

Creole Cowboy

When south Louisiana ranchers have trouble gathering wild cattle out of the marshes, they call Darryl Guillory and his cow dogs.

Story and photography by
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IT'S 4 A.M. AT DARRYL GUILLORY'S HORSE CORRALS JUST OUTSIDE CHURCH POINT, LOUISIANA,

and already the commotion has started. Pickups with goosenecks are parked helter-skelter in the muddy driveway, and cow dogs peer out into the dark from between trailer slats, barking in excitement. Cowboys scramble to catch wide-eyed horses of every shape and size by flashlight. Darryl directs the whole melee in a thick Creole dialect as he saddles his big jugheaded horse, Clyde. A single bare bulb lights the lean-to shack that serves as his barn.

Finally, the last horse is loaded and the caravan pulls out, barreling down the backroads of Acadiana, a land of rice fields and crawfish ponds and cattle. In lyrical French, a Cajun song crackles over the radio as we fly past waking farmhouses and sleeping towns. More than an hour later, we arrive at our destination, the marshes just south of the little town of Gueydan.

Darryl and his crew of 10 cowboys and seven cow dogs are here to gather 200 head of spoiled wild cows, their calves, and a remnant of yearlings ungathered the year before. Most of the cattle that run in these marshes see humans only once a year. The goal today is to bring the herd out of the marshes and down a levee to pen them in a pipe corral that straddles the levee top. Seemingly a simple task, if it were easy the owner would not have called Darryl.

Darryl is a Creole, a French-speaking person of mixed black and French origin descended from the earliest Louisiana settlers. He is a light-skinned man with a perfect crescent of salt-and-pepper mustache. This is his livelihood, gathering cattle for ranchers and farmers who don't have the know-how or the manpower to do it themselves. His services are in great demand, thanks to a lifetime of experience handling bad cattle and the well-disciplined pack of Black Mouth Cur and Catahoula dogs that work by his side.

"When they can't catch something, then they call me and my dogs," he says. "Kind of like The Equalizer."

PICKING UP THE PIECES

This particular cattle owner has about 7,000 acres flanking the Intracoastal Canal, where barges slide by silently in the sun. It's that southernmost part of Louisiana where the line between dry land and coastal water blurs. It's usually wet, boggy country, so flat the horizon curves right into the sky, broken only by a crosshatching of higher levees where the cows leave their small calves when they go into the quagmire to graze.

Darryl explains that the owner first hired another crew some weeks before to do this job, but



Darryl Guillory and one of his horses, Sheba, along with three of his dogs. Their practiced teamwork helps them catch cattle in the Louisiana marshes.



Darryl often has help gathering cattle, but it's his horses and dogs that many times play the biggest part.

they failed dismally. When the cattle started breaking on them, they took their ropes down to rope them, making the spooky, mostly Brahman-cross herd wilder than ever.

"It was a bunch of guys with no chief," Darryl says, shaking his head, "and now we've got a wreck."

As a result, the cows get one glimpse of us pulling in with trailers on the levee and they quickly head for the opposite side of the pasture, moving like snakes through the tall marsh grasses.

By contrast, Darryl's crew is as disciplined as his dogs.

"When I go to pen somebody's cattle with my dogs and a crew, it don't matter if you're 2 years old or 100, when I say something, that's it," he says in his soft-spoken drawl. "And I don't want no hollering because it distracts the dogs."

Darryl's crew is an odd assortment of mostly black young men, including a school teacher, a government worker, a couple of zydeco musicians, and several young boys eager to learn the art of cowboying Louisiana-style.

"I always have help because there's always somebody who wants to be a cowboy," Darryl says. "Some are really interested, and some just want to go around and talk about it, but not many people today want to do the real cowboy work, the dirty work."

An exception is 26-year-old James "Peaches" Jordan, a burly black cowboy who is in the marshes today in a straw cowboy hat and chinks, mounted on a stout bay horse. Peaches has known Darryl all his life, and wanted to be a cowboy and have his own ranch since he was a kid. He went to college and played football at McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana, with hopes of making the NFL draft and earning enough money to buy a big ranch. That dream went down the drain when a knee injury ended his football career. Instead, after graduation he went to work for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency. He spends his spare time training horses and working with Darryl.

"My goal is to one day have 400, 500 head of cows," he says. "Right now, I'm just trying to learn from Mr. Darryl, because he learned the old ways and has so much hands-on experience, not just textbook learning. Eventually, I want to give up my job and do exactly what Darryl's doing."

Though poorly documented, the history of black cowboys runs deep in the Southeast and Texas. People of African descent made up a high percentage of the Louisiana *cavaliers* (horsemen) tending cattle in the 18th and 19th centuries, including black slaves and "free people of color," who often owned their own land. According to Bill Jones, who wrote *Louisiana*

Cowboys, freed blacks held some of the earliest brands recorded in Louisiana.

Prior to the Civil War, almost 70,000 cattle ran on the vast prairies and coastal marshes of south Louisiana, but Union troops drove off thousands and consumed thousands more during the war. With most of the white population at war, black slaves were left to tend the cattle on the plantations, but many abandoned their homes and fled to Texas, where they soon found their livestock skills in great demand. Some historians calculate that approximately 8,700 black cowboys participated in the great cattle drives between 1866 and 1895, more blacks than whites.

LIFE ON GULLORY ROAD

At 57, Darryl is a big, squarely built man who walks with a decided limp after numerous horse and cow wrecks, but who sits his horse with ease, straight and tall. A bullwhip slung over his back and a red whistle around his neck are his tools for signaling his dogs, plus a piercing "whoop" he also uses to get their attention.

Darryl has been doing this all his life. Born into a family of 11 children, he still lives in the small white frame house where he grew up on Guillory Road. His father, Eugene, was a cowboy who raised bulldogs and did all the dangerous wild cattle catching in the area. In those days, there were few open fields and everybody ran

their cattle together in the dense woods, gathering them only once or twice a year.

Eugene loved his work, but he was an alcoholic who too often came home without a paycheck. When he realized Darryl wanted to follow in his footsteps, he told him, "Be fair with people, but don't let nobody use you. And do what you like to do in life, because you're going to do it all your life."

After short stints as a barber and then a carpenter, Darryl took those words to heart and went to work for the stockyards in nearby Eunice. The owner, Cooney Brown, saw his potential and gave him an old gooseneck trailer so he could start hauling cattle. Hauling cattle to the stockyards for people meant he also had to catch them, so, like his dad, he got some bulldogs to catch the "bad stuff." Sometimes he worked with a seasoned older cowboy named Ray Fontenot, who also used dogs. All the time, Darryl was watching and learning, honing his skills as a cowboy.

"I roped some bad bulls in those days when I was young," he says. "When I'd get ready to go catch something bad, my feet would be shaking in the stirrups, I was so nervous; then *bam*, all the sudden they'd quit shaking and that was it. I wouldn't be nervous or nothin'. It was just me and them."

One time, Darryl and two of his dogs had to bring three cattle out of the woods and load them all in the trailer he had set

up, gates open, at the end of a long dirt lane. He was riding a little 900-pound Quarter Horse he called Pappa, carrying a bunch of ropes on his saddle. He hit the lane at a full gallop with all three cows in front and the dogs on either side running all out.

"I roped all three of them coming down that road," he says, "just dallied and dropped the end of my ropes. We were still running when we hit that trailer, and everybody—horse, dogs, cows—went in at once. I pulled my feet out of the stirrups and grabbed the top of the trailer as they went in, then I shut the gate. I guess I was just lucky."

There were plenty of wrecks, too. Like the time a big bull hit the front of the trailer as he loaded, then wheeled and came blasting back out too fast for Darryl to get his slack. When the bull hit the end of the rope, it flipped Darryl's horse, and Darryl hit the ground hard, landing on his head.

Another time, he had a bull roped and was coming fast to the trailer when the bull suddenly took a notion to jump right into the saddle in front of him, slamming horse and rider into the truck so hard "it made a big ol' dent" that was still there when he traded the truck.

A GOOD INFLUENCE

No question Darryl's tough, but there's another side to him, too. He had a wife at one time, long gone now, but no kids of



Darryl's crew prepares to go into the marshes to gather cattle, while Darryl hangs back with his dogs until the crew gets positioned. They are a mixed group of men, some experienced and some young boys eager to learn the art of cowboying, Louisiana-style.



Darryl's dogs—a mix of Black Mouth Curs and Catahoulas—get a reward for a job well done.

his own. On the dash of his truck, though, there's a faded photo of a 5-year-old boy riding a calf.

"That's the boy I raised," he says. "His mama was on drugs, and I tried to help her and get her to go to rehab. She said the only way she would go was if I took the boy. I took Tray thinking it would be a couple months and it turned into nine years."

Tray went everywhere with Darryl. One day the boy was watching a rodeo tape on TV, and he said, "I want to do that; I want to be a bull rider."

"I said, 'That's a rough occupation, son,' " Darryl recalls, "but he told me, 'You said I could be anything I want to be,' so I said OK."

The boy went on to become a top junior bull rider, but nine years after she left him, his mother, still not rehabilitated, came and took him back. Darryl tells this story haltingly, choking back his emotions.

His soft side also shows in the many "rescue" horses that graze his pastures. When the sheriff finds abandoned horses, he calls Darryl to pick them up. If Darryl can't find the owner, he'll work to relocate each horse, being careful to give them only to someone he knows can and will take care of them. Years of dealing with the public have given him the ability to "read people," he says.

These days, Darryl doesn't rope as many bad bulls, but partly because times have changed. Now he finds more demand for managing, penning, doctoring and working cattle instead of just catching the bad ones.

"I see a lot of people getting in the cattle business—doctors, lawyers, teachers, who don't know nothin' about cattle," he says.

One of his customers is Robert Feucht, a Eunice contractor who bought a piece of land outside of town about three years ago, inheriting 56 cows in the deal. With no pens on the place, he always hires Darryl to bring his portable pen on wheels, which can be set up in 15 minutes and holds up to 100 cows. Now Darryl is designing a permanent pen for Feucht so he will be able to trap the cattle himself.

"Even if we have the pens ready to use this fall, I'll still hire Darryl to come and work the cattle for me," Feucht says. "He's the best cowboy around here, and I'm more than satisfied."

CREOLE CANINES

Darryl figures he gathers about 2,000 head per year for various customers, plus the 150 or so head he runs himself on little places scattered all over. Over the years he has phased out his bulldog "catch" dogs in favor of Black Mouth Curs and Catahoulas, Southern breeds bred for both catching (going for the nose or ear) and "baying up" the cattle. He sometimes uses Border Collies, which he says are smarter but not as tough in the Louisiana heat.

The Black Mouth Curs are muscular dogs of varying shades of yellow and with a black muzzle, bred in the Southeast as hunting dogs as well as cow dogs. The spotted Catahoula is a native of Louisiana, also bred to hunt wild boar and work cattle.

Good dogs are invaluable in this country. Once a herd of cattle has been "dog broke," they'll bunch up at the mere sound of Darryl's truck and trailer, and two or three cowboys can pen them easily with the dogs.

Today, in the marshes south of Gueydan, Darryl is getting his chance to show what his dogs can do with a bunch of un-dog-broke outlaws. After everybody unloads their horses, he sends the cowboys out into the marsh to make a wide barrier a healthy distance from the cattle. He and his dogs hang back as he motions everyone to stay back from the herd and keep quiet.

The cattle start toward the corner where the cowboys want them and begin to mill restlessly, but soon they begin to split and make a break for the human barrier. Several times the cowboys have to drop back at a run to try to hold them. One high-headed black cow charges through and Darryl puts his catch dogs on her until she returns to the herd. A young spotted bull and a hump-backed gray Brahman bull make a run for it and make it all the way back to the Intracoastal boundary before they're retrieved.

When the herd finally settles, Darryl sends his dogs in to bay them up. The dogs circle the herd at a run, barking, waiting for something to try to escape. When a cow throws her head up and makes a move, it's either to fight the dogs or run. That's when the dogs go to her head, grabbing her nose or ear until she drops her head and runs back to the herd.

It's all about patience, Darryl says.

"You don't want to just rush when you're baying them up, and you don't want to be too close to them, because when they come out, if they don't have nowhere to spin and they see you right there, they'll break, they gonna run. And when one breaks, they gone."

Patience finally pays off, and the cattle settle enough for the crew to move in and shove them up the bank of the levee, where they take off again, but this time toward the pens. It's close to 1 p.m. when the last cow is penned, after the cowboys have to rope and drag a few stragglers. It will be 10 p.m. before the weary crew works the last calf through the old chute and returns home.

A satisfying day for Darryl.

"Cowboying for me is not about the money, definitely not about the money," he says. "I just love it. I just want to be out there and just do it." 🐾

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