



Diane Bohna runs cattle in the San Joaquin Valley of California. Photo by Darrell Dodds.

WESTERN HORSEMAN

By Jennifer Denison

Away from the big-city lights and warm, sandy beaches of California, in the San Joaquin Valley, life moves at a slower pace, and you can drive down gravel roads for miles without coming to a town or seeing another person. What you will find are cattle and horses grazing peacefully in meadows nestled between rolling hills. If you're lucky, you might even spot a silhouette in the distance of a rancher like Diane Bohna trailing cattle or riding through the herd horseback with two stock dogs by her side. A single, self-reliant ranch woman, Diane has had to work independently since she was a young girl helping her father, Henry, on her

family's ranch, which is not far from Three Bar Ranch, where she lives and ranches today.

"I've never minded being alone," she says. "I learned that when we'd take cattle to the high country in the summer. We'd go to the mountain in June and didn't come back until the day before school started. We saw hardly anyone, except the occasional hiker, all summer long. My dogs were my friends and I caught chipmunks."

Her father's shadow and top hand, Diane developed a good work ethic at a young age like most ranch kids. She also gained independence and problem-solving skills few youths have the chance to learn today.

"My father taught by example and would allow me to make mistakes so I could learn," she recalls. He told me, "You do what you have to do, and you'd be surprised at what you can do if you have to."

When Diane was about 10 years old, her father asked her to move some cows while he rode to another pasture, and he would meet her later. The cattle moved steadily for Diane until they came to a corrugated iron bridge, and then they balked and wanted to turn around. Without hesitation or discouragement, Diane used her cattle savvy to get the cattle to cross.

"I worked the cows slowly and finally got one to step on the bridge, and then the rest followed," she explains. "When I met my dad later, he asked how things went and how I got across Steven's Creek. When I told him I crossed the bridge, he said, 'Diane, I've never been able to get cattle to cross that bridge, but because you didn't know you couldn't you assumed you could.'"

About five years later, Diane's independence and survival skills were tested again while gathering the remnant in the Sierra Mountains during a November snowstorm. The majority of the family's cattle had been gathered earlier in the fall and were close to home, but a cross-country skier found more, and someone alerted Henry.

"Dad went to work immediately and hired a helicopter to fly in, locate the cattle and haul hay for them," Diane recalls. "The snow was at least 10 feet deep, and they were hidden under a tree and had eaten all of the bark off it."

The family dug a trench to a water source and fed the cattle for a few days to boost their energy. Then they used a Snowcat to plow a trail for the cattle to follow.

“The cattle were fine as long as they stayed in the Snowcat track,” she explains. “If they stepped off the trail they’d sink to their bellies in snow. We had a trailer hooked to the Snowcat, and Dad would tie down the cows, put them in the trailer and haul them out 15 to 18 miles.”

While her father hauled the cattle out, Diane and her dog stayed with the herd and kept them moving.

“I crossed a 10,000-foot pass on foot in the moonlight in 20-below-zero temperatures,” she recalls. “I got really tired and sat down at one point and almost died [from hypothermia]. My dog started licking my face and woke me up. After that, I had a newfound energy called fear.”

Diane was with the cattle for 24 hours before she heard the Snowcat the next morning. Folks wondered why her father would put her in that situation, but those who ranch know that it was out of necessity and that Henry had confidence that his daughter could get the job done well. She proved that time and time again while she was growing up, and she continues to prove she can handle almost any task on her own ranch.