

handling. The herd would be gently driven towards the open gate, and the riders would lay off a little, contenting themselves with checking any attempts to escape. Sooner or later, a few bolder spirits would investigate the entrance, and, once they were through, the others followed. It was fatal to try rushing them in: that meant losing the lot, for they would start milling and in a moment there would be a mob of frantic cattle charging round and round amongst themselves in a blind panic. Once a mill starts there is nothing to be done except to keep out of the way until the cattle break loose. And, if they break towards you, to still keep out of the way, because there is no arguing with terrified cattle, and they will not be turned aside by a horse and rider.

Walter said that on one occasion Ramsey, tired and very wet after a strenuous day in the saddle, waxed impatient at the outfit's slowness in corralling the herd, a large bunch of some 700 head. He had ridden up and slapped the cattle at the gate in reckless fashion. In a second there was a wild mill, and, to a man, the outfit made themselves scarce till the cattle broke. The fruits of that day's labour were last as the herd scattered in a mad charge across the campo, and old Ramsey flew into such a rage that the frightened cowhands ran away and left him to it.

HOWEVER, our day's work was not wasted, for, except for one calf, the cattle were safely penned in the largest of the three corrals. This poor unfortunate was expeditiously killed by José and Rufino and, while they prepared the meat for churrasco, Walter and I took the "big wash" in the swamp, and the rest of the gang washed down the horses.

Those evening swims were marvellous, although it was just as well to keep an eye open for stray alligators. Especially female alligators, Walter said, explaining—and his explanation is discreetly paraphrased—that whereas a male might be more broadminded, a female would be so shocked by the nakedness of us as to commit a reprehensible act of vandalism on our lathesome figures.

Our bathes provided a suitable opportunity for replenishing the gasoline tins which served us for water-containers. Thus I am able to place on record an authentic instance of two men who drank their own bathwater.

MY boots felt heavy when I picked them up next morning, and to my surprise a frog jumped out from one of them. He was only one of many, however, for there were quite a dozen more sheltering under saddles, lassoes, and other articles left on the ground. They were regular lodgers with us every night we stayed at the camp, and would jump away slowly and lazily when we uncovered them.

Our job for the day was to move to dry ground the bunch of cattle we had corralled the previous afternoon.

I was keen on getting as many interesting photographs as possible, and a picture of the herd charging out of the corral, down a slight incline, and straight out into the swamp, promised to be an exceptionally good one. The corral fence seemed a favourable vantage point, and accordingly I took an elevated seat on top of the gatepost and waited for the cattle to pass beneath me. To make a better picture Walter promised

to throw the cattle through in a bunch, and as rapidly as possible.

He certainly kept his word. Yelling like demons, the outfit galloped round the corral and crashed the herd at the open gate. Unfortunately for myself, the boys overdid the effects, and about ten times as many cattle as could conveniently manage it tried to burst through the opening at the same time. The stout timbers shook violently under the impact, and, still clutching my camera, I was pitched from my lofty perch on to the back of an escaping steer. Things seemed to happen fast after that, and in about two seconds I was lying in the bushes beside the fence, watching the pounding hooves flash past, and wondering if I were still in one piece.

An unusual airiness in the nether regions warned me that this was not so, and investigations revealed the fact that a not inconsiderable portion of the seat of my trousers was adhering to the top of the gatepost. Beyond this, however, no damage was done; even the camera, which rather surprisingly I still held in my hands, escaped injury.

Our departure was delayed while I changed my trousers, for, besides the risk of shocking the susceptibilities of the cowhands, the torn pair offered to inquisitive mosquitoes such intriguing possibilities as could not fail but to have unhappy results for myself.

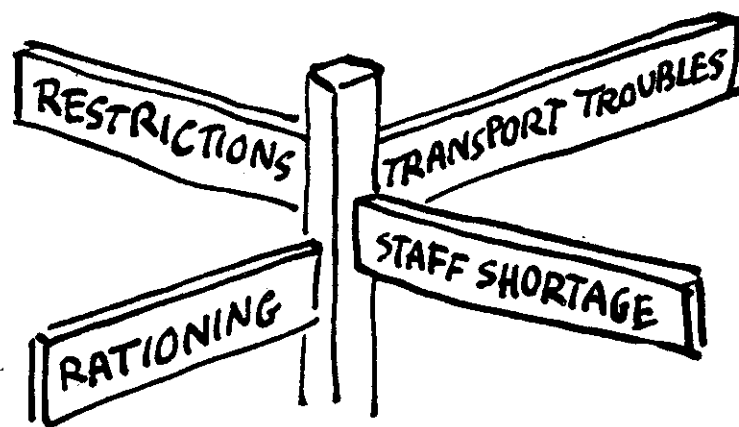
The drive commenced and it took us until past mid-day before the cattle were freed on the dry campo. On the way back we circled round and picked up a bunch of horses. They roam the campo just as the cattle do, although they are not allowed to stray very far from home. These we drove back to the camp and corralled for our use during the week, while the mounts we had used that day were turned out to grass, so as to be fresh when next they were rounded up for duty.

TALKING of this and that, I asked Walter if the campo round Descalvados fazenda was valuable for any reason other than grazing. He said that some years previously the Indians had come across a place where oil had seeped through the earth, and had covered a large patch of land. Old Ramsey had been tremendously excited by the discovery and had sent down to Rio de Janeiro for an expert to come and make investigations. But by the time anybody arrived the floods had come and gone, and the place was no longer to be found. The expert, he went on, made various tests in different parts, none of which proved satisfactory, and finally returned to Rio having accomplished nothing.

I expressed my surprise at the inability of the Indians to locate the position after an interval of only a few months, a comment which drew from Walter the opinion that they had purposely refrained from disclosing its whereabouts when asked to do so.

"The Old Man was kinda rough in lots o' ways," Walter said, "an' he never thought much about what the Indians wanted, or what they didn't want. I reckon he scared 'em talkin' about oilwells an' machinery, an' all the people he'd have workin' there an' everythin', 'cos, though he didn't know it, none of 'em wanted to go an' look for the place; an' afterwards Rufino told me we wasn't nearer than a day's ride to where we figured it was. Anyways, it's never bin spoke of since, so I guess the floods washed it out."

(To be continued next week)



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