

THE COWBOY

by
Hal Ames



There were so many stars in the sky, it felt like Luke could reach up and touch them. Nights out on the prairie were always cool and bright at that time of the year.

Luke was laying on the ground thinking about the next day's work. The herd of cattle needed to be taken across the river, so the next day would be a slower day. He knew it was going to be difficult. If they missed the train, they would lose a lot of money. The train takes the cattle to Chicago for slaughter.

He had worked very hard, and he was very tired. The blanket below him helped to make the hard ground a little softer. The fire next to him helped to make the cool air feel warmer. The other cowboys were preparing to go to sleep as well.

They had to reach Abilene by the end of the week. They were a day ahead of schedule. There were one thousand steers in the herd. They had already been away from the ranch for three weeks, and the cattle were getting tired.

Luke had been a cowboy for as long as he could remember. His father had taught him how to ride a horse when he was only three years old. Being on a horse was as natural for him as walking. He loved the outdoors and enjoyed the fresh air.

He had his dog Linger by his side. Linger was the best dog he had ever had. Linger would help keep the cattle moving and in a group. Sometimes the cattle would get scared and want to run away. Linger would run after them and bring them back. At night Linger

slept next to Luke and helped to keep him warm. He was getting older now. This might be his last trip to Abilene.

The smell of fresh coffee filled the air when Luke and Linger woke up. The cook had eggs, beef jerky, and biscuits ready for breakfast. After eating a big breakfast, Luke was ready for the day's work.

Today was a big day. It was Thursday, and they were getting closer. They had many miles to ride before they reached Abilene. If they got an early start they should be in the city by evening. That would be fine with Luke. He would eat at the restaurant in town and sleep in the hotel; in a real bed.

He took his saddle over to his horse. His horse's name was Butch. He put on the blanket, and then set the saddle on top. He tightened the cinch, and then he put the bridle into the horse's mouth. Butch did not like the bridle, and he always fought when Luke put it in his mouth. It did not matter. Luke always won.

Butch had been a champion rodeo horse. He had retired from competition, and now he worked the cattle range with Luke. They had been together for just over four years now. They knew each other very well; which makes the job a lot easier. The three of them were a team.

Luke climbed up onto Butch and headed out to the herd. Frank and Kenny were already preparing the cattle for the last leg of the drive. Linger was close by the side of Luke and was ready for his job.

There was a big river they needed to cross before reaching Abilene. It had rained two days before, so they were a little worried about the level of the water in the river.

Luke rode Butch and worked with the other cowboys to move the cattle toward the river. When they got to the river, it was not as bad as they had thought. The level of the water was normal for this time of year.

The steers do not like water. Today was no different. The cattle stopped at the edge of the water and would not go in. The cowboys were yelling and whistling at the steers. Finally, one jumped in, and then the rest followed. It took a long time to get all of the

cattle across the river.

When the steers had all reached the other side of the river, everyone took a break for a late lunch. The steers were feeding on the grass along the edge of the river and resting.

Luke sat on a big rock overlooking the river. The view was beautiful. Linger was lying at his feet sleeping. Butch was close by eating grass.

Suddenly from the west, the skies turned dark. A big storm was blowing in and there was not time to get ready. This was the worst thing that could happen. The cattle spook easily, especially when there is thunder, and they will run. The danger of a stampede was making the cowboys nervous.

The cowboys quickly jumped onto their horses and circled the herd. They yelled and whistled trying to keep the livestock together.

The storm rolled in quickly with strong winds and constant lightning and thunder. The cowboys held the herd together for a little while, and then suddenly they bolted. They ran right at Luke, Butch, and Linger. The stampede was impossible to stop.

When the storm was over the cowboys managed to get the cattle back into a herd, but it became obvious that something was wrong. In the path of the stampede they found Luke, Butch and Linger trampled to death. They died together the same way they had worked together for over four years.

The other cowboys buried them in one large grave. They took the big rock that Luke had sat on overlooking the river and carved this into the rock:

“Here lies Luke Tanner, his trusty horse Butch and his loyal dog Linger. They died the way they lived: working together. 1899”



"Short Stories for ESL Students" by **Harold I. Ames** is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

VOCABULARY: (*Match the word to its definition*)

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. exhausted _____ | a. step on many times |
| 2. steer _____ | b. no physical energy, tired |
| 3. natural _____ | c. competition for cowboys |
| 4. biscuits _____ | d. scared animals running |
| 5. rodeo _____ | e. a group of steers |
| 6. whistling _____ | f. sound made by blowing |
| 7. bolted _____ | g. jump, to go fast |
| 8. stampede _____ | h. inborn, normal |
| 9. trample _____ | i. beef cow |
| 10. herd _____ | j. dry bread |

TRUE / FALSE:

- | | |
|---|-------|
| 1. Luke was a cowboy. | T / F |
| 2. Linger was a German shepherd dog. | T / F |
| 3. They were taking the sheep to Abilene. | T / F |
| 4. The river was too high after the rain. | T / F |
| 5. Luke had eggs, beef jerky, and biscuits for breakfast. | T / F |
| 6. Luke's horse was named Mandy. | T / F |
| 7. The sky was clear at night. | T / F |
| 8. Luke's blanket caught on fire. | T / F |
| 9. The cattle were going by train to New York. | T / F |
| 10. Luke died after a stampede. | T / F |

MULTIPLE CHOICE:

1. What was the name of Luke's dog? _____
 - a) Ginger
 - b) Lunder
 - c) Limber
 - d) Linger

2. Where were the cowboys taking the steers? _____
 - a) Abilene
 - b) Chicago
 - c) the prairie
 - d) the ranch

3. What caused the stampede? _____
 - a) rain
 - b) the river
 - c) thunder
 - d) whistling

4. What happened to Luke? _____
 - a) he got rich
 - b) he went to the rodeo
 - c) he ate his breakfast
 - d) he died

COMPREHENSION: *(Write a complete sentence to answer the question.)*

1. To what city was the train going to take the steers?

2. How long had Luke had Butch?

3. To what city were the cowboys taking the cattle?

4. What bad thing happened after they crossed the river?

5. What did the cowboys write on the rock?

6. What was Luke looking forward to doing in Abilene?

7. What were the names of the other two cowboys?

8. What year did Luke die?

9. What did Butch do before Luke got him?

10. How long had they been away from the ranch?
