



NIGHT MOVES

It's 4 A.M. and time to move cattle from Caprock's feedlot to provide production efficiency at Excel's nearby beef plant. But it makes for an early day for the cowboys of Caprock.

THE COWBOYS OF CAPROCK START WORK EARLY, BENEFITING ANIMAL WELFARE AND HELPING EXCEL'S BEEF PLANT INCREASE EFFICIENCY.

BY STEVE WERBLOW

PHOTOS BY LISA VICKSTROM AND STEVE WERBLOW

BOVINA, Texas – It's 4 A.M. and 47,000 cattle slumber and stir softly in the crisp air of an October night in the Texas Panhandle. Then the hush of the night is pierced by a rebel yell as seven cowboys on horseback enter a pen.

"Yee-hah!" "Up-ah, up-ah!" "Heyheyheyhey!" Lumbering to their feet, the 100 cattle in the pen shuffle, then trot away from the riders, who advance side-by-side to direct the cattle out of the pen into a 16-foot-wide alley.

In the alley, the cattle start moving faster. Light-colored steers flash by a pool of light from one of the feedyard's lightpoles, followed by a sparkle from silver buckles on leather chaps as the cowboys move their horses into a trot to keep up with the cattle.

Despite the movement of 600 tons of cattle, the procession is surprisingly quiet. There's the rush of hooves, the snort of horses, an occasional bellow from one of the cattle and the clank of metal gates. Periodically, a rider lets out a yell.

"Let'sgolet'sgolet'sgo! Yah!"

The early wake-up call occurs a few times a week at Cargill's Caprock Feedlot No. 5 here in Bovina, a metropolis of cattle on the scrub-covered High Plains of Texas. The cattle are headed on trailers to the Excel plant in nearby Friona, just a dozen miles up the road, where they will be processed soon after sunrise.

The inconvenient hour is carefully chosen, notes Lonnie Busch, feedlot manager. Excel can start its production line right on time, maximizing its efficiency. And the cattle are processed promptly, which is better than having them stand around for hours at the packing plant getting nervous and losing valuable weight.

In fact, while the industry benchmark for a steer's weight loss between leaving a feedlot and processing is 4 percent of body weight, Bovina's night-shipped cattle shrink less than 1 percent, according to cattle scheduler Mickie Herring at Excel in Friona. The Bovina feedlot's percentage of "dark cutters" – beef discolored by a flush of stress-induced hormones – is also quite low, ensuring more potential for premium beef. Dark cutters represent a loss of \$200 per head, so there's a lot of money to be saved by keeping cattle from getting stressed.



Kevin Schueler
strapped up to
move cattle.

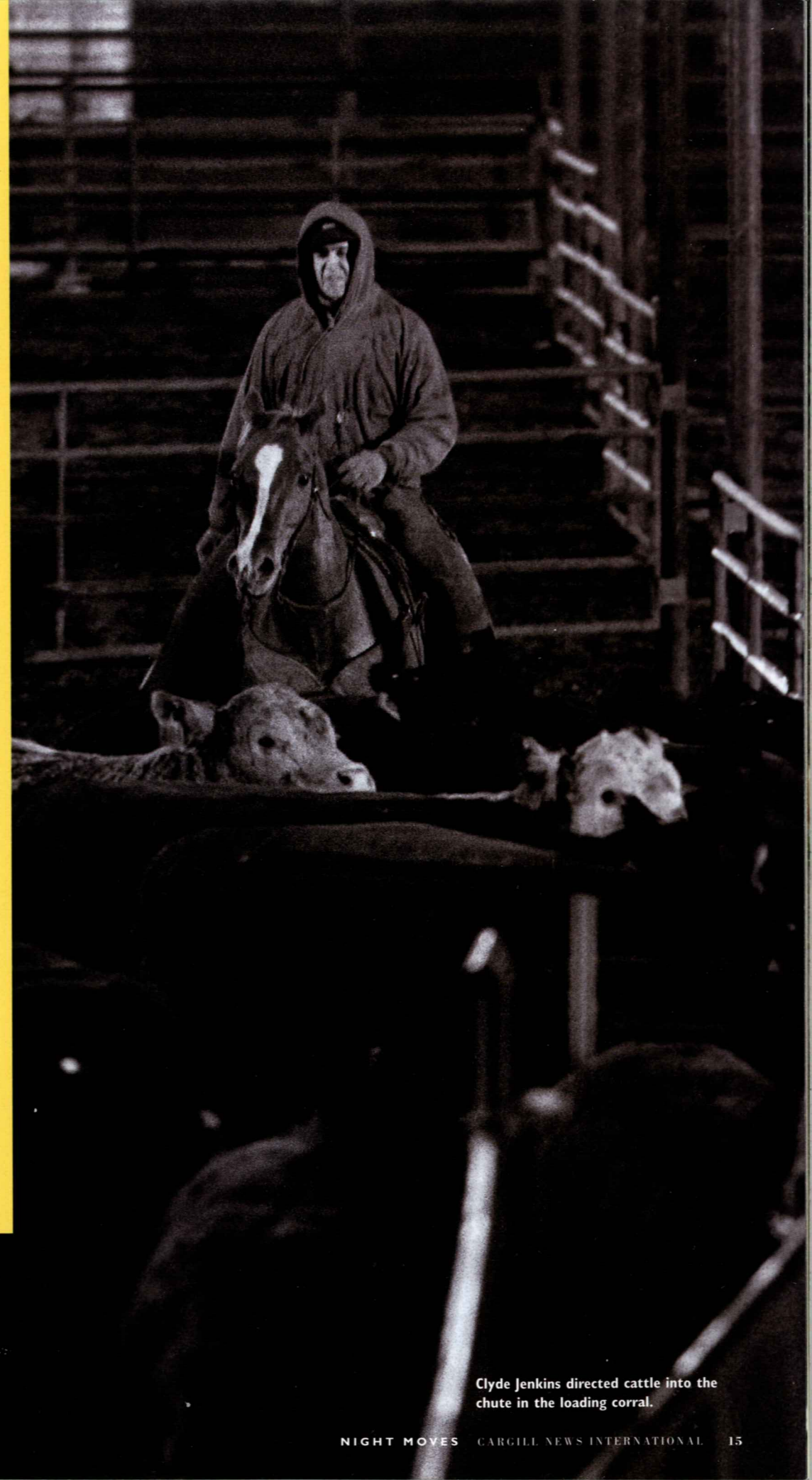
That makes night shipping a three-home-run customer solution for Excel. “It helps the plant in yield and overall quality,” Herring says. “And we’ve got 1,900 employees here, so the consistency of what we do is important. We don’t have to jockey our workers’ schedules back and forth. We know we can start on Caprock 5’s cattle first thing in the morning – because when they say they’ll be there at a certain time, the cattle are there.”

To ensure that reliability, several Caprock feedyards coordinate their efforts. For instance, when icy roads or lightning storms prevent one of the other Caprock yards from getting their cattle to the plant on time, Bovina’s riders saddle up early to make sure Excel can keep operating efficiently.

Caprock’s nighttime cowboys are a special breed. They’re all part-timers. Some have cattle of their own. One is finishing his degree in ag communications. Another crafts custom-made spurs. The common denominator is that they’re all skilled riders who know how to read cattle.

“A calf has a brain, a horse has a brain and you have a brain – and you’ve got to work it all out in the pen,” says Darren Newton, the cattle manager who oversees Caprock’s night shipments. “It’s easy to get frustrated, and it’s intense. This is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to train someone on.”

Back in the feedyard, rider Clyde Jenkins follows 16 head into “the box” – a curved, solid-walled steel pen about 20 feet square – swinging a heavy door shut behind him. His horse snorts a cloud of steam in the night air, then Jenkins moves his mount toward a steer he has determined is the leader. The leader trots



Clyde Jenkins directed cattle into the chute in the loading corral.



Boots and other tools of the cowboy trade are donned in the incandescent glare of the tack room.

through a curved chute called “the snake” and clatters up the ramp to a transport trailer. Most of the other cattle follow.

But one steer balks, and Jenkins and his horse begin a dance that has been performed in feedyard pens on the High Plains for more than a century. The horse steps to one side, trying to nudge the steer toward the shoot. The steer fakes left, then bolts straight at the horse’s chest. The mount shifts aside with surprising grace, then wheels around to face the startled steer. The steer tries one or two quick feints, then yields and moves into the snake.

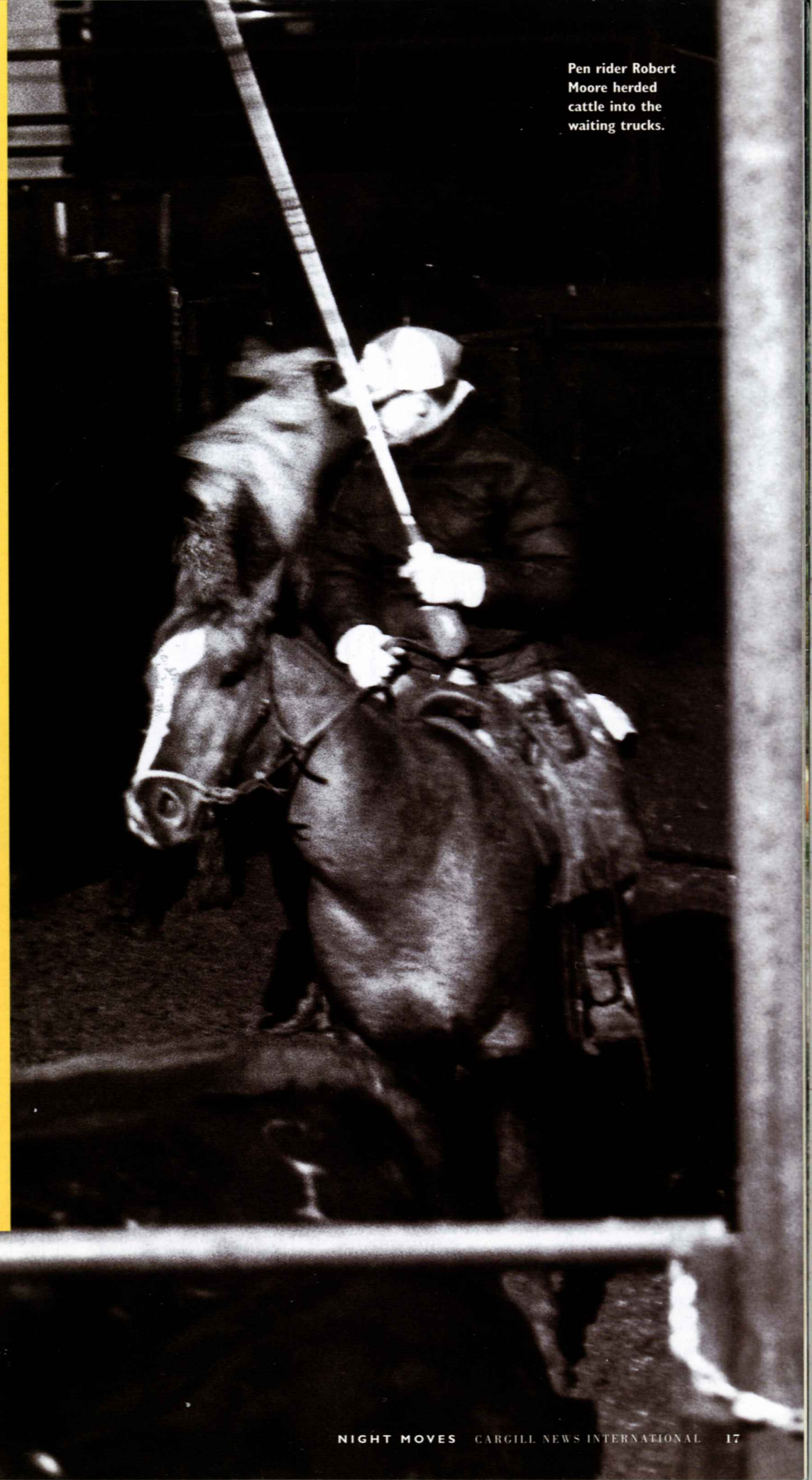
At about 1,250 pounds, the steer weighs more than the horse and rider combined. Without brawn on their side, cowboy and horse play a game of mental chess with the cattle, executing moves in split-second time.

“You pick out the leader and start working on him,” says Jason Floyd, a veteran cattlemen who spent two years as a night shipper before hiring on full-time with Caprock as yard manager. “You get to where you can tell what he’s going to do before he even makes his move.”

Despite all the advances in technology, loading cattle still comes down to a cowboy and a horse. “We’ve got four-wheelers and ATVs, but you can’t turn around an ATV in a tight space,” Floyd notes. “And you can’t make an ATV step to the side.”

As he speaks, horses and cattle dance in the pens under the brilliant stars of the big Texas sky. 🌍

High performance from Caprock’s night-riding cowboys results in high performance at Excel, a Cargill customer and sister business.



Pen rider Robert Moore herded cattle into the waiting trucks.