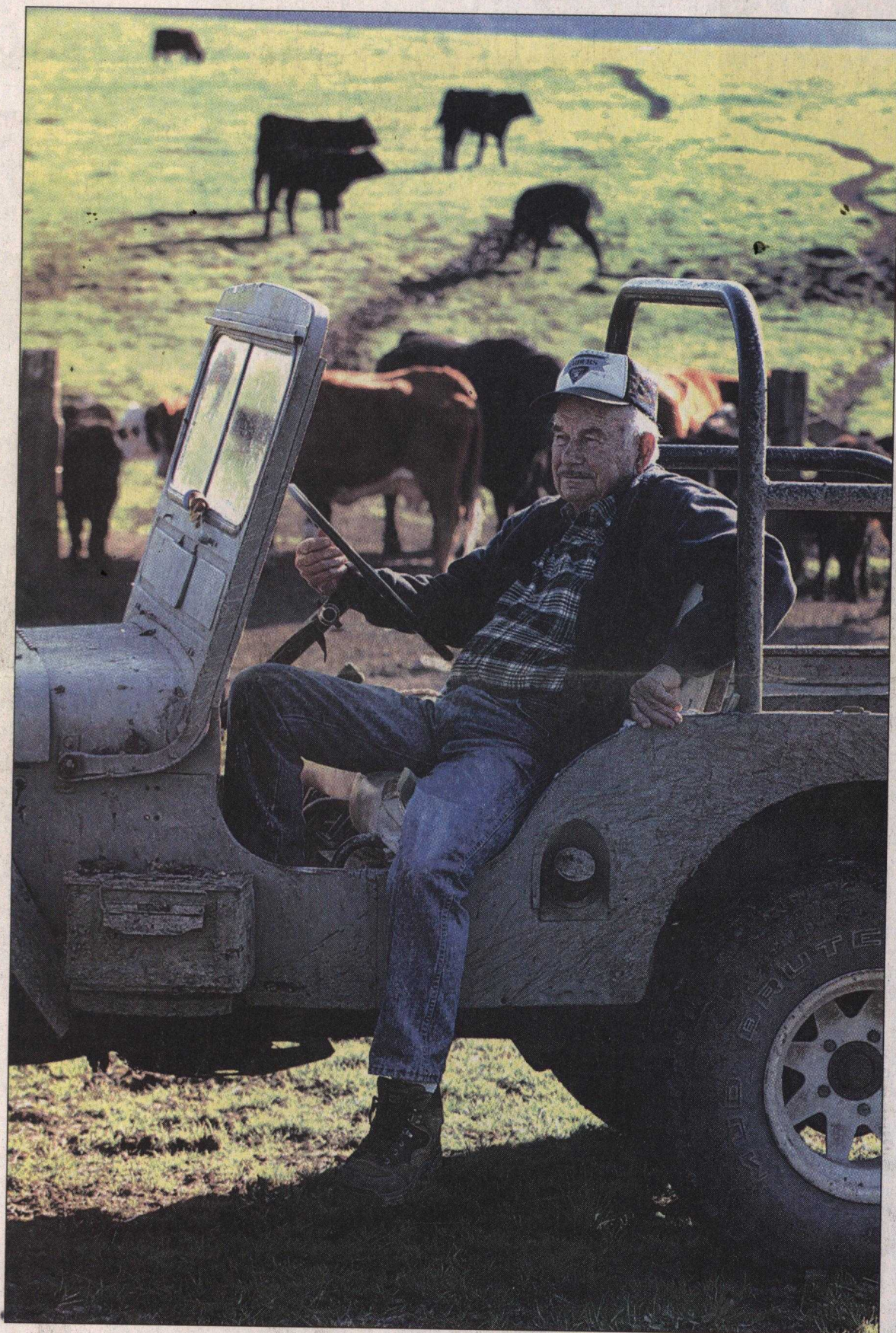


A Quiet Cattle Call

Local ranching tradition fades into the sunset



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

John Rocha, 79, is one of the last cattle ranchers in the county. He still works his 3,500-acre spread in the '49 Willys Jeep he bought brand new.

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WATSONVILLE — Life on the range has changed plenty in the past 60 years for John Rocha.

The Watsonville rancher has always made his home on the range, but the sun has set on what had been a healthy livestock operation, generating profits that sustained generations of family.

Rocha and the half-dozen other ranchers left in Santa Cruz County say it isn't mad cow disease that will bring them down. It's the encroaching urban sprawl, high property taxes and smaller profits that have sent all but one of Rocha's children into careers off the range and prompted him to put 2,400 acres of his 3,500-acre ranch up for sale.

Yet the finding of mad cow disease in one slaughtered Holstein in Washington state at the end of last month has dimmed profit margins for ranchers across America. Born in Canada, but raised on a ranch in Washington, one infected cow caused a scare that brought

cattle prices tumbling as much as 50 cents a pound.

Ranchers here hope that Americans' fears of mad cow disease, which can be transmitted to humans if they eat brain or spinal tissue from an infected cow, will subside by May when ranchers take their fatted calves to the 101 Livestock Market in Aromas.

Jim Warren, president of 101 Livestock, hasn't held an auction since the announcement, partly because of the holidays, but also to give the market time to calm.

When he opens the gate and lets the cattle in on Jan. 27, he's confident the market will have rebounded and ranchers will round up their herds and head for auction.

"I think prices will get better, but I don't know if we'll recover back to what it was before," he said.