

The Great Noxubee Cattle War

Travis McDaniel
Retired (1960-1994)

In this story retired Fish and Wildlife Service employee Travis McDaniel shares a story concerning trespass cattle on the Noxubee Refuge. He states they had issues with locals cutting the fence surrounding the refuge and letting their cows graze. Mr. McDaniel recounts when they finally caught trespass cattle, how the refuge couldn't store the cattle at the barn in Starkville the second time they caught cattle, and what they did to fix the situation and win the cattle war.

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Noxubee Refuge had a history of trespass livestock. From the time I was assigned to Noxubee as the manager in 1972, we had been trying to roundup trespass cattle that folks living on inholdings had let run on the refuge. The previous manager had fenced the entire refuge to prevent such trespass, but the locals merely cut the barbed wire, turned the cows in on our wildlife plots, and then tied the fence back. We had tried many times, unsuccessfully, to catch the trespass cows.

A terrible tornado swept through the middle of the refuge a year or so after I came to Noxubee and a tremendous acreage of forest was blown down. It was springtime and the grass was just beginning to green up in our wildlife openings. A few days after the tornado, assistant manager, Lee Fulton, was driving through the refuge when he spotted some cows grazing on the fresh growth in one of the refuge openings. The locals had turned their cows in on the refuge since their pastures had been overgrazed all winter and offered little in the way of nutrition. An hour or so later Lee burst into my office, uniform messed up and all in a huff.

“Travis, we got ‘um this time. We finally got ‘um where we want ‘um,” he said excitedly! “There’s a bunch of cows in some of that tornado blow down. I’ve already caught one and got her tied up. I know we can catch more if you get the crew out there to help,” he blurted out, hardly able to contain himself.

“If you think we can catch ‘um run up to the shop and tell everybody up there to get ready and follow us. Be sure and get all those catch ropes we bought and bring them along. I’ll be right behind you as soon as I can get in my boots.”

A few minutes later three truckloads of employees were speeding down the refuge road towards the spot Lee had identified. The cows were still in the opening when we got there. We all slid the vehicles to a stop on the loose gravel, jumped out, and chased the cows into the tangled mass of blown down trees and broken limbs.

Cooter Smith, our mechanic, hollered, “Try to catch all the caves first. A momma cow won’t leave her calf. Catch ‘um by the tail and hand on!”

We all followed Cooter’s instructions; each picked out a calf and tried to chase it down. Sure enough, after a mad dash around, over and through shattered limbs and tree trunks, Cooter, Lee and I each caught a calf. We tied them up on the spot and, like Cooter said, the cow came back and just hung around her calf. All we had to do was slip a rope over her head and we had two for one. We were catching so many cows I sent Cooter home in one of the trucks to get his personal cattle trailer. When he got back he found the rest of us a little worse for wear, with scratched arms and faces, but now guardians over a dozen or so cows. With one of us pulling on a rope tied to the cow’s neck, and one of us pushing on the freshly manure splattered rear end, we finally got all the cows and calves loaded in the cattle trailer. Cooter and his brother, Curtis, took them to Starkville to the cattle barn while I went back to the office and called the barn to tell the man we were coming with a trailer load of cows – and, he could expect more later. After all our earlier

failures, Lee had learned the secret to cow catching success. All we needed was to stick with it and something to slow them down a little. The tornado had provided the jumble of tree trunks and limbs to do just that.

After making the call, I drove to Starkville to the cow barn. We hadn't even finished unloading the cows before the owner showed up at the barn – wanting his cows back. I suspect Cooter and Curtis passed right by his house as they were carrying the cows to Starkville. I figured the cost of everyone's salary for the time involved, gas for the vehicles and a rental fee for the use of Cooter's trailer and gave the owner a price for what it would take to get his cows back. I reminded him I could also charge him with cattle trespass, but out of the goodness of my heart I was only charging him an impoundment fee. He was mad as a wet hen, but he had no choice. If he didn't pay right away he would also have the overnight stay at the cattle barn added to the bill. He paid the couple of hundred dollars fee... probably swearing under his breath to get even with me if he got the chance.

I was ecstatic over the success we had in catching that first batch of cows. The trick was in catching the calves first, but we also found if we just stuck with the chase and the cows didn't have open woods to escape through, we could catch them. I was so sure of future success that I had Cooter leave his cow trailer at the refuge. Sure enough, in a few days Lee spotted another bunch of cows. I had hoped the first impoundment had taught all the cattle owners I meant business, but such was not the case. We went through the same routine as before and in a few hours had another trailer load of cows. Again, I sent Cooter and Curtis to Starkville with the cows while I went back to the office to call the stock barn about another load.

"Mr. McDaniel, I'm sorry to tell you this but I'm not going to be able to hold any cows for you," the owner of the stock barn said apologetically.

"You don't mean you're full up do you?"

"No, I've got plenty of room. That's not the problem."

"Well what is it then," I asked in a puzzled tone?

"Look Mr. McDaniel, I don't own this barn free and clear. I still owe a good bit on it. And I got a call – I ain't tellin' you from who – and they told me not to take in any of your impounded cows anymore. I hate it, but that's the way it is," he said, apologizing again. "I wish I was a young man, I'd help you fight 'um," he said. "But I just can't afford to."

I told him thanks for his support and not to worry about it. There's more than one way to skin a cat – and more than one way to pen up a cow. I immediately called Cooter on the radio and told him to forget about dropping the cattle at the barn and to bring them back to the refuge. But, before he left town he should go by Vanlandingham's Hardware and buy about four rolls of barbwire.

We built a four-strand barbwire holding pen in a secluded spot near the headquarters and put the cows inside. We built it good enough to last for several years and convenient enough so that we could put impounded cows inside it whenever we caught more. Well, that did the trick. The owner showed up the next morning asking if we had seen any of his cows that had somehow broken out of his pasture. I told him we had some cows and if he wanted to claim them and pay the impoundment fee, they were his. I also warned him that each new cattle owner was getting one free ride without being charged in federal court with cattle trespass - and that he had just had his. He paid the fee and took his cows without much of a squabble.

We never had to use the holding pen again. The great Noxubee cattle war was over and we had won, hands down. True, there would be other type battles to come that I would loose, but we won this one fair and square. Oh, the taste of victory is sweet!

Travis H. McDaniel
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