

## Alberta on Three Dollars a Day

by David J. McBain

**L**ook." She pointed to three cows ambling curiously toward the campsite. "Mooo," she called, sticking her neck forward and lifting her chin. "Mooo, mooo."

He dropped the tent ropes he was fiddling with and stomped directly toward the cows.

"Hyaah. Hyaah, heyway. Git."

The cows stood motionless, gazing with dull eyes as he approached. The clearing was kept barren by the treading of cattle hooves. Sparse trees fell off into a valley on three sides, giving the meadow the shape of a horseshoe. At the top of the horseshoe, the open gate of a barbed wire fence led to a huge grazing area. At the last moment, the



cattle dug their hooves into the steamy fall dirt and ran bawling into the trees. He walked back to the young woman. She was standing with her weight on one leg, her body a series of long, straight lines and surprising curves. Her face widened into a full-lipped smile, full petulant cheeks framed by a shock of scandalous red hair.

"Ooooh," she said, wrapping her arms around his neck, "You are good."

He unhooked her arms from his neck. "Take off your jacket." It had been raining while they rode their bicycles, and they were wearing brilliant yellow rain ponchos. He pulled his jacket over his head and dropped it to his feet.

"They'll be back. Cows are colour-blind, but they

can see a bright colour like yellow." He liked being able to feed her bits of general knowledge.

"Take it off," he said.

The sun, ready to settle behind the mountains, cast an orange light on everything. The woman had fallen from her bicycle, and they pushed the bikes into this pasture so she could rest. As he had bandaged and soothed her skinned limbs, he'd felt her trembling faintly, helplessly, like the fluttering heartbeat of a lame bird. He wanted to erect the tent before sundown.

A row of cattle appeared from the trees. Front and centre, like a warrior chief, stood a black bull. A hump protruded from his shoulders like a malignant growth and his chest was as wide as the distance between the narrow lodge-pole pines surrounding the young man and woman.

"Take it off," hissed the man through clenched teeth.

She was still. Her smile was sealed with a stunned glaze.

One of the bull's horns was broken, jagged; the other curled down in front of his face. His eyes were cold and empty, like the black inside a culvert at dusk.

There was a crippled tree-limb by the man's feet. Twisted and rotten, it would crumble to wormrot if it struck anything. He snatched it up and raised it over his head.

"Ho. Hyaah, ha-whoop." He marched toward the bull, stomping his feet on the springy earth. The herd watched intently as their leader lifted his hooves in regular, secure steps toward the young man. The bull and the man were about fifteen paces apart.

The young man's father had told of being chased by a bull in a corral. He said the incident came back occasionally in dreams.

When the bull stopped, thought the man, he would rush at it, swinging the staff. If the bull turned and ran, he would chase it faster and yell louder. The bull could gore him now if it lunged.

His father had almost been gored. After running across an eternity of corral he'd just made it over the fence in time. "And every inch of the way," his father would say, savouring the brutal scene, "I could feel his horns driving into my back."

He would smash the limb over the bull's nose and then run.

The bull stopped. For a second each calculated the other's worth, then the bull swung his enormous head over his shoulder and he and the cows galloped into the trees and over the side of the hill.

"Gawahh. Git on outta here you son-of-a-bitch!"

As he disappeared over the hill the bull shot his back hooves contemptuously into the air, higher than the young man could reach.

The man's limbs felt like many small pieces of rubber. The woman was standing by the limp raincoat. Her arms hung stiffly at her sides.

"Get your bike. We've gotta get the bikes and get outta here."

They yanked the tent out of the way, picked up their bicycles and began pushing them out of the trees.

In the open area, the cows had formed themselves into a row, blocking the man and woman from the clearing. They set down the bicycles and the woman started edging into the trees toward the fenceline by the pasture. He searched around for the rotted limb.

His father had said it was good to have a whip when herding cattle. Cattle would move when whipped.

The herd stood resolutely, shoulders together, a bovine lynching mob. The young man made himself as solid as possible, but a series of electrical impulses shook his joints.

"Although one day when I skipped school," said his father, "I really learned something useful."

He strode toward the bull with the piece of arthritic, mutilated wood. He spread his arms and walked bow-legged like a cowboy, but with short, nibbling steps. He clenched his jaw sternly, trying to be as wide as possible, and roared at the dull animals.

The bull shot air through his nostrils.

*I was riding parallel to a fenceline. Had my wrist tight through the loop-handle on my bullwhip and it was flying free to the side. You know, with the wind. Well, that whip happened to catch on a fencepost and right away wrapped around real tight and I'm yanked off my horse and right into the dirt. I took that bullwhip home and cut open the handle with my knife.*

He recalled that last time a few of the animals had danced around friskily, young bull calves with



impudent rounded knobs on their foreheads. Now they were still. He stalked toward the bull.

If the bull were human, the young man would batter his skull with the tree limb. He would drum his head on the dewy earth while the females looked on, horrified, then he would drive his hands in below the armpits and pull out ribs like chicken bones.

*Boy, I'll never forget running across that golf green. And all the way I could feel the tip of that guy's boot in my ass.*

The bull made a furrow in the earth with his right hoof. He flung his head to the ground and high in the air.

The man tossed down the stick and scrambled into the trees. A few yards ahead of him the woman was creeping along, holding onto trees as she passed them and looking backward. Her head,

like a retarded doll's, lay sideways on her shoulder. The man bellowed at her to run, and she lifted her knees and ran alongside him.

The ground rumbled as though giving birth.

*If you're ever in the company of a vicious dog, don't let him know you're scared.*

The woman was crawling through the fence. The poles were sturdy and black and the wire was black, tight as mandolin strings, with tufts of black and yellow hair on some of the barbs.

"Go. Go." cried the man as he retreated from the pounding hooves.

Out in the bare pasture, the cows poured through the open gate. Led by the bull and running in fear, they spread into the grazing area and ran down the open hillside toward the river that slithered low from farm, to farm, to farm.