

## RIDE FOR THE BRAND

When ya work for Big Jim Travis, ya get tired. When ya finish the day, ya hit the sack and just kinda melt into it. But ya still feel fortunate that ya have a nice soft bed to get into. There's guys out there that are asleepin with the cactus, so ya appreciate what ya got. The old bunkhouse could get a little drafty now and then, but she keeps the rain off ya and they're aworking on replacing the siding.

During the day when I get too far away from the house, I always pull out a little jerky from the saddlebag to keep me goin. Now when it comes to real eatin, old Charly the cook ... well, he's a master. In fact, some of the boys have got to callin him 'The Grubmaster'. I think they do it just to rile him, cause he don't seem to like it. Yeah, old Charly can get kinda cranky sometimes, but if ya take the time to get a good read on him, he's alright. I've found that the quickest way to turn that snarl into a smile is to go bragging on his stew. Truth be told, a bowl of his stew and some of his fresh baked bread is about the finest eatin a man could get.

Whenever ya run across someone new and they ask ya what ya do, there won't nobody hesitate to say ya work for Big Jim Travis. Jim's brand is a crossed 't' with a 'J' overlaid on it. Jim is tough, but he's fair. His rules are pretty simple, so if ya keep to em, ya can ride with Jim forever. Now that don't mean ya have to be perfect. Ain't nobody perfect. If Jim knows you're really trying, and ya just mess up, he'll always cut ya some slack. Ya just gotta go to him with it, lay it out on the table, and tell him how you're gonna rein in whatever it was that made ya mess up.

Every now and then, Jim will put on a young cowboy who's a little green. Jim likes to take em under his wing and guide em down the right path. He'll always give the young cowboy a piece of paper and tells em to put it up by his bunk. That paper contains some simple advice that his pa had given him.

Get to know your maker; talk to Him often

Always do what you say you're going to do,  
and then do a little bit more

Always keep your hands open; closed fists  
usually come with trouble

If it ain't yours, leave it be

Master your fears and courage will come

Always give your best to get the job done

Know where to draw the line and don't back

up

If you sell your honor, you ain't got nothing  
left to sell

Weigh your words; make them count

Be at peace with God before you hit the trail

Big Jim's ranch is so far out in lonesome country that there ain't no animal docs anywhere near. When calvin time comes round, all of us cow-boys that been round awhile take on the chore of helpin out in that area. We just pitch in with our experience and horse sense. There's one thing for sure, Big Jim has clearly impressed upon our minds that he wants every one of them calves out alive and we best do everything we can to get it done. If we got a real tough one, Big Jim kinda takes over and we just step back and give it to his hands. And I gotta tell ya, there ain't nothin like seein one that's been a little stubborn getting cleaned up by

his mamma and finally standin on four wobbly legs. When he gets a little older, it's kinda fun watchin him bolt out across the pasture and look back to make sure he ain't too far from mamma.

One of our top herdin dogs had puppies a couple of years ago. She had nine of them, but she could only nurse eight. She abandoned the one that had been born with only three legs. Big Jim gave his daughter the chore of takin care of that little one. And I'll be dogged if that three-legged dog didn't become the best herder of the lot.

Roundin up strays that go up into the hills is a regular job on the ranch. I don't know how he does it, but Big Jim knows every one of his cows. He can tell us which ones we need to find. If we don't find one, then he'll go out with us, and we'll keep lookin till we do find em. I guess it's just a gift that's beyond somebody like me.

Ownin a ranch can be a risky business with a host of things ya gotta battle. There ain't much ya can do about the weather, except hunker down when ya have to. We got enough water holes and creeks on the place to keep the animals alive when the rain stays away too long. The pastures are good

native grass, and we do our best to keep the locoweed out. There's one thing that's been causin the ranchers round here some real problems lately—cattle rustlers or, as the locals call em, the scum of the lot. We been havin to take shifts stayin with the herd at night. Ya always make sure your rifle and six-gun are loaded, and ya got plenty of ammo to spare. I always like to take that old three-legged dog with me. He can hear things way sooner than any of them others.

When I first started with Big Jim, he took me with him to St. Louis to pick up some valuable supplies for the ranch. On one of many clear, starry nights, we had a conversation round the campfire. I asked him if he ever had trouble with Indians on the ranch.

“There's always been a lot of stories going round, Seth,” said Jim. “But most of them are probably exaggerated. I first encountered them the first year when I was rounding up some strays in the hills. I went down to the creek to give my horse a drink, when I found an Indian brave spread out on the rocks. He'd been shot through the shoulder, and it looked like he had fallen down the hill. He was still alive, so I took him back to the house. We took

care of him the best we could and eventually he got better and went back to his tribe.”

“Anything ever come of it?” I asked.

“Well, I didn’t know it at the time, but he was the chief’s son. Several months later, three Indians rode up to the barn. With his headdress, one of them was obviously the chief. His son accompanied him, as did a young woman from his tribe. The chief wanted to thank me for saving his son by offering me the young woman as a bride. I quickly went into the house and brought out my wife. He must have gotten the idea, because he said he would be back. When he came back, he brought me the two best male and female goats he had. Talking was a challenge, but he motioned for me to come out into the pasture. As we walked along, he pointed to some weeds and brush, and then he pointed to the goats. Then he pointed to the good grass and shook his head no. I had to think about it for a few minutes, but I finally understood what he was trying to tell me. The goats would eat the weeds and brush and not the grass.”

“So that’s how we started using goats to clear a pasture,” I said.

“Yep ... every so often the chief will come around to do some trading. We don't talk much, but we understand each other. His tribe has hunted our hills for many years, long before we got here. There's plenty of game up there, so I let them keep hunting and fishing the streams. His braves know not to shoot my cattle, so it all works out. I kind of like having his tribe beyond those hills. They know if anybody tries moving our branded cattle near their land that it's not us. I believe if rustlers made it that far, the chief would send someone to warn us.”

“So ya kinda help each other?”

“Yep ... we had a brutal winter ... I think it was about two years before you started ... the game in the hills was hunkered down and pretty scarce. The chief came to the ranch one day and wanted to trade for two of my cows. I knew that meant they were hurting, because he'd never asked for cows before. I would have given him the cows, but that's not their way. We had to trade for them. What he gave wasn't near worth what the cows were, but I made the trade. I think he knew that I knew what they were facing.”

Now I don't know what made Big Jim choose me to go with him on that trip. Maybe he saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. Whatever the reason, I'll never forget them talks round the campfire with Big Jim.

Last week, Big Jim, Old Smoky, and me went out to see if we could find that missing cow that me and the boys couldn't find earlier. We weren't havin much luck when Old Smoky's horse started pullin up lame. We got down off our horses and Old Smoky bent down to see if something had gotten up under the shoe. Old Smoky was getting along in years, but he was still a good cowboy. He was startin to lose his hearing, so when that big old rattlesnake right behind him started rattlin, Old Smoky never heard him. As I reached to get my shotgun from the saddle, Big Jim jumped in front of Smoky and pushed him out of the way. That big old snake grabbed Big Jim's arm and put a lot of venom in him. When that snake dropped, I blew his head off. Smoky and me figured Big Jim was a goner with that big snake. But he took out his knife,



cut into the bite, and sucked out the blood, and we figure most of the venom.

Then he stood up and said, “You okay, Smoky?”

“Yeah, boss,” answered Smoky. “What about you?”

“I’ll be alright.”

What we didn’t know was that Big Jim had taken so many bites from rattlesnakes over the years that they no longer got to him.

“Find anything in the shoe?” asked Big Jim.

“Yep,” answered Smoky. “Just a rock, but I got it out.”

“Let’s keep looking then,” said Jim.

I was talkin to Smoky later, and he said he was mighty grateful to Big Jim. Puttin his life on the line to save Smoky’s. That is something that most men ain’t likely to forget. Yep, death had no power over Big Jim that day.

I was sittin in my bunk the other night doin some thinkin. I know I ain’t never gonna get rich workin as a cowboy, but Big Jim gives us plenty of grub, plenty of water, a roof over our heads, and a

nice soft bed to sleep in. And I got plenty of pardners that got my back. When ya get right down to it, I got everything a man really needs out here.

Old Smoky and me ... well, we reckon that we're gonna ride for the brand till we can't ride no more and the big boss calls us home. And then we reckon we're still gonna be ridin for the brand when we join them riders in the sky.