

How Now Valley Cow?

An udderly delightful history of
Telluride's favorite holsteins

by Allison Johnson



"That must be strong perfume you're wearing!"

My fiancé and I stood on the deck of our Gold King condominium when he jokingly addressed those words to a harried young woman who had just been chased across the valley floor by a herd of cows. Her dog had nearly dragged her though the fence in its hurry to escape the lowing behemoths closing in behind them. For the woman and her dog, it was an unnerving encounter with the summer residents of the valley floor. For us, it was just another cow story.

The valley cows, renowned for their lack of fear when it comes to humans, are as much a part of the Telluride landscape as Bridal Veil Falls. The cows offer a first impression of Telluride, a bucolic touch that seems a little out of sync with the rugged mountain setting. Yet their very presence serves as a barometer for locals. Their arrival with the dandelions of June heralds the summer, while their departure with the golden leaves of fall suggests that the first winter storms are imminent.

Long-time local Bill Mahoney, Sr. (a.k.a. Senior) estimates that cattle have occupied parts of the valley floor since the turn of the century. By the 1930s, three dairies, owned by Al Thompson, Kelly McKnight and Ed Vezina, provided milk for Telluride. Mahoney himself delivered milk as a boy around 1939, replacing empty bottles off people's doorsteps

LEFT: The ever-curious doggies love to have their picture taken.

Judy Kokin's Valley Cows cartoon strip



RIGHT: Judy Kokin's udderly delightful painting "The Herd"

BELOW: Ingrid Lundahl's fitting B&W Portrait

with fresh ones from a milk truck. Milk went for 10 cents a quart back then, and "none of it was that pasteurized junk."

After World War II, the dairies faded away, much like the mines, but cattle and ranching remained. In

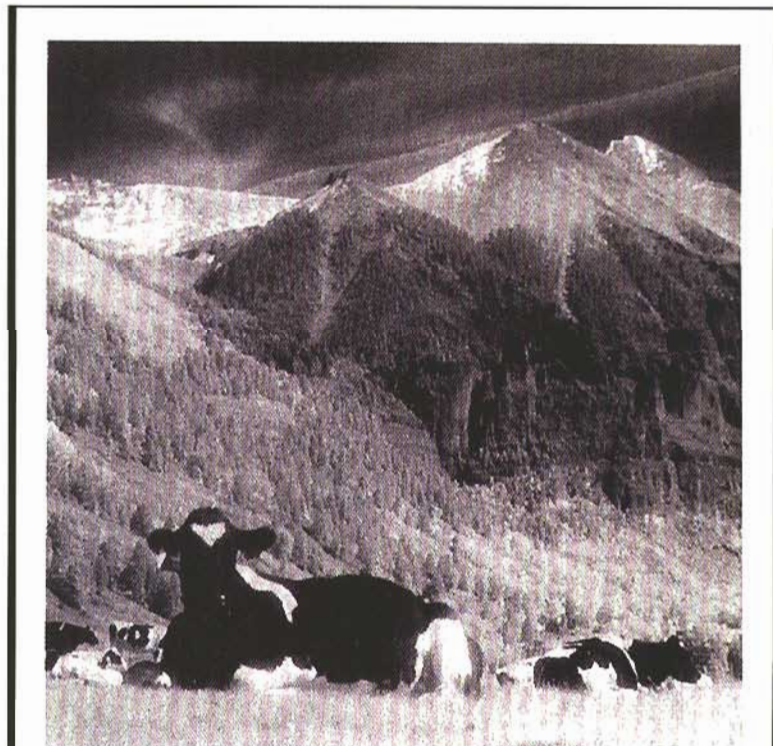
1970, the valley floor was leased to another long-time local, Roy Edward Elliott—better known to gambling buddies and town-folk as Alley Oop. Oop ran the cattle for some 20-odd years, until he retired in his 80s.



Nowadays, the valley floor's approximately 800 acres are leased each summer by the San Miguel Valley Corporation to Oop's successor, Dewey Campbell, who likes to say he's been chasing other people's cattle since 1942. Each summer he brings in about 200 holstein yearlings and 30 pregnant red heifers from a dairy near Fruita.

Campbell arrives in Telluride a month before the cattle to mend fences and start irrigation. "The valley floor would be just another desert without the irrigation," Campbell comments, referring to the vast network of ditches criss-crossing the area. "It may look green, but that's only because it's irrigated. I remember a few years back when the snow was all gone by the end of June. Walking on that valley floor was like walking on Post Toasties. It was real crunchy."

In order for the young would-be dairy cows to join the herd in the fall, they must make what Campbell calls "cheap gains" by bringing their weight up to 900 pounds by summer's end. While Campbell admits that the valley



Portrait of a Valley Cow



floor isn't prime cattle country, it's a good place for them to summer.

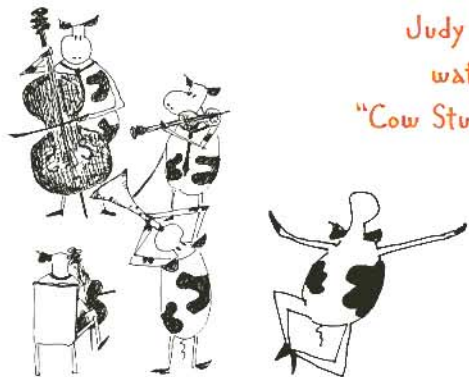
Unlike days of yore when the dairies provided a much-appreciated product to townfolk, today's agriculture and the town's emphasis on tourism don't always mix. Campbell's difficulties begin the day the cattle are shipped into town and unloaded into the rickety old corral on the east end of the valley. "I've been patching it up for 10 years and it's been there since the '40s," says Campbell in a soft-spoken drawl. "And it's trying its best to fall down. Once when I tried to rebuild it, they was telling me that the corral is sort of a historic type thing and they don't want it to look any different than it does now. Make it as strong as you want, but don't change its looks."

Dogs roaming loose and chasing cattle

create another problem for Campbell, but he admits that the cows are just as likely to chase a dog, which he suspects was the case with the woman at Gold King. Along with the dogs come their trouble-making recreational owners, and Campbell grumbles about "outlaw" bicycle riders who keep him busy mending fences. "Now, I try to leave gates closed because I want the cattle in a certain section," says Campbell. "If that fence is in the way of the bicycle riders they'll cut it. I've had more cut fences out there than people who have 10 times as much land anywhere else. In fact, I have to check some of those fences, especially along the old right of way, every single day."

Sometimes even mended fences can't contain the cattle, and they've been known to wander into town, over to Lawson Hill, and most notoriously up Boomerang Trail to Mountain Village. "The thing about it is, there's no way

Judy Kolin's
watercolor
"Cow Study #11"



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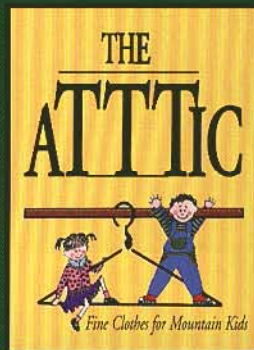
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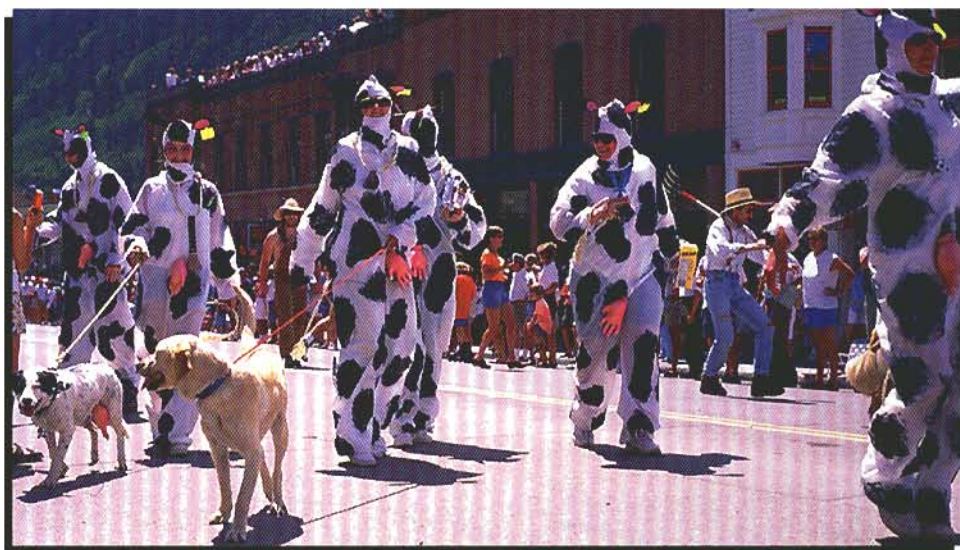
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to keep 'em off it," laments Campbell, who has tried in vain to get permission to install cattle guards at the base of the trail. "They get started walking up it and, next thing they know, they just find themselves at the top. And once they're at the top, that green golf course looks pretty good to 'em. They have no qualms about walking out there."

Though cows are not what most golfers hope to encounter on the first green, Campbell points out that Colorado still has open range laws on the books. While it is his responsibility to fence cattle in, it's the golf course's responsibility to fence them out. Driving the cattle back down the trail is no easy matter either, and Campbell still recalls one year when he and Oop had to drive the cattle down the highway to get them back to the valley floor. "Once they start drifting like that, why they'll just go anywhere the road goes," sighs Campbell. "They'll go wherever there's no resistance. They wander around like a bunch of caribou. They just go because they can."

Wandering around like a bunch of caribou is one of their better-known vagaries. A less-publicized one is their penchant for dashing across the fields en masse for no particular reason. Campbell attributes such behavior to living in corrals at the dairy. "They've never had access to that much open country before," he remarks. "They really don't know what to do with it, and so every once in a while they'll start running for the heck of it just because they can. They're not used to having enough space to act silly. I guess they just feel good."



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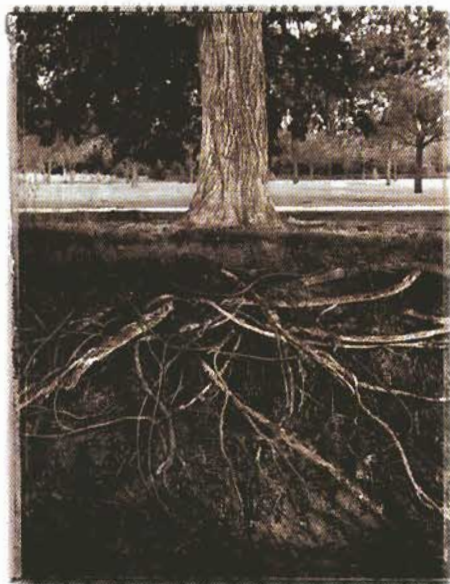
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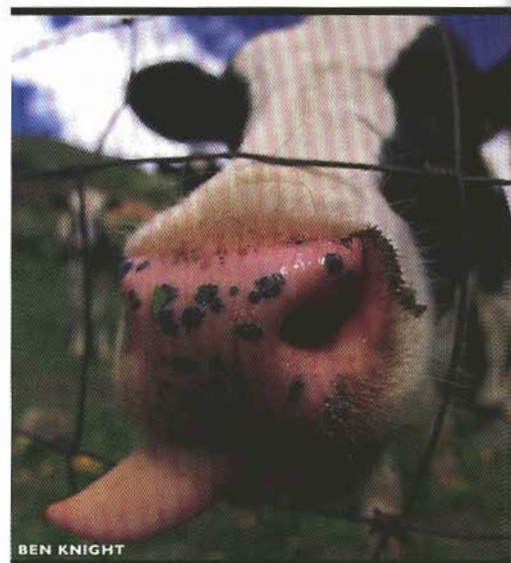


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The comparison to caribou is apt in another way as well. Spend enough time observing the valley cows, and you'll notice that they jostle for social position as much as stags in rut. They head butt each other. They kick, they nip, they mount up, they jostle



BEN KNIGHT

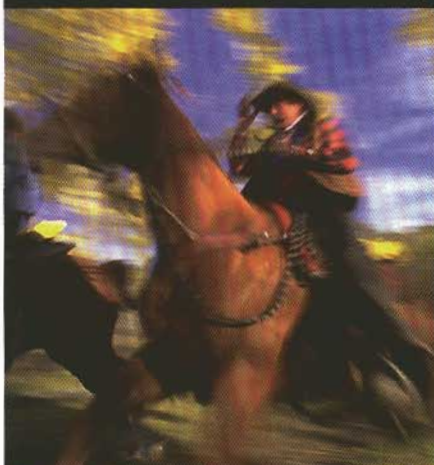
and they bellow long and loud when irked by a neighbor. "Some of those bigger ones are steers," Campbell explains, "and even though they've been steers for most of their lives, they've still got a bit of aggressiveness in them."

Like all rural tourist settings with enclosed large animals, there are bound to be people who want to pet the nice pretty cows. Last summer a woman with a baby in her arms walked right up to a steer, who soon began pawing the ground, shaking its head and bucking its hind legs as if someone had tried to saddle it. The woman quickly backed up to the fence, where we were waiting to help her to safety. "I just wanted to feed it some apples," she rationalized in a shaky voice. "But it got angry when I didn't have any left." Campbell notes that the woman shouldn't have been out there in the first place but adds that the cattle are bottle fed almost from birth and unusually accustomed to humans.

"[The steers] will try to buffalo you," he says. "They'll come up with their head swinging and they'll be bellowing and pawing the ground and going through all the motions, but they just don't really, for the most part, have the nerve to take on a human."

They are curious enough about humans, however, to come trotting up when you call, furnishing my fiancé with a party trick he once used to impress his future in-laws. The valley cows' curiosity about all things

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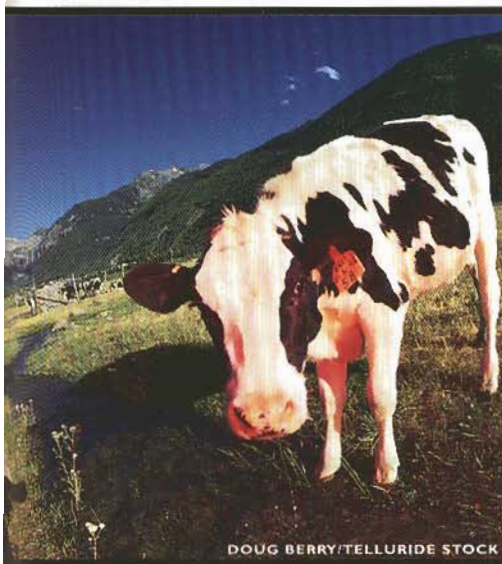
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human also provides local photographers with a staple of yearly photo opportunities, and in recent years the cattle have been captured scrutinizing bluegrass festival out-houses and a recently landed hanglider.

While cattle have been around almost as long as miners, their appellation as the "Valley Cows" is only as recent as 1987, when local artist Judy Kohin arrived in town after finishing a senior art thesis that used dairy cows as subject matter. Since then, she's drawn a weekly cartoon strip for local newspapers that offers a running commentary by the cows on everything from tourists to local politics. Kohin says the cartoons chronicle the history of Telluride, but she also considers the actual cows to be a symbol of the history of the valley. Their return each summer sets Telluride apart from other ski resorts that have succumbed to developmental sprawl.

"They really symbolize the undeveloped valley," muses Kohin. "The whole development of the valley floor is a big issue, and



DOUG BERRY/TELLURIDE STOCK

when the cows leave, that means the valley floor will be developed. It will be a big turning point for Telluride. Telluride has changed so much already, and this will mean another major change."

When that time for change inevitably does come, Telluride will lose a piece of its heritage as old as the miners themselves. The picturesque quality of the valley cows will pass—like other moments in Telluride's history—into the twilight of our memory. In the meantime, the valley cows' summer antics will continue to provide more entertainment than cable television.

Allison Johnson, a writer in Telluride, lived across from the Valley Cows for two years.

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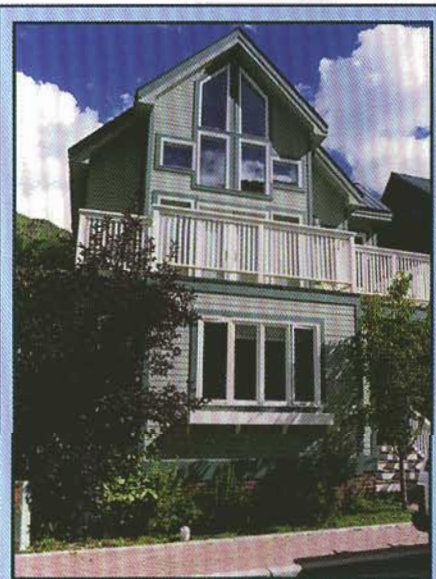
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