

The Dallas Morning News

State

Old-fashioned cattle thief looks to ride out term on house arrest because of health

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Published: 04 March 2010 02:42 AM

Updated: 26 November 2010 03:05 PM

QUANAHA, Texas - Born 100 years too late, Roddy Dean Pippin rode his horse down the main drag, doing his best John Wayne. He still fit the part of the cowboy in this tract of Texas near the Red River, with its church-steepled skyline and landscape of mesquite trees and tumbleweeds.

The town of 2,500 is the kind of place where time moves at a stutter step and parts of the Old West never faded away.

Just like in the Westerns he grew up watching, there was a jail cell waiting for him.

That was in November, and Pippin's life is still in legal limbo, as a string of appeals for mercy because of his declining health have been rejected by judges and politicians. This despite a music video pleading his case, a Facebook page, a Twitter account.

He's already served half of the eight years he was sentenced to for rustling. A stint on house arrest, given for medical reasons, expired in November. So, he's in prison while his attorneys continue their appeals.

A skinny diabetic raised on Louis L'Amour novels and Tinseltown bravado, Pippin dressed like Roy Rogers at school and was eager to prove to classmates he was just as tough as they were.

Pippin, now 26, took the straight path for a little while, dabbling in college and dreaming of writing Westerns.

But, inspired by tales of cattle rustlers from decades past, he blazed a trail across Oklahoma and Texas, stealing \$100,000 in livestock, saddles and "anything that wasn't tied down," recalled District Attorney John Staley Heatly.

Pippin's gang of nine nabbed at least 125 head of cattle during an 18-month spree.

He dubbed himself the "Robin Hood of Rustlers." Most of his victims in this part of the country - where a few cows could be worth a mortgage payment - were far from wealthy.

Pippin picked off cattle in small batches, Heatly said, snatching five or six at a time and netting a few hundred dollars with each crime. By 2004, he was looking for a final, big score: a truck hauling dozens of steers.

But the law caught up with Pippin in a stretch of West Texas where cattle is king and old ways of punishing rustlers die hard.

"One hundred years ago, he would have been hung in the county square," said rancher Wayne Walker, 56.

In this part of the country, views of cattle rustlers have changed little since the 1800s.

And in rough economic times, cattle thefts are on the rise. In Texas, where Pippin did most of his stealing, the number of livestock reported missing or

stolen in 2007 was 2,400. In 2008, it more than doubled to 6,404. The Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association estimates similar figures for 2009.

"It's always been a problem," said association spokeswoman Carmen Fenton. "To us, a thief is a thief, and if you steal the animal, we want you to do the time."

Say you run 100 head of cattle; you might have a gross income of \$50,000. That's before the bills for diesel fuel, feed and fence repairs.

"There are a lot a people who have a little land who make some money running cattle," said Heatly, the district attorney. "That's why people around here look at [rustling] as such an egregious offense. It's kind of like going to the bank and draining several different accounts."

For his crimes, Pippin got four consecutive two-year sentences. Others in his gang got lighter sentences. Pippin's supporters say authorities are trying to make an example of him.

There is the diabetes, too. Pippin requires six or more insulin injections a day and nearly around-the-clock care. His attorneys have asked that he serve the rest of his time under house arrest, but those appeals have been tossed out.

"My eyesight is starting to go," Pippin said recently. "I can't feel my feet, my lower extremities. My sugar is so high my body is shutting down."

Fearing the worst, one wealthy friend of Pippin's, Robert McCausland, offered to pay restitution on what was stolen, but the ranchers flatly rejected the proposal.

"I think they've gone after Roddy because he was the youngest of the group and he was willing to take the blame," McCausland said.

Indeed, after he was caught, Pippin showed authorities where he'd snatched cattle. His friends say that cost him. Pippin said he's remorseful and just wants to get out of jail in one piece.

"This is the last thing I would want to be famous for," he said. "I'd like to be able to get out of here and still be able to see the stirrup I put my boot in."

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