

## **Preston Nutter**

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Preston Nutter was the Donald Trump of the early twentieth century. He was wealthy and well known in the area. Through the years his name appeared in several articles associated with the cattle industry and he was a key witness on the trial of Alfred Packer, the infamous nineteenth century "Man-Eater". Unlike Donald Trump, however, he kept a low profile, never revealing any personal or business information. His daughter Virginia Nutter Price published selected biographical information in the 1964 issue of the Utah Historical Quarterly, otherwise, no major biographical document has been produced to-date to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this complex character, whose experiences could have inspire many western movies. Nutter was a practical man who managed his cattle empire with fierce tenacity and clear purpose. The information on this paper deals only with the organizational aspects of the ranching operation and includes personal interviews with people who gained field experience driving cattle to and from pastures, dealing with the daily hazards of the cattle business not only in the area where Nutter ran his outfit but also through the Uintah Basin. Their experiences provide a glimpse of the complexity of the ranching business and an understanding of the harsh conditions imposed upon those who braved the elements, rough terrain, and unforgiving environment to carry on their activities. Preston Nutter kept a journal, recording his daily activities, and he kept copies of all his business transactions. Mr. Howard Price, husband of Virginia Nutter donated one hundred and fifty boxes containing all these documents to the University of Utah Special Collections Library. This compilation provides a first hand account of the intricacies of his cattle business. Some of those entries are reprinted here when they have to do with the scope of this paper. William Barton's unpublished autobiography, donated to the Utah Historical Society by his nephew Robert H. Burns was also a valuable source of information on this research. Bill Barton worked for the Nutter Corporation on the early days and was very familiar with the manner Nutter wanted to run his business. To the people who shared their stories and recollections: James Brown, Doyle Lisonbee, George Long, George Marett, Grant Ainge, John Davies, and to the continuous assistance of Janet Taylor and Ellen Kiever at the Uintah County library, and the gracious ladies at the Duchesne Visitor Center, a heartfelt Thank you.



## Objectives

The objectives of this research can be outlined as follows:

- How did Preston Nutter run his cattle operations
- How did Nutter and his cowboys work on the field
- What time of year did they work in each location
- Where did they camp
- Corrals
- How and where did they obtain supplies
- What information can be inferred about his interactions with government agencies  
(Forest Service in particular)

### **How did they work on the field?**

#### **What time of year did they work in each location?**

Preston Nutter's personal diary:

8-11-1919- Gathering horses and mares Walker and I riding south side of Horse Bench, Woodall and Earl Babcock riding the north side. Farrow stationed as lookout to stop horses as they came up Horse bench. Rounded up about eighty head of stock. Neal Hanks came over. We drove horses to brush corral and went to camp, got some dinner and came back and worked some of the horses over, then back to camp for the night.

8-13-1919- Finished separating horses. Drove the mares up Water Canyon, turned loose 52 mares and the black stallion. Rode the pasture Walker and I going on East side, Woodall and Earl riding west side. Walker and I found 5 head of wild horses drove them in to water. Woodall and Earl found 14 head wild horses, started them but through carelessness let them get away taking our 5 head with them.

8-15-1919 Rounded up all cattle and drove to lower bottom, Farrow myself going down and building fence to hold them there. Hanks gathered a few head and took them up the river waiting for Woodall and Walker. They were late getting in, had to camp for the night. Sent Farrow to drive bulls up creek so our drive would be shorter for tomorrow.

8-16-1919- Started for the Nine Mile ranch driving all the bulls, gathering carload to take south to the Arizona ranch. Had quite a lot of trouble. Got them above Hanks fence and turned loose. Came on to the ranch around about midnight.

8-22-1919- Started for Colton to load bulls, arrived Colton one pm. Farrow and Woodall there had dinner at Elmer's. Dispatcher told us he would load car train would be there six pm to pick us up. Farrow and Woodall went to get bulls, which were out about two miles. They got in to corral. I went to stockyards and we loaded them just in time to have train pick us up. (Preston Nutter papers on file at University of Utah Special collections library)

Grant Ainge explains how this operation took place. Although his cattle ran East of Vernal, the change of seasons is the main reason to move the cattle to other locations: "Several ranchers got together to check the cows periodically and in October they rounded up all the cows that were using the same range and brought them back to Jensen. Once they got all the cows back Grant would call the names of the owners as the cows were reaching the corral so they could be retrieved and taken to their own pastures. If they had to corral their cattle preferred the bottom of canyons because it was easier for them to keep them together that way". (Personal interview, tape on

file at Ashley NF)

Doyle Lisonbee: "They [the Nutter operation] probably had forty employees all the time.... He ran the cattle down the Arizona Strip. We figured he had three thousand heads down there... They had to feed the cows throughout the winter and then they sold the steers and whatever they set for sell. They shipped in the fall". (Personal interview, tape on file at Ashley NF)

Fred Pope in "Emergency Pants" writes: "Bill Barton was still short on his cattle count in early December even though he, and three or four other cowboys had tried to find them at different times since the fall roundup. Other people were also a few head short. So he made another long ride around the sheltered spots in the high country." In "All Night Under a Dead Horse" he wrote: "There were six of us camped at Barton's cabin in Lake Canyon, but we did not ride together. We rode alone because we could cover so much more country and the only object of the ride was to be sure there were no cattle where they would starve to death before spring".

From Preston Nutter: "Utah Cattleman, 1886-1936" by Virginia N. Price and John T. Darby: "...Nutter and six men in his outfit picked up the cows and bulls on the range near Fairplay in the early part of September and began the long drive across the Continental Divide at Tennessee Pass. From there they trailed by way of Glenwood Springs and picked up the old Indian trail that led along the Colorado River and Grand Junction".

From "Heart Throbs of the West" by Kate B. Carter. 1951, Daughters of Utah Pioneers Publisher: "Day Herding – Do you know what that means? Well, it means the most tiresome job on the range. When the cattle had been gathered and were waiting to be taken other places, or when they were collected for branding, steer-selling or "cutting out", they had to be held and to hold them was to hold them was "day herding". Of course, there was night herding, also, but they tried to avoid this. If possible they were driven to pens or corrals and shut up over night. In the day herd, usually cattle and horses were not put together. Their habits are somewhat different and so they can best be tended separately. The object is to hold the herd and prevent any from escaping. This is done by continually riding around them and watching that the unruly, mischievous "stubborn-pesky" ones do not get away." (Carter, Kate. p.327-328)

"Generally there were two occasions when the owners of the livestock would check on their cattle. One of these would be in the late spring, when they held what was generally spoken of as "The Calf Round-Up." Then all the cattle would be gathered together by cowboys who represented the owners." (Carter, Kate. p. 218)

"The round-ups in early summer were great events and cattle were gathered from every mountain cove and valley and driven into the big herd which was always surrounded by other cowboys with their fine horses who were as alert as the men, and the faithful dogs who were trained to help both men and horses, where animals were to be "cut out" of the herd, or "brought back in," if they were straying away. The horse could turn as short and as quickly as the animal he was working with, and the cowboy anticipated his every move and they became a unit of strength in the work." (Carter, Kate. p.336)

George Maret, former Duchesne County Sheriff for 25 years describes how they managed the cattle business in the early days: In summer time they put them in the high country, that

would've been toward Range Creek and then in the winter they stayed in the main ranch and could run the winter range from there. They brought them in and they had BLM lease and they ran those on the county North and West of the Nutter Ranch in Nine Mile. (Personal interview, tape on file at Ashley NF)

Bill Barton worked at the Nutter Ranch for a number of years in the early days of the Nutter operation. In his unpublished biography he wrote: "When the cowboys leave here with the beef herd, they make it over into Cottonwood Canyon for the next night, with a drift fence at the foot of the canyon where they camp and the steers have the rim of the canyon for 8 miles; another drift fence stopped them a mile from the mouth of the canyon. Then on the next day they get the herd into the fields at the Home Ranch and take a day's layover and then drive out to Colton. Here the trainload of steers is loaded for shipment to California."

Jim Brown worked on the Nutter Ranch for eighteen years. The following is his explanation of how they used to ran their cattle business:

“When we ran the cattle in Nine Mile, Nutter used to bring the steers up from the Arizona Strip and fatten them up at Strawberry or in the Nine Mile area then trail them to Myton and sell them to the troops or to the Indians in the very early days, and then he had a small herd of short horn cattle that he raised bulls and took the bulls back down the Arizona Strip, but there is a cabin on the Mountains called Bill Barton cabin. They went to the ranch in the fall, the calves were weaned, the cows would go to the ranches in Myton and Ioka and some of the cows with short calves would go. That way the mother cows would go back out on the mountain down in Rockhouse, Cottonwood and Nine Mile and Green River area to winter. After they wintered there, the cows were started back to the mountain. The cattle from Myton and Ioka would trail back to the ranch, ran through the dip and bath and then taken up to Pine Springs and Tidwell areas where the calves were branded and then they went back to Willow Springs where they branded some others and generally the steers and heifers were all drawn Steer Ridge and then the steers were put in the beef pasture and the heifers were put in the heifer pastures on the Gooseneck and then in the fall they would trail about the third weekend in September they were trailed back to the ranch and sold approximately the first part of October. Then they went back to the mountain and got the cows and calves and took them back to the ranch, cleaned the year’s calves, finished branding. Off course they branded any time they got a hold of anything it wasn’t branded.” (Personal interview, tape on file at Ashley NFJ)

### **Corrals**

Corrals come in all shapes, sizes and concoction. Early Use corrals were constructed of brush and branches they found in near proximity. Cowboys who needed to build a quick corral for the night used some of these structures. Although they used the same paths every year, cattlemen did not allot much funding to build corrals on the trails. The hired hands just utilized what was available to keep the horses and cattle at bay during the night. Because Preston Nutter had a substantial operation, he built cabins and corrals at strategic locations. Some of those cabins are still standing.

From a letter dated Dec 10th, 1906 written by L.H.Milton, Range Valley Ranch foreman to Preston Nutter: “...I turned steers in box just after you left and found them yesterday in box about two miles above mouth of trail canyon on opposite side of river. There is quite a basin and side canyon there and good feed so just left them there. Now am pirty sure these cattle will stay there for week or ten days and do allright.”

Doyle Lisonbee, whose father and son had at different times work for the Nutter Ranch in Nine Mile Canyon reported that small corrals were made out of timber and were assembled to

keep wild horses. About the corral at Nine Mile Canyon he said: “There was rock walls on both sides and they did build this fence to stop the cattle from going up. The gate was bob wired, but they had a rim of rocks and nobody could get through. (Personal interview, tape on file at Ashley NF)

A Ute tribal informant reported: The older Ute corrals where they kept wild horses were about one and one half meter tall, made out of brush gathered around the area where they wanted the corral.



View of corral

Newer corrals (early 20th century) were not so tall, about one meter or so. They were thick and horses could not see on the other side so they did not try to escape. They tried to build the corrals between two knolls (small hills) where they drove the horses and once the horses were in the enclosure they would close the gate. He knows a couple of older corrals north of Neola, in Tribal land. He described the use of drivelines and corrals to ambush wild horses in the early days of Ute population in Western Utah. The Ute corral we visited was probably built around the turn of the twentieth century. He remembers visiting the site in the 1960's when the gnarling cedar branches looked just as they do today, blanched by their exposure to the elements. The wood seems to have been cut by metal ax. The corral is located on top of a ridge South of John Starr Flat. Our informant explained that the wild horses were gathered from around the area. There are water holes in several small canyons that ran north/south where the horses could graze. The horses would be funneled through a series of low built brush stockades that formed a linear



fence while people were placed at strategic points where the horses could potentially ride outside their projected route. If they saw the horses were drifting away, they would stand up, waving and gesturing to frighten them and kept them on the right course. Once the horses reached the last mesa top they would be quite tired. On top of the mesa the cedar brush walls were built denser and the branches would connect more closely, forming a thick wall up to about six feet tall between the juniper trees along this corridor. As the horses took this track, the driveline that was following a rough north/south direction suddenly bent on a southeasterly course forming a blind curve. Within two hundred feet they reached the end of their run without being aware that the branches had encircled them. At this point the riders would quickly secure the corral and contain their horses. (Personal interview)



View of horse drive at John Starr Flat

John Davies, a cattle rancher and old resident of Duchesne stated that in earlier times the small corrals were used to hold wild horses, later they used them to hold the cattle they were vaccinating.

On the road north of Duchesne, toward Lapoint there is a small, round corral, about 15 ft. diameter by 6 and one half ft. tall, which is still used for training horses. (Walker, Rt 65 Box 730170).

Grant Ainge: Used to run cattle in the Jensen-Brush creek area. They took the cattle to the mountains in the spring, arranging with the Forest rangers when to move the cows to different allotments as the pastures ran low. The cows were left to drift and roam and the different owners helped each other check on the cows and bring salt. They usually did not have problems with Forest Service personnel, but he was aware of other ranchers who did not get along with rangers. They did not have corrals in Forest land and as long as the cows had sufficient pasture and salt



they did not stray. When he stayed in the mountains he took a camp trailer, but he ranched in more recent times. (Personal interview, tape on file at Ashley NF)

From Fred Pope's *Memories of Bill Barton in "The Partnership Mule"*: "That corral had been built in exactly the right place for corralling wild livestock. There was a big high ledge six feet away and the mountain climbed steeply more than half a mile. That ledge continued on up the canyon, down too, for that matter, and was used as a wing to help guide the wild ones through the gate and into the corral from either direction, up the canyon or down the canyon."

From interview with Mrs. Olsen (University of Utah Archeological Survey site 42DA38): Mrs. Olsen says her husband once had a sheep (later cattle) grazing permit in the High Uintas at or near the head of Burnt Fork in 1948. Her husband rode inadvertently into a standing deer trap corral. Mrs. Olsen talked to other people in the area who also saw the deer trap made of rocks/brush built against a ledge. (On file at Ashley NF)

Bill Barton wrote: "The following year I made another pasture for Mr. Nutter, ten miles from Willow Springs. It was called the Pine Spring Pasture and was built to hold the beef herd on the first night out from Willow Springs. It was in the edge of the Cedar Belt, and rim rocks made some of the fence. Then cedar posts and quaking aspen poles for some parts of it and also heavy net wire for others." (Bill Barton's *Autobiography*, p.33)

Jim Brown explained how they built corrals in the early days: "They dragged up logs, a lot of them were probably Indian corrals or outlaws or something and then the cattlemen improved them to keep the cattle or the horses in them. They used whatever was there. Some of them were built by dragging big trees and making a wing. A round corral was used for catching wild horses or working cattle through the area, maybe get a lot of branding". (Personal interview, tape on file)

From a 1976 *Deseret News* interview to Howard C. Price: "An intricate system of corrals simplifies the classification of the herd into desired groupings enabling the crew to work with a minimum of confusion." (*Rugged rancher survives time, sightings and EPA* by Arnold Irvine, *Deseret News*, May 8, 1976)

### **Where did they camp?**

Doyle Lisonbee: The Nutter cowboys camped wherever they stopped at the time. They also had small cabins scattered on the areas where they usually stopped with the cattle, where the cowboys could stay overnight. "They had cabins to stay in different places where they could go to watch cows and look around. They had one on top of Cottonwood; they had a big cabin up there. Then they had another ranch they called Range Creek."

The cabins did not belonged to anyone in particular but if people passing by were in need of shelter or a place to sleep they used them. (Personal interview, tape on file at Ashley NF)

On *Memoirs of Bill Barton*, Fred Pope wrote (*All Night Under a Dead Horse*): "There were six of us camped at Barton's cabin in Lake Canyon (near Avintiquin)". From "*Emergency Pants*": "It was near midnight when he passed the Minitium cabin near the mouth of East Fork... Inside the cabin there was a bed roll hanging from a wire tied around the ridge pole, and

there was a small sack of grub hanging nearby. The bunk was covered with a foot of dry hay for a mattress. Bill tied his horse to the corner of the cabin and fed him the hay off the bunk. Then, he built a big fire in the fireplace, and it was soon cozy in the little cabin. Other people used Barton's canyon while he was away". From "*Rats in the Sugar Sack*": "One time we were all away from Lake Canyon for more than a month. When we got back we soon found out someone had been there, eaten a meal, washed the dishes and put everything back in place except his chair."

From Preston Nutter's personal diary: "May 23, 1919: Went to Cedar Corral expecting to find cow outfit around there about dark. The men had moved and had to camp under cedar tree without bedding or anything to eat."

From Preston Nutter's journal: "10-5-1917?": Started cattle for Colton overtook them at Sand flat where we camped for the night. Turned horses in Al Thompson's field and occupied his bed. 10-6 Moved cattle on stopped for dinner up at the Squaw bridge east of Park moved on and camped at the big flat east of head of summit creek. Turned cattle loose. 10-7 Rounded up the cattle and moved on pretty early. Stopped at Willow Creek for noon. Moved on and camped at spring at Logies Ranch, turned cattle loose. 10-8 Rounded up and started on towards Colton. The work mules did not come in with the saddle horses. I went back and got the unclaimed horse and my saddle mule. Just then we ready to hitch them up the boys came in with the work mules. Stopped at Horse Creek for noon and the old smelter for the night."



Willow Spring cabin with corral around spring. Photo courtesy Jim Brown

George Maret: They had cabins out there to live wherever they moved their cattle to a different area. They had a cabin and a ranch in Range Creek, and another one on top of the mountain, I don't remember the name. It was just for Nutter's riders, his people. He one time when he moved out there controlled everything from Green River to the head of Strawberry Valley and as the story goes he ran about 25-30 thousand head of cattle. (Personal interview)

Bill Barton: "The elevation of the country for this work was from 8,000 to 9,000 feet, a beautiful area for summer work. There were many nice springs at which to pitch our camp while building this pasture." (Bill Barton's Biography)

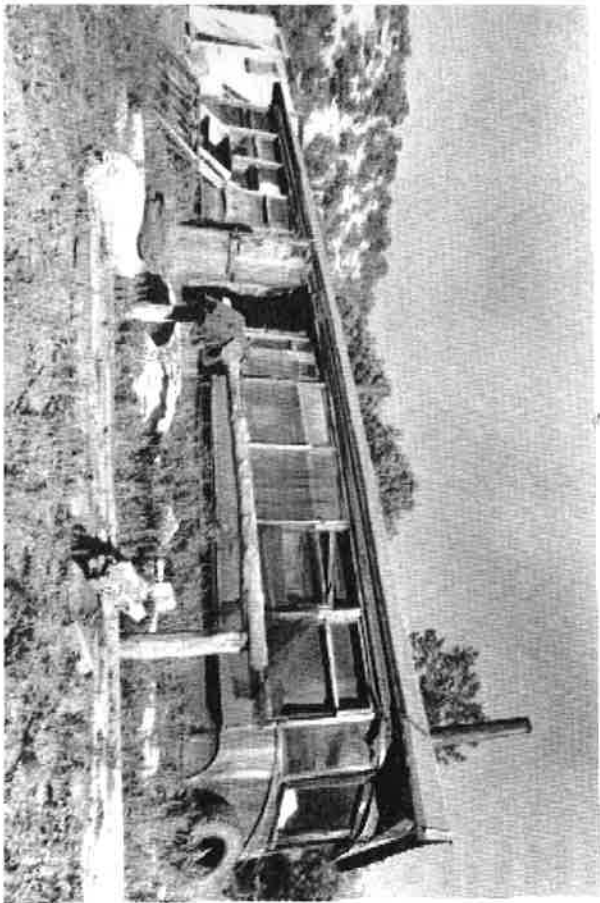
Jim Brown: "They camped out under the stars or under a ledge, there are places down along the river where they camped. There was a camp right on the confluence of Nine Miles and the Green River where I got a lot of pictures of different things like that.

He had cabins in Range Creek, in Nine Mile, Willow Springs, Pine Springs, Tidwell cabin, Rock house, Sisal's cabin." (Personal interview)

### **Where did they obtain supplies?**

From the diary of Preston Nutter it is evident that both him and his wife Katherine traveled considerably. Before they were married Nutter used to travel south to Arizona where he had a large number of cattle. He still had many friends on the Eastern states where he also sold and shipped his cattle. Price, Utah was the center of his activities, and later Salt Lake City, where his daughters attended school. No doubt they would purchase supplies and items of everyday use in Salt Lake City and Price. The Marriott Library in Salt Lake City contains the Preston Nutter document collection (150 boxes), including business records, financial files and many receipts for purchases of personal items.

Preston Nutter and later his son in law Howard C. Price were known for their frugality. They wouldn't allow their ranch hands to slaughter cows for their own consumption (although several sources informed that the cowhands did at times slaughter calves that were unmarked) Nutter supplied dry pork for his ranch crew. Nutter was very particular about letting people bring their cattle to graze on his property.



**Pine Springs shelter (photo courtesy J Brown)**



95 Outside rock house Cow Camp Cabin



95 Outside rock house Cow Camp Cabin

Top Photo: 95 Outside rock house Cow Camp Cabin  
Bottom Photo: 95 Outside rock house Cow Camp back  
Photos courtesy: Jim Brown

### **Nutter's Relations with Government Officials**

William Anderson reported a few problems associated with Nutter's cattle, grazing permits and salting issues. The first incident occurred in Colton, Utah, where Nutter was grazing his cattle on Forest Service land without a permit. Anderson reported: "I proceeded to tell him (Nutter) the rules and that he must abide by them, and further I would report him for trespass. He sat for a while, never changing the smile, and finally informed me that he would do as he pleased and rode away."

Another incident occurred in the summer of 1907. In this occasion Anderson was trying to notify Nutter he needed to salt the cows he was grazing on Forest Service land. His attempt to gain Nutter's attention failed and finally told him to go away. Anderson explained: "It made me so mad, I went to my saddle pockets, got tacks and U.S. property notices and with the butt of my gun proceeded to tack them up on the gates, corrals and fences, but no one seemed to pay any attention to me. At any rate, I notified Mr. Nutter, in the presence of witnesses, that he would be expected to furnish salt for his stock and not allow his men to in any way interfere with other people's stock that were permitted to run there in common with his." (William Anderson biography)

Jim Brown explains: "You got to realize Nutter was there before there was a Forest Service, or there was a BLM and after he helped originate the BLM eventually it all worked against him." On the salt issue, Brown reports that it took at least a full week for the salt wagon to reach all the grazing areas where the cattle was kept. Consequently, not much could be done about earlier deliveries, everything had been coordinated to achieve the best possible results.

Nutter was a savvy cattleman and he knew how to facilitate the movement of cattle to different ranges by rationing the amount of salt when it was time to move the herd. They would place the salt in the areas where the herd was going to be moved and it was easier for the herdsman to relocate them. Anderson was adamant about Nutter's seemingly carelessness in providing salt for his herd, but it was all part of Nutter's well calculated strategy.

Bill Barton asserted: "The hauling of salt for a big herd of cattle is quite a job, as it takes about five pounds per head for the summer season. On the winter range the salt has to be scattered with pack mule, so that means trips to different parts of the range and usually about 200 pounds to each pack and each pack distributed in about 50 pounds to each place. At many places, which are called salt licks, salt is placed year after year and when winter's snows begin to come, the chunks of salt are removed from the salt licks on the summer range and stored away in a cabin at the Willow Springs Camp."

### **Artifacts Discarded on the Field**

#### **Conclusion:**

Preston Nutter ran a vast operation. In Bill Barton's own words: "To give a reader a better idea of the magnitude of the country where these cattle ranged: it was 30 miles from the Willow



Springs cow camp of Nutter's to Green River at the mouth of Nine Mile and if one followed around the Jack Creek benches it was nearer 50 miles and there were 3 different mesas like this one I have just described, and the East side of the Big Beef pasture only required a little timber work to make it impossible for cattle to climb out through this timbered belt along this deep canyon.”

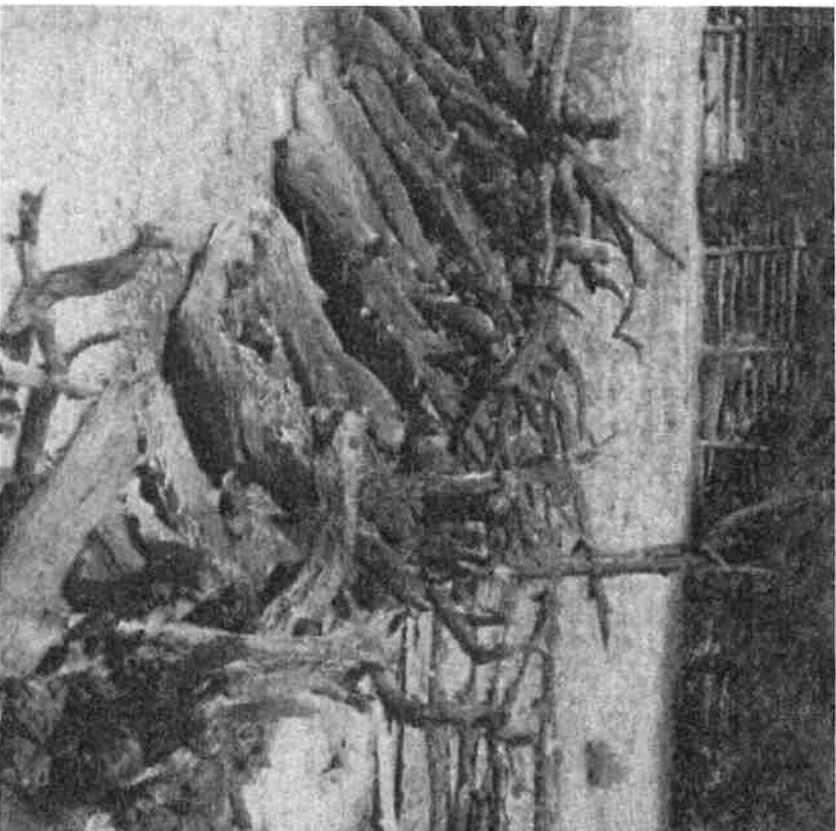
- The area covered by Nutter's operation was vast.
- Cabins were built at strategic locations, but cowboys would camp outdoors when necessary.
- Historical artifacts found on Nutter's property or on the land he leased most likely belonged to his cowboys.
- There were several other outfits running cattle and sheep around his property, hence, artifacts found outside Nutter's property lines probable belonged to other group.

#### **Corrals or other structures.**

Utes built corrals on mesa tops to ambush wild horses. Some of these corrals still remain, scattered on the vastness of the basin. There is a clear difference between Ute corrals and those built by cowboys, although in some cases, cowboys would utilize timber from older structures that were nearby.



Typical Ute wild horse corral wall



**Background: Corrals at Nine Mile Canyon**

**Foreground: Corral made with timber collected on site.**

**Photo courtesy Jim Brown**

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