LEARNING THE ROPES

Swanton cowboys
find their home on the range

By Isaiah Guzman

The cattle hear Gordon Claassen's whistle. They know it means there's more grass where he's going, but they're still slow to respond this morning.

"They're just sittin' there hot swattin' flies," he grumbles to himself. "Come on cattle!" he shouts. "We need a leader!"
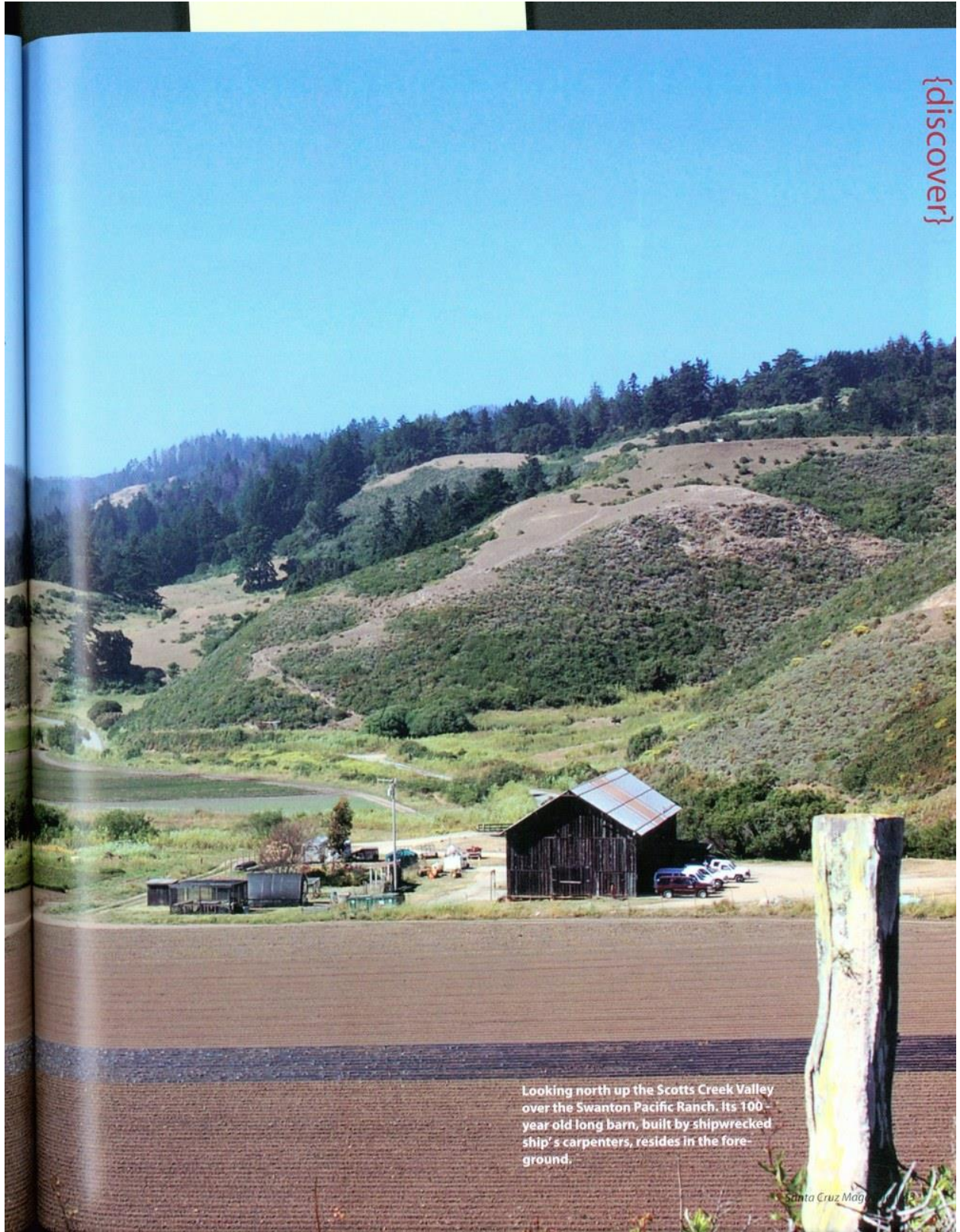
Four cowboys move in on horseback to motivate the heifers, and for a moment—with seemingly endless open land in the distance and Claassen in his beaver felt Stetson hat, worn Wrangler jeans and boots—this could be another time, another place. Maybe 60 years ago. Maybe Oklahoma.

But those redwood-covered hills that fade into the Pacific Ocean and that all-terrain vehicle Claassen is driving make it clear this is 2010—and it isn't Oklahoma. Santa Cruz is about 15 minutes south, Highway 1 is about a mile west, and the cars are within earshot when the wind dies down and the waves aren't pounding.
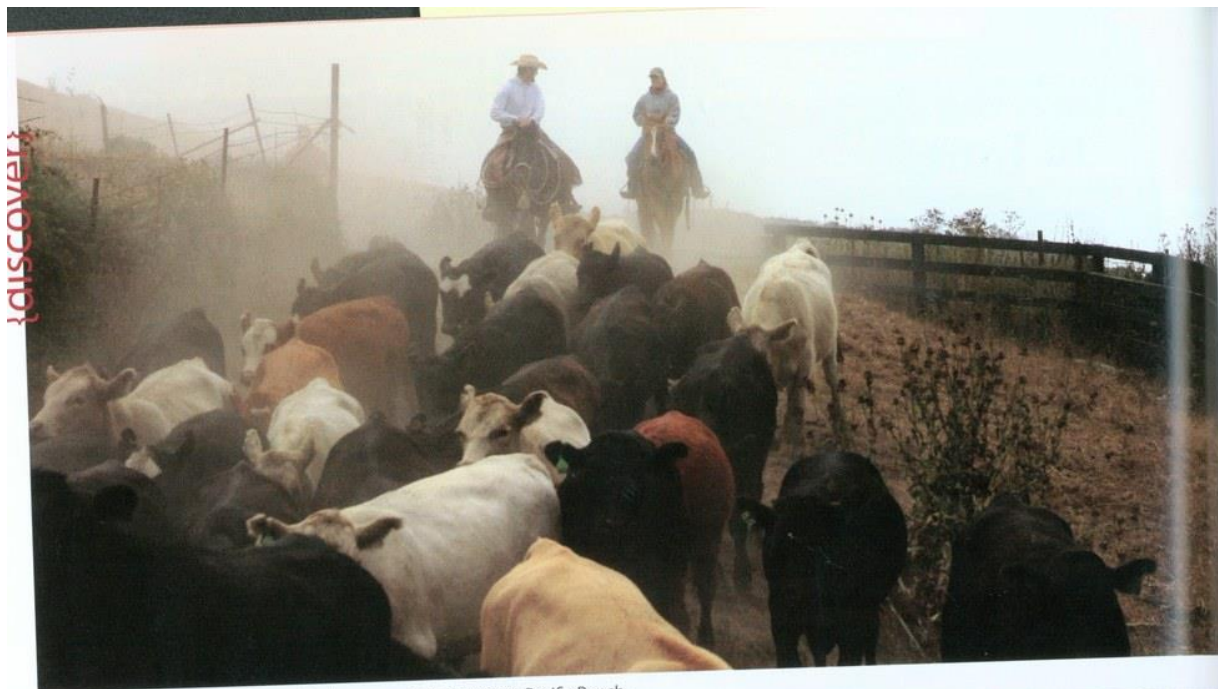
PHOTOGRAPHS ARTHUR ROSATO

Looking north up the Scotts Creek Valley over the Swanton Pacific Ranch. Its 100 - year old long barn, built by shipwrecked ship's carpenters, resides in the fore-ground.

Cowboys and cowgirls alike ride the range on the Swanton Pacific Ranch.

Shrouded by the costal fog a lone cowboy moves cattle to a new pasture.
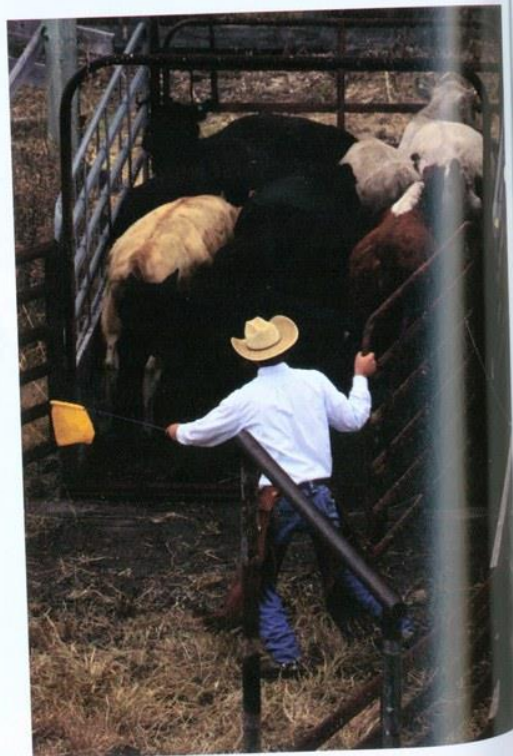
On average, Swanton Pacific stocks 650 head of cattle. About 30-40 of those every year become natural grass-fed beef, which is processed and sold at Cal Poly or right at the ranch. The rest of the livestock is fattened up on grain at feed lots before becoming most likely Safeway Rancher's Reserve.

Claassen says he prefers the natural grass-fed beef. It's higher in vitamins, beta-carotene and Omega fatty acids.

"What you see is what you get," he says, driving toward a black Angus that has broken away from the herd. Claassen tries to cut it off, but the all-terrain vehicle isn't quick enough and the animal walks into the brush. Two students come over on horseback to get it back in line.

"A horse," Claassen says, "is still the best tool for moving cattle." ⮞

For Swanton Pacific Ranch Grass-Fed Beef
Visit: www.spranch.org/

A Cal Poy student herds cattle on to Santa Cruz County's last working livestock scale.