmer could also have the hide from the animal he butchered. This could be sold for twenty-five cents at the produce house. The government would eventually buy these also.

Rapidly as the gun could be fired, the cattle fell by legal edict and six to fifteen dollars. Every once in awhile the gateman and the rifleman traded off.

"We'll all be sorry--mark my word--sorry day--sorry cattle--oh, damn it! Damn it!" and Grandad scuffed his heel in the powdery lot soil mixed with pulverized manure. Then I saw him stiffen.

"Hey, there, Jess, you ain't gonna let 'em shoot that heifer--why, look at her--she's big-boned and her back is straight as an arrow. She's broad across the rump. She'll make a fine cow with a little grub under her belt," and he blocked the gate. The gateman looked back uncertainly at the rifleman.

The sudden stop of the cattle flow annoyed the rifleman. "Here, there, you slowpokes--get a move on. We ain't got all day. You there in the gate, move over."

Grandad spit down by his scuffed boot, pulled his dusty Stetson down over one brow, and slowly turned on his heel to walk over to the rifle holder.

"Young man, you may be paying me ten dollars for the use of my lot to carry on this outrage--and heaven forgive me, I took it--but let me tell you right here and now--I will stand in this gate all day if I see fit. You can just tell your Mr. Government Bookkeeper not to send me no ten dollars and just pack your gear and git. This is my place as long as I'm paying the lease, and I'm paid up."

The rifleman lowered his gun to the ground and looked past Grandad to the two men in the car. One of them shook his head and the rifleman stepped back. "All right, Mister, it's your lot. But we got an awful lot to do."

"This won't take a minute. Then you can go on with your bloody business. I got a little business of my own."

Brownie stuck his head around the corner of the barn during the gun's silence, surveying the scene with raised hackles.

"Jess, pull that heifer on through and let the next dumb honyock through. I want to make a deal with you."

"Hey, you can't do that--regulations say. . . ." the government man started to say.

Grandad didn't even pause. He and the neighbor walked over to the lot's far corner. Brownie ducked into the barn as the gun barrel rose once more.

The outburst had startled me. I'd never seen this gentle man who was all the father I'd ever known act this way. Now I stretched up on my toes, almost falling into the tank. By the time I had regained my balance, I saw Grandad take the frayed end of the heifer's rope and lead her through the gate toward the barn.

He stalked triumphantly back to his leaning place, pulled out his knife and started whittling. The only time he noticed the proceedings was a rhyth-

mical knife change as the rifle cracked.

The death panorama continued with only a pause now and then for the rifleman to wipe his gritty eyes or trade places with the gateman. The bawling grew less and less. Grandad whittled through a pile of fence slivers. I became bored with the ugliness, the death struggles of the falling cattle, the pushing and shoving of hungry families grabbing for the warm flesh to butcher, and the frantic slashing of knife to juglar vein to bleed the carcass--the blood spurting in Romanesque fountains. Hunger was the knife sharpener, poverty the wielder. Two neighbors stood toe-to-toe claiming the same carcass while a third pounced on it and hacked away a hind quarter before he was noticed.

By sundown all were gone--only muddy bloodstains, warm blood smell, trampled corral, a sagging corner post, and a dust pall remained. Not one carcass had to be burned.

Slowly Grandad did the chores, Brownie following close and trembling at his heels. Once he banged two feed buckets together, and Brownie scrouged down under the feed bunk.

"C'mon, boy. Nuthin's going to hurt you, fellah. Them maniacs with their green car and hot rifles are gone."

My eyes hurt at supper. I hardly heard the conversation until Grandmother exclaimed, "You didn't!"

"Yep. Couldn't help it." He took a healthy swig of coffee.

"Don't you try to change the subject by making loud noises with that coffee. You know good and well how that irritates me." He thumped the cup down, and his shoulders slumped. "Honey, I think if you'd have come down there today and watched those cattle you would know why. I been a cowman ever since I herded cattle up in Kansas when I was twelve years old. But never in my life have I ever seen cattle deliberately shot."

He went on, "All those cattle needed was feed and grass. All them poor cusses needed was money to buy feed. But when they could get a little money, then there were no cattle left to feed. I saw more'n one grown man cry today. Money--people just ain't got it. Spirit--it's about all gone, too."

Grandad slowly twirled his empty cup. "Then that little heifer came along--skin and bones all right, but good calf-having bones. I knew we couldn't afford her, but I looked at her and I could see that kid with that rifle waiting, and it got the best of me."

"You mean the best of your good judgment. You aren't on the yards now. You don't have money like you did then.;"

He shook his head. "Then I looked at Barbara sitting up there on that fence not knowing what all that waste meant, and there was that heifer. All of a sudden, I decided it wasn't going to be the end but maybe a beginning."

My eyes riveted on his face.

"Beginning of what, Grandad?"

"Your college education!"

"Her what?"

"Yep. Take my word, that heifer will help send this kid off to college."

"In the meantime, how do we pay for her?"

"Well, the govenment had appraised her at seven fifty because she looked so sorry. Shows how much those green-horns knew about cattle. I offered him ten dollars and he grabbed it right up."

Grandmother stared at him. "You're crazy. If anyone would ask me right now, I'd say you needed your head examined."

"Well, we'll have those government dollars soon and Jess didn't mind giving me credit to get more for that heifer."

Grimly Grandmother poured hot water into the dishpan, put in the bar of P&G, and turned her back on him.

"Ah, now, honey, can you think of a better way to spend the rent for a day of killing than on a beginning?" And I knew he was sweet talking her. Then her shoulders began to shake and Grandad said, "Hey, don't cry. What's done is done. I can't go back on my word. A trade's a trade in my books."

She turned, but there were no tears. "I'm not crying. Crying doesn't do any good anymore, but we can still laugh. And it struck me funny that it's only an idiot like you with nothing left who could think of a college education for a six-year-old girl who could care less right now."

Grandad just looked at her.

"Besides, we need to think of a name for the new heifer. What about getting fancy and calling her Alpha?"

"Alpha? We don't know anyone by that name," I said. We liked to name the cattle kept around the lot after people we knew.

"She's right, honey," Grandad chuckled as he put his arms around both of us. "And that's gettin' pretty fancy. Seems to me I've heard tell that Alpha means beginning in Greek."