

©This work may be used for private study or in the classroom. It may not be published, broadcast or distributed in any other manner, including electronically, without the written permission of the author. To do so, contact her at fholt@telusplanet.net describing your request.

Youth Writing Camp II — Journal Shelter, Bragg Creek©

by Faye Reineberg Holt

I want to tell them stories
Of this place the Cochrane hills
And ranch and another time
But will it matter? in the midst
Of techno music and tank tops
Young love and disappointments
Will they care?

A hundred and twenty-five years ago, not so far away, a man of enterprise and money and power dreamed of shaping a new world. Dreamed of making his mark in a landscape unchanged for eons. For little more than a wink and a smile, he purchased thousands of acres. For less than girls spend on jangling bracelets, he leased more land, 100,000 acres in all.

Then, in Montana, the dream-struck, would-be rancher bought 6,800 head of cattle. His thirty cowboys and their three hundred horses drove the herd hard, fast. Fifteen, eighteen miles a day? Unheard of so long ago. And the cattle paid the price on the long trail. When they arrived at his Alberta ranch, the animals were thin, exhausted. But, there was time to fatten them, bulk them up before market.

Instead, an unseasonal, unrelenting October snow storm raged against them. Without shelter in the blizzard, thousands of cattle died. The rest were left weak — most too weak to survive.

Yet, for a man of ambition and vision, abandoning the dream wasn't an option. Still rich, the next spring, he travelled to Montana and bought another 2,600 head of cattle.

Again, they were herded back to the ranch, this time not so quickly. This time, near Fish Creek, close to their journey's end, winter struck with vengeance. The wind was bitter. The snow piled high. Temperatures plummeted. No warm chinook winds came to the rescue.

Oh, smart cowboys wanted to keep the herd safe for the winter, shelter their charges in the valley surrounded by hills. But the ambitious, obstinate boss stuck to his orders. Onward, never stop, never fail. Cowboys and cattle lurched, plodded, half blind through icy storms. Brutalized by wind, they trailed through heavy snow to a landscape where pasture was slicked with ice or beneath deep blankets of white. Was it another thousand head that froze to death or starved? Was it more? By spring, carcass after carcass lined coulees, crushed dreams.

But that is only half the story
Of the famous Cochrane Ranch
Where past tragedies loom large
Loom close yet too far away
From youth living in a world
Of space stations and rap music
Who sit beside trees, jotting in journals
Young writers who will return to city lives
Filled with teenage complexities
So far far beyond my sheltered imagining
Far far beyond the stories I want to tell.