

14. TO THE EATON PERMIT AND BACK

When the morning coffee klatch¹ at The Forks got wind that Jeanne and I were going to take our cattle 35 miles west, into the Boulder Ridge country, they went into overdrive: “...if they ever manage to get cows up there, they’ll never see ‘em again – dead or alive...” etc. As usual, the gossip got back to us second hand. We put on a brave face, but it did make us nervous.

We were lucky to have some good neighbors who volunteered to help us on our first trail drive to upper Sheep Creek. Larry Peterson and his brother, Dan, volunteered along with Bert Martz (1913-1991), an older gent who was born and raised in Livermore and was living in a trailer on the Roberts Ranch. Before we got things figured out, we were glad for all the help we could get.

Trailing cattle from one location to another is almost always preferable when possible. It’s less stressful for the cattle than trucking and costs less.

Cattle have surprising long-term memory and can remember places from year to year if they’ve been driven. This is a knife that cuts both ways. If they know where they are, they know where to hide if you’re trying to find them. On the other hand, if they know where they’re going, they’re more likely to go. And when it’s time to go home, they know where to go (after they’re through hiding).

Cows with calves at their side are comfortably trailed about 8-12 miles a day. They will naturally get up to move before daybreak and good time can be made before it gets hot.

If done slowly and deliberately, two people can move a good-sized herd on the Cherokee Park Road (when at least some of the cows remember where they are going). Hard surfaced roads will make cattle foot sore and slow them down unless they are allowed to pick their way along the edge. There’s no point in pushing them so hard that they have to bunch up on the road. Easy does it.

The drive to the far side of the Eaton Permit from our Rabbit Creek Ranch was about 35 miles up the Cherokee Park Road. Our oldest daughter, Meredith, went ahead, driving a pickup pulling a stock trailer (don’t tell anyone how old she was). She would close any gates that were open and signal oncoming cars (there was a lot less traffic in those days).

On the first day, we tried to get over Calloway Hill by sun up and water the herd along the road on Meadow Creek. We would get over Cherokee Hill mid-afternoon and settle down for the night on Divide Creek.

On the second day we’d pass through Cherokee Park and up Devil’s Creek to spend the night in Munz Lane at the top of Sheep Creek Hill. The Munz brothers had owned what is now the DOW’s Upper Cherokee Park Unit back in the 40s and had fenced the mile-long lane that bears their name for gathering and sorting cattle. In later years, this was a point at which we could sort off cows and calves for the George Creek and Sheep Creek Permits.

The third day would get us to Section 3, the only fenced section of the UP lease, just east of Lyle Van Wanning’s place, where we would leave the herd to rest. We’d come back in about a week and spend a short day taking them the last six miles or so to the back side of the Eaton Permit in Section 23.

We preferred not to use dogs, especially around cows with calves. The instinct to protect her calf from a predator will cause a cow to turn and fight a dog. Other cows will join in, and pretty soon there can be more confusion than progress. There are fewer problems using dogs with dry cows or yearlings, and dogs can be helpful in the willow bogs when cows are hiding.

That first summer, we went up to Eaton several times to move salt and check the few cattle we saw each time. We fixed fence (lots of it flattened by snow drifts) and moved salt. We had some cows that drifted west onto Sand Creek or north onto Chimney Rock.

After the summer-long steady drumbeat of The Forks doomsayers, Jeanne and I headed up to gather our cows (with some nagging concern) about the 15th of September, 1979.

We took two pickups, one pulling the little camp trailer we used at the Wellington farm, and the other with the stock trailer and horses.

We set up camp just below the old Wilson Ditch Camp, and the next morning we headed out with a USGS topo map to start gathering on Cow Creek.

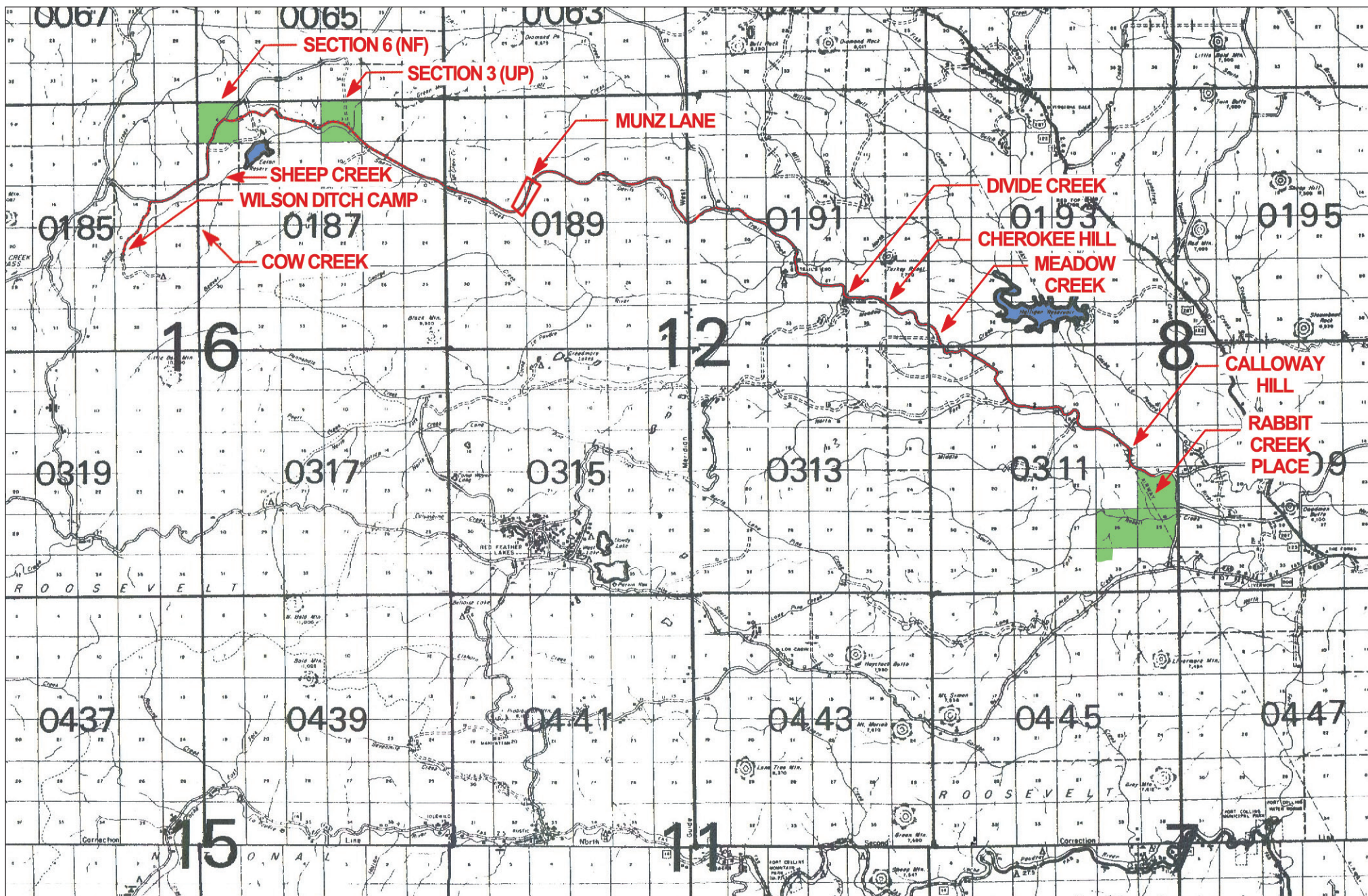
For a week, we worked the draws and clearings down Sheep Creek and its tributaries to the Reservoir. When we got all the cows and calves we had gathered pushed into Section 6, a fenced section at the northwest corner of the Permit, we had a full count (beginners luck – never happened again).

We went back to the ranch and took Meredith out of school to help us on the three-day drive (she kicked up a fuss about missing school, but to no avail). Jack and Jackie Mitchell at the Ferree place volunteered to keep Arthur and Nina.

Jack, who worked for Pat, was an old rodeo cowboy of some notoriety and a real supporter of ours among the neighbors. On the last afternoon of the drive down as we were pushing up Calloway Hill from the west, Jack showed up on his horse and helped us over the top. We were sure glad to see him.

Our successful first year on the forest did a lot to quiet the sniping at The Forks (temporarily). We made friends with Lyle Van Wanning and Ray Wooster. Jeanne wowed them with an apple pie baked in our little camper trailer – made with apples from the orchard at the Tibbits Place.

¹ The hard core consisted of Evan Roberts, Chet Crow (who worked for Evan), Bill Johnson (who owned The Forks with his wife Helen), and Leo Miller (more about Leo later).



Trail Drive to the Eaton Permit