

THE DOGS OF J.W. CALLAHAN

J.W. Callahan owned a big old spread out in western Colorado where he pursued ranching as a livelihood. Though that was a common occupation out there, J.W. coulda rightly been called uncommon. Many considered him a maverick in his time. While every other cattle rancher around depended totally on cowboys and good cutting horses, J.W. assigned a goodly portion of his herding duties to his dogs. The rancher did have some mighty fine dogs, one hundred of them to be exact. Nowadays, such a move would draw praise as a progressive and effective means of increasing profitability. Back then, most cattle ranchers didn't act real quickly on anything that might diminish the way of life of their local labor pool.

With the end of autumn approaching, J.W. set out to bring in the last few head of cattle from the back areas of his massive ranch. Overwintering in that part of the country meant plenty of hay and some type of protected quarters. Naturally, he sent out his mixed crew of dogs and traditional

wranglers to comb the range for the stragglers. The roundup went well, and when the last of the riders and dogs had returned, J.W. seemed pleased. A final head count, though, revealed that one of the dogs was missing.

Ol' Pete never made it back, and that stuck in J.W.'s side. He had a fondness for every one of his dogs. When he heard the news, he saddled up his faithful steed and headed for the hills.

As he left, he told his men, "Boys, I don't know how long I'll be gone, so's ya best get the rest of the dogs and horses settled in for the cold."

A week went by without a sign of J.W. After the second week, some of the boys got a little concerned. When a fierce winter storm blew across the land, Jeb Hawkins, the ramrod of the crew, and a couple of other men started packing up some provisions to form a search party. As they got ready to mount up, there appeared on the horizon a shadowy rider headed their way. As the horse and rider got closer, it filled some of the boys with trepidation. The quivering icicles hanging from the rider's beard and the smoky breath of the horse gave all the appearance of a ghostly visitor from beyond.

The sound of ninety-nine dogs barking simultaneously broke the eerie silence. Yeah, them dogs recognized the figure of the shadowy intruder as that of their master. And sure enough, J.W. had ol' Pete draped across the back of his big horse. The good dog appeared a might down in the mouth, but alive nonetheless.

They had quite a celebration at the Bar-J ranch the next day. The frigid temperature outside didn't matter cause inside their hearts were aglowin at the return of Ol' Pete. J.W. threw such a big barbeque that, believe it or not, no one gave a second thought to one hundred dogs and twenty cowboys sitting at the same table chowing down on the same delicious feast.

Now, pardners, I got a feeling it's kinda the same way with the Lord when one wandering spirit returns to the fold. Them angels probably throw a great big barbeque up there in heaven just in celebration.

So, the next time you step outside and you take in the sweet aroma of hickory smoke in the air, consider its source. It could be your neighbor grilling up some thick juicy steaks. Or it could be the

*wind blowing in from that barbeque restaurant
down the road that just fired up for the evening
crowd. Or maybe ... just maybe, there coulda been
another lost soul saved today.*