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The Day The Cowboys Quit



Synopsis

The time is 1883, the place is the Texas Panhandle. Cowboys refuse to be stigmatized as drinkers and exploited by the wealthy cattle owners who don't pay liveable wages. Those very same ranchers want to take away the cowboys' right to own cattle because this ownership, the ranchers believe, would lead to thieving. So, in 1883, the dictum is set: If you're a cowboy, you can't own a cow. When rumors of such legislation travel from wagon to wagon, the cowboys decided to rally and fight for their rights--they gather together and strike.

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Customer Reviews

Kelton's novel has some of the ingredients of pulp western fiction - big ranchers against the little guys, justice at the end of a rope, an honorable hero wearing a sheriff's badge - but he brings a great deal of insight, experience, and historical background to the task of telling this story. It is enjoyable and full of well-drawn characters and unexpected turns of plot from beginning (a squabble over the brand on a cow) to the end (a gripping courtroom drama). The title suggests that the book might be a more light-hearted story that focuses on the cowboy strike of 1883, but Kelton's aim is to explore the more complex psychology of the men who live by the Code of the West. The ill-fated strike is over before we are well into the book, and the author focuses on the unexpected and far-reaching results of its aftermath. Like many books about the West, this one is about loss and the passing of an era. The cowboy way of the open rangeland is quickly disappearing as settlers move in and towns spring up, the cattle business falls under the influence of venture capital from the East, and rough justice must give way to law and order. Most enjoyable for this reader is the

characterization of its main character, Hitch, a single cowboy in his thirties for whom circumstance, loyalty, and honor lead him out of a job he loves and into harm's way, until he reluctantly assumes a role of no small responsibility and risk in the new social order on the Texas plains. Not the fearless hero of standard cowboy fiction, Hitch has a good many conflicting feelings, he's more diplomatic than quick with a gun, and his actions require considerable courage. Kelton's rural Texas background and knowledge of frontier history clearly come through in the many details that enrich the tale he tells.

With a wondrous talent for making cowboys real human beings rather than placing them on a pedestal of larger-than-life heroes, Elmer Kelton could make what would seemingly be mundane a sharply focused point of interest. The independent cowboy, and the independent rancher who worked by the sweat of his brow to succeed are rapidly fading, as corporate money and power begin to hold sway. The Cowboy Code, when a handshake would suffice, is no longer a proper means under which to operate a business. Because of their power and influence, new rules are imposed by the big money boys restricting working cowboys from developing their own herds so long as they are employed by another cattleman. Unhappiness with this rule causes some to go out on strike, but the walkout, plagued by lack of unity and shortness of funds, ends quickly. The only effect of the aborted strike is that those who chose that path are forbidden to return to their jobs. This includes Hugh Hitchcock, the former wagon boss of the W Ranch, owned by another good man, Charlie Waide, who himself is caught in the middle, and cannot afford to buck the powerful. The story is really one of conflicts between big money influence and personal freedom as well as whether frontier justice will prevail over codified law. Hitch, like others in his shoes, sees his cattle seized, and reluctantly, almost painfully so, throws his hat in the ring for Sheriff after seeing a vigilante hanging of a cattle thief, all the while knowing a hired gun recruited by the powerful is enforcing their will. The former wagon boss, scraping by himself, is a cinch to lose, or so it seems. As usual in Kelton's wonderful stories, there are many shades to most of these characters, and only a couple of them are purely bad men.

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