



CONFESSIONS OF A COWDOG: PARTS I & II

The Cattleman Magazine
June 1981 Issue

by John R. Erickson

Hank's very first
appearance in print!
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"The Cattleman"
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The Cattleman
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"The Brand Inspector"



Panhandle Cowboys

By John R. Erickson

Confessions of a Cowdog

Aug. 15: My name's Hank. I'm a cowdog on a ranch in Texas. I never heard of a cowdog keeping a diary, but I'm going to give it a try.

My ma came from good stock. They were Australians, back to who laid the chunk, and they were all good with cattle. Ma used to say that Uncle Beanie was the best cowdog in South Texas.

But she fell in with a bad crowd when she was young, and that's where she met my old man. She used to tell me about him: "He was a good bloke, but just a wee bit south of worthless."

I asked her what it was that attracted her to him. She got a far-off look in her eyes and sighed. "We were both young and foolish. He was a dashing rogue. Hank, that daddy of yours could pee on more tires than any dog in Texas." That always stuck with me, kind of gave me a standard to aim for.

Aug. 25: It was terrible hot today. This long hair makes me awfully uncomfortable. Me and Drover spent most of the morning shaded up beneath the gas tanks. I didn't think I had enough energy to move — until Pete came along.

Pete's the barn cat around here. I don't like him. I don't like his looks. I don't like his attitude. I don't like cats in general. I whipped him and ran him up a tree.

That got me all hot and worked up, so I went up to the septic tank. It overflows and there's always a nice cool puddle of water there. I plopped down in it. Oh, it felt good. I rolled around and kicked all four legs in the air. When I got out, I felt like a million.

I trotted down to the house, just as Slim and High Loper were coming out of the yard gate. I trotted up to say howdy. I rubbed up against Loper's leg and gave myself a good shake. I

guess I hit him with some mud and water. Made him mad.

"Git outa here, Dammit!" He's a funny guy, gets mad at little things. When he's in a good humor, he calls me Hank. When he's mad, he calls me Dammit. When he's really mad, he calls me Dammittohell, whatever that means. I answer to all three.

Sept. 1: It was cloudy and cool today. Me and Drover were sleeping down at the corrals. Drover's my running buddy, a small, short-

haired white dog. He's got no cow sense at all, just doesn't understand the business. I think he's scared of cattle.

Well, I was sleeping, don't you see, and Drover woke me up. "Hank, get up, boy, there's cattle coming this way, a whole herd of them, coming in like elephants!"

I'm in charge of ranch security. I don't allow

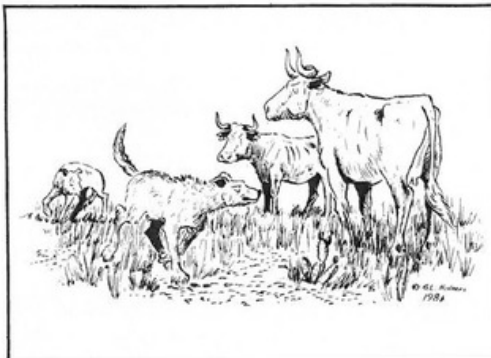
cattle up around the place. I came out of a dead sleep and jumped to my feet.

We went ripping out of the corral, me in the lead and Drover bringing up the rear. He was right about the cattle. It was a by-gosh invasion, 50, 60 head of stock.

As I went on the attack, my ma's words came back to me: "Bite 'em on the heels/Bite 'em on the nose/Take a hunk of hair out/Make 'em shake their toes."

I went straight to the lead cow. She was a horned wench and had an evil temper to boot. She dropped her head and started throwing hooks at me. Out in the pasture, maybe I would have backed away. But not this time. I was protecting the ranch (did I mention that I'm in charge of ranch security?), and I was prepared to give my life if necessary.

She rolled me once with them big horns, which kind of inflamed me, don't you see, and I put the old Australian fang-lock on her nose.



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Ma would have been proud of me. In seconds, I had that northbound herd going south. Drover was right behind me, cheering me on. "Git 'em, Hankie, sick 'em boy!"

I sicked 'em, all right, but come to find out, Slim and High Loper were trying to pen them in the corral. How was I supposed to know? Next thing I knew, High Loper was coming at me, swinging his rope and calling my name. "Damnittohell, git outa here!"

I got chased up to the yard. I don't know what happened to Drover. He just sort of disappeared when things went sour. He does that a lot.

Sept. 15: Had a wild time last night. Me and Drover was sleeping by the yard gate. Along about midnight he woke me up.

"Hear that?" he whispered. I listened and heard it. Coyotes, and they were close. "Let's run 'em off."

"You think we should?" I was still half asleep.

"Heck yes. This is our ranch, ain't it?"

"Good point. But I don't want any rough stuff. Those guys are thugs."

We loped up the hill until we could see a coyote standing in the road, a small, skinny, scruffy-looking villain. I barked at him and told him to scram, we didn't allow no coyote trash around our ranch. He told me to drop dead.

I was ready to leave it at that, but Drover thought we had a responsibility to the ranch. "Let's give him a whipping. There's two of us and only one of him."

I counted, and sure enough, we had him outnumbered two to one. "Well, all right, if you think we should."

He thought we should. So I swaggered out and jumped the coyote. I threw him to the ground while Drover nipped at his tail.

I sure was surprised when that little coyote's uncles and cousins and big brothers showed up. All at once I was in the midst of a coyote family reunion. Man alive, they was biting me in places I'd never been bit before.

"Come on, Drover!" I yelled. "Don't save anything back, boy, this is the real thing!"

Drover had disappeared. I managed to escape with everything but two pounds of hair and part of my left ear. An hour later, I found Drover, huddled up in the darkest, backest corner of the machine shed.

I was all set to whip the tar out of him, but he cried and begged and told me that, down deep, he was opposed to violence. How can you whip a dog that says that?

Nov. 1: Got into trouble today. High Loper and Slim were doctoring sick cattle this morning, running them through the squeeze chute and giving them shots and pills and stuff.

Me and Drover were hanging around, watching. The cowboys went to dinner and left all the medicine beside the chute.

Drover went over and sniffed the cardboard box full of big white pills. "You know what these are? Amino acid boluses. They're supposed to give energy to sick cattle. They're good for cowdogs too."

I walked over to the box and sniffed. "Smells good. But wouldn't the cowboys be mad if we ate 'em?"

"Oh, heck no. It says right there on the box that cowdogs are supposed to eat them."

I squinted at the box. "So it does."

I pulled one out and chewed on it. Say, that stuff was good. I went back for another one, and another one, and then I went back for seconds. It beat the heck out of that cheap co-op dog food.

Before long, the box was empty. When the cowboys came back from lunch, I was sunning myself beside the chute, full and happy and feeling good. I gave the boys a grin and wagged my tail.

High Loper stared at the empty box. "Where did those. . ." He looked at me. I must have had a few crumbs on my chops. "Why you worthless cur, that box cost \$21!"

Huh? I looked around for Drover. He had disappeared. About then the rocks and sticks started flying, and I ran for my life.

I found Drover in the machine shed and I jumped right in the middle of him. He cried and begged but I didn't listen this time. My momma didn't raise no fool.

"Wait!" he cried. "If you won't whip me, I'll tell you a deep, dark, awful secret."

"Huh? An awful secret?"

"Yeah. Listen. It was all Pete's idea. He wanted to get us into trouble."

"Naw. No foolin'?"

He raised his right paw. "It's God's truth, Hankie."

"Why that sorry, no good for nuthin' cat! Come on, Drover, it's time to clean house."

I marched down to the saddle shed, caught Pete plumb by surprise, whupped, re-whupped him, and ran him up a tree. Drover was behind me all the way, cheering me on.

"Git 'im, Hankie, git 'im!"

That was that. We went up for a good roll in the sewer, and I said to Drover, "Boy, I can't believe Pete would try to pull a deal like that on us cowdogs. How dumb does he think we are?"

He shook his head. "Yeah, and us in charge of ranch security. You just can't trust these cats any more." ■

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The Cattleman

SEPTEMBER, 1981





Panhandle Cowboys

By John R. Erickson

Confessions of a Cowdog: Part Two

It's me again, Hank the cowdog. I keep getting into trouble around here. I don't know what's wrong. I try to run this ranch the way it ought to be run, but I don't get much cooperation.

Take the boss as an example. He ain't what you'd call fond of dogs. First thing in the morning he'll come walking down to the corral. Most of the time I'm already down there, checking things out. I'm in charge of ranch security, don't you see, and that's such an important job, I like to get out early and make my morning rounds.

So into the corral walks the boss with a scowl on his face. I come up to him, wagging my tail and grinning and trying to be about half-friendly. What does he do? He gives me this greeting: "Go on, dog, git outa here."

Everyday it's the same. I don't have to do anything wrong. He just looks at me and those words come to his lips. I don't understand it.

Well, all right, maybe I do, just a little bit. I've made a few mistakes, but they were honest mistakes, nothing he should hold a grudge about.

I guess my troubles with the boss go back to that day last summer. I got myself locked in the saddle shed. Drover, my running buddy, had told me that there was a mouse in there and as head of ranch security, I figured it was my duty to go in and check it out. Pete the cat is supposed to be in charge of mice, but you can't depend on a danged cat for anything.

So I was in there sniffing in a corner and the next thing I knew, the cowboys turned out the light and locked the door. That was a bad deal, me locked up and night coming on and no one out there to guard the ranch.

I knew Drover couldn't handle it by himself.

He's pretty tough as long as I'm out front doing the fighting and the dirty work but when I'm not around, he goes up and hides in the machine shed. He won't even bark at the mailman in broad daylight unless I'm there.

Well, I got in a big sweat worrying about it. What if robbers came in the night? What if the steers came up around the house and started rubbing on Sally May's evergreen trees? Suppose the coons pulled a sneak attack, or the coyotes came up around the house and woke up

High Loper? When Loper misses his sleep, he ain't fit to live with.

I had to get out of there, that was all there was to it. The ranch was in danger. I reviewed the situation and decided there was only one way out: I would have to chew a hole in the door.

I went right to work. I chewed and I chewed and I spit out pieces of wood

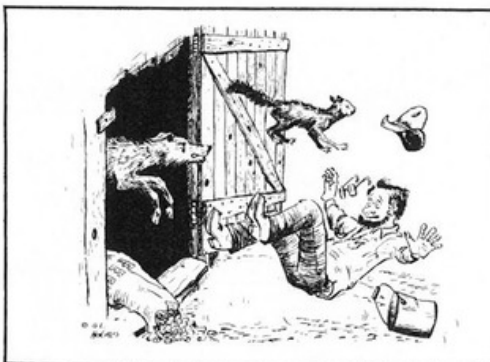
and I got a splinter in my gum and it took me an hour to get it out. And I chewed some more.

About daylight, I had a fair-sized hole built in the door, but it wasn't quite big enough. Then I heard a pickup outside. Someone got out and coughed. I said to myself, "Ah ha, they've missed me and they've come to let me out."

The door opened and there was the boss. He looked down at my work and looked at me. His face went red and he roared, "Dammitt to hell, you're eatin' the door off the saddle shed, git outa here!"

That's the thanks I got for trying to do my job. Did he think I chewed up the door just because I like the taste of wood?

He took off his hat and started swinging it at me. "Go on, git outa here!" I would have been glad to get out. I had spent all night trying to get out. But since he was standing in the door and swatting at me with his hat, I couldn't get out.



That just made him madder. I dashed around the saddle shed, knocked a saddle off the rack and spilled a can of neat's-foot oil. At last, I ran between his legs and escaped. He threw a hoof pick at me but missed.

Well, that got his nose out of joint, and he stayed mad for the rest of the morning. We might have patched things up, but we got into another wreck that afternoon.

The boss and High Loper were sorting cows in the front lot after dinner. I was lying outside the corral, taking a little snooze in the sun and catching up on all the sleep I'd missed the night before.

Pete, the barn cat, came up and started playing with my tail. I raised my head and told him to buzz off. He kept it up. He was swatting my tail with his paws. It didn't hurt and I tried to ignore it. But then he sank his claws in and struck a nerve.

I can get along with anybody's cat as long as he knows his place. His place, as far as I'm concerned, is either out of my sight or up a tree. My second-most important job on this outfit, after ranch security, is keeping the cats humble and in their place. I don't take no trash off a cat.

I growled and gave Pete fair warning. "Best leave my tail alone, son. Run along and play. I've got important things to do."

He looked at me and kind of cocked his head to the side. Then, out of sheer spite, he slapped my tail again.

Drover had been watching from under the pickup and he came galloping up. His hair was bristled up on the back of his neck and he was showing his fangs. "Get lost, squirt, or we'll..."

Bam! Before Drover could finish his sentence, Pete slapped him across the chops. He yelped and moved out

of range.

"You're just lucky I didn't pull off one of your legs and beat you to death with it," said Drover. Pete yawned. "Look at him, Hank, see what he did? He's got no respect for a cowdog."

Ordinarily I would have just whipped the cat and got it over with, but I needed some sleep. I laid my head back down and fell right to sleep. I was twitching and rolling my eyes and having a wonderful dream, when I felt a sharp pain in my tail.

Drove was right there, whispering in my ear. "It was the cat again, Hank, I seen him. He was playing with your tail, after you told him not to."

"Will you shut up? I know what he did." I stood up and went nose-to-nose with Pete. "Cat, you're fixing to get yourself into a storm."

"Git, 'im, Hank, git 'im!"

"I done told you to lay off the tail and buzz off. Now, are you gonna buzz or do I need to give you your daily whipping?"

"You tell him, Hankie, preach that hot gospel!"

I looked back at Drover, who was jumping up and down in excitement. "Will you just shut your little trap and let me handle this?" Back to the cat. "What's it gonna be, son? Peace and quiet or blood and guts?"

Pete threw a hump into his back and hissed, right in my face, which is one of about 23 things I don't allow a cat to get by with. Then he popped me on the nose, and the fight was on.

I lit right in the middle of him and had him buried, but he squirmed out and somehow popped me on the nose again. It made my eyes water, it stung so bad.

Drover was jumping around in circles, "Get 'im, Hankie, tear him up!"

Couldn't quite get a handle on the squirmy little son of a gun. I chased him around the pickup once, then he ducked under the fence and ran into the front lot — where the cowboys were sorting cattle. I was in hot pursuit.

Well, one thing led to another. I ran right in front of this snorty old cow, don't you see, and the next thing I knew, she was blowing hot air on the back of my neck and shaking her horns at me. It sort of took my mind off the cat.

I ran for the nearest cover, which happened to be the boss, and you might say that he got plastered. The old cow took aim for me and got the boss instead. Bedded him down slick as a whistle.

Then I did my duty as a loyal cowdog. I rushed to his side and licked him in the face. He turned red and screeched, "Dammittohell, git outa here!"

I can take a hint. I know when I'm not welcome. I got the heck out of there.

Who do you reckon got the blame for this? Pete, who started the whole thing? The cow, who did the actual damage? No, no. Good old easy-going, fun-loving, hard-working Hank.

And ever since that time, when me and the boss run into each other, he don't say howdy or good morning. It's "Go on, dog, git outa here."

It's hard, being a cowdog. You've got to take trash off the cats and abuse from the cattle, and you get no thanks, no respect from the boss. I guess that's why they keep me around this ranch, so that any time somebody fouls up, they can call in old Hank and pin the blame on him. It's a cruel old world. ■



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"HANK THE COWDOG: A BRIEF HISTORY"

Excerpt from Chapter 3 of "*Story Craft: Reflections on Faith, Culture & Writing from the Author of Hank the Cowdog*" by John R. Erickson

..."After years of trial and error, I finally began imitating the oral tradition of storytelling used by cowboys and ranch people in the Panhandle. It was the simple, unadorned approach to language my mother had used in her storytelling, language that crackled with sly wit, subtlety, and imaginative ways of putting words together.

I liked the way country people told stories, and after wearing this costume for a while, I discovered that I was no longer trying on clothes. The costume had become my skin. It was me, and I found an outlet for my stories in livestock publications: *Livestock Weekly*, *The Cattleman*, and *Western Horseman*.

All of this apprentice work came together in the winter of 1981. I was working as a cowboy on the LZ Ranch south of Perryton, and rising early (4:30 or 5:00 a.m.) to do my writing. I began working on a series of short humorous pieces for *The Cattleman* magazine, about my experiences in the cowboy trade. I needed twelve of them and wrote them as fast as I could. It never occurred to me that they might be good. My only thought was that we needed money to pay for baby clothes and doctor bills.

After turning out six or seven pieces about my cowboy work, I ran out of ideas and thought that it might be fun to write a story from the point of view of a ranch dog. I wasn't sure I could get by with this, because *The Cattleman* didn't publish fiction. Nevertheless, I took a run at it and chose a dog named Hank as the narrator.

I had known an Australian shepherd dog named Hank who lived on a ranch in Oklahoma, and he had been typical of most of the dogs I had grown up with: sincere, good hearted, and by human reckoning, not very smart. Poor old Hank was always in trouble but never understood why.



Drover, another character in the first story, was a little mutt I had known on a ranch in Texas, and I described him just as he had appeared to me: dreamy, innocent, and afraid of almost everything.

To this mix, I added a cat named Pete, a cowboy named Slim Chance, and the man and wife who owned the ranch, Loper and Sally May. At the time I wrote the first Hank story, the character who most resembled me was Slim, the bachelor cowboy, and in many ways he still does. He reads every issue of *Livestock Weekly* from cover to cover, sings to his dogs, eats boiled turkey necks, and puts his dirty dishes into the deep freeze so they won't get moldy. He's my kind of feller.

When I wrote that first Hank story, called "Confessions of a Cowdog" (it later appeared in a book called *The Devil in Texas and Other Cowboy Tales*), I didn't think it was anything special. I never dreamed there was magic in those characters or that, a few years later, I would end up working for the dog. Paul Horn, editor of *The Cattleman*, never said a word about it being fiction, and may he enjoy a thousand blessings for that.

Several years later, after I had self-published four or five of the Hank books, *The Cattleman* began running the books as serial stories. They ran a Hank chapter in every monthly issue for seventeen years, and it became one of the most popular features of the magazine, a magazine that "didn't publish fiction."

In my travels over the years, I have met many a rancher's wife who whispered, "My husband used to sit at the mailbox in his pickup, waiting for *The Cattleman* to come so he could find out what happened to old Hank." Those crusty ranchers were too cheap to buy a book, but they sure enjoyed Hank's adventures in the magazine.

My writing for livestock publications gave me the freedom to develop a set of rural characters who spoke for themselves and viewed the world in their own terms, without political correctness or the intrusion of urban minded mediators who, secretly or not so secretly, believed that rural meant "dumb." That is a common error made by people who have never spent any time in rural America and who often describe us as "provincial..." [Be sure to check out the book *"Story Craft"* to read more]





"100 YEARS AND COUNTING FOR FORT WORTH'S FAMOUS CATTLE MAGAZINE"

Excerpt from a story by Gary Jacobson, The Dallas News

"...Star cowdog

Perhaps the most celebrated writer in the magazine's history was J. Frank Dobie, author of the Texas classic *The Longhorns*. He wrote for *The Cattleman* from 1926 to 1960, Brisendine said. Dobie died in 1964.

The most successful writer, though, might be John Erickson, creator of the Hank the Cowdog series of books and tapes. A Harvard Divinity School-educated cowboy who wrote in his spare time, Erickson started publishing in *The Cattleman* in the 1970s — technical stories about ranching and cows, he said — and got his first Hank story in the magazine in the early 1980s. It was fiction, but based on a real dog he had known.

"The Cattleman did not publish fiction," Erickson said in a recent interview. "Dale Segraves [the editor at the time] did not say a word about it."

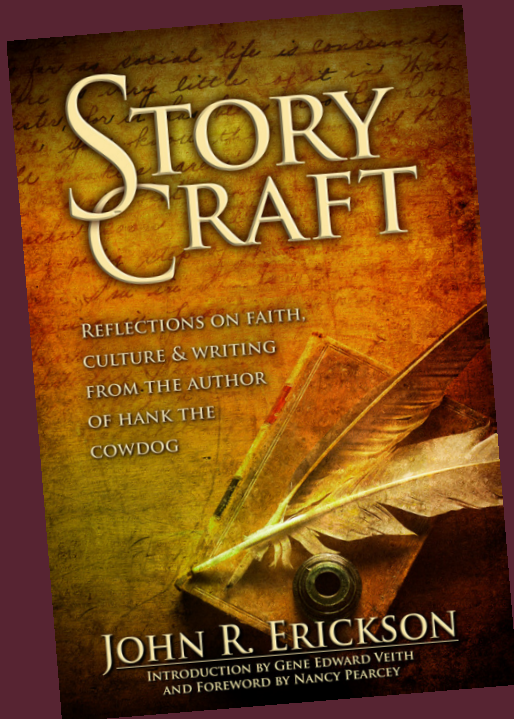
Hank is the self-proclaimed head of security on a ranch, a canine Inspector Clouseau with a penchant for creative wordsmithing as he narrates his misadventures. "Hank the Cowdog has never aspired to ordinariness," Hank once said.

Three decades after the dog's debut, there are more than 60 Hank books and a couple of dozen other books from Erickson. He said more than 8 million of his books and tapes have been sold. Hank's adventures have been serialized in *The Cattleman* as well as *The News* and performed by theater groups in North Texas and elsewhere.

Erickson, 70, owns a ranch near Perryton and is a member of the association that publishes *The Cattleman*.

"Hank bought the ranch," Erickson said. "It definitely wasn't cowboy wages."...

Read More: <http://www.dallasnews.com/business/business/2014/02/22/100-years-and-counting-for-fort-worths-famous-cattle-magazine>



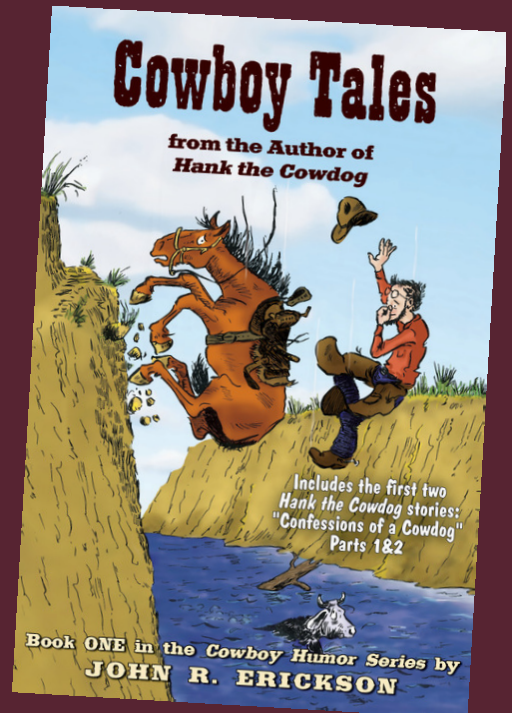
Story Craft: Reflections on Faith, Culture & Writing from the Author of Hank the Cowdog

Good stories nourish the human spirit, and it doesn't happen by accident. In Part One of *Story Craft*, Erickson describes his experiences as an apprentice writer and publisher. Then, in Part Two, he attempts to define what a story should be and how it relates to culture and religious faith. And, in Part Three, he gives helpful, practical advice to aspiring writers. This is an engaging and interesting must-read for all Hank the Cowdog fans!

Cowboy Tales from the Author of Hank the Cowdog
(Book One in the Cowdog Humor Series)

Cowboy Tales is an ebook re-release of *The Devil in Texas and Other Cowboy Tales*, a collection of the very first humorous fiction stories by John R. Erickson to appear in "The Cattleman" in the 1980s. These hilarious tales, which include "Confessions of a Cowdog" Parts 1 and 2, met with such a warm reception that Erickson was inspired to go on to write the popular Hank the Cowdog series, which has sold over 9 million copies and charmed families and school children around the world for over 35 years.

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AND THE CATTLEMAN MAGAZINE