

# TEXAS ROADKILL

---

Tom Wilks

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2003 by Tom Wilks  
All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), except brief quotations used in connection with reviews, written specifically for inclusion in a magazine or newspaper, without prior written permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN: 1-59196-219-6

## Acknowledgements

---

I offer my sincerest thanks and gratitude to those that gave freely of their time and expertise to provide vital information on wildlife rehabilitation, ranching, trucking, criminal investigation, forensic science, veterinary medicine, football, and Texas barbecue. Without your help this book could not have been written: Jack Ryan, Lt. David Myers-Webster Police Department, Robert Houck, Larry Bellmyer, Concepcion Comacho, Ted Heinrich, Robert Williamson, Bobby Petty, Joanna Wactor, Sharon Schmalz, Deana Roberts-DVM, the *Atascosa County Cattlemen's Association*, and Cathy Clark, Executive Secretary, *Texas Animal Control Association*.

And a special thanks to my wife Peggy for her assistance in research that contributed immensely to the successful completion of this book.

—Tom Wilks



# Chapter One

Leonard Sowder reached for the thermos and tried to blink himself awake. Remembering that he had drunk the last of his coffee before pulling off the interstate fifteen miles back, he put the thermos back down and gripped the wheel firmly with both hands, determined to get himself and his eighteen-wheeler home safely. *I should have left El Paso earlier*, he thought. The Kenworth's dual chrome exhausts gleamed brightly in the moonlight as it rumbled eastward through the still August night.

No other traffic traveled this stretch of Ranch Road 486 at this late hour—which was lucky for Leonard. The sudden change from the soothing hum of eighteen tires rolling over smooth blacktop to scattered gravel peppering the undercarriage jolted him awake. Leonard slowed the big-rig as he eased it from the shoulder back onto the road. The truck had drifted completely across the opposite lane as Leonard succumbed to the pleasant allure of slumber that washed over him like warm spring rain. “Man...that was close!” he said aloud. He twisted the air-conditioner knob to full cold then inserted a cassette into the tape player and turned up the volume. *Just a few more miles...I can make it now, no sweat.*

A moment later he fought again to ward off persistent nodding. He shook his head vigorously and forced his eyelids open. As the highway sank into the shallow valley he saw the distinct but sparse lights of the small sleeping town. *I'm almost home...another couple of miles.* He stared at the road, trance-like, about to drift back to sleep when something on the road caught his eye—just within the far limits of his headlights. *A possum!* Leonard's senses sharpened as he sat erect focusing on the waddling marsupial. *It's always worked before*, he thought, recalling past wakeup tricks on the road. Adrenalin surged through his body as he pressed hard on the accelerator and aimed down the Kenworth's long flat hood.

The possum, startled by the brilliant flood of light, scurried toward the safety of darkness just off the road. Leonard calculated the angle he needed to intersect the possum's retreat then tugged the steering wheel to the right. His eyes burned into his target. "You're mine," he said, his lips curving into a tight smirk.

Emerging from her den an hour earlier, the possum had been foraging without much success until she caught the scent of a possible meal on the highway. Hunger had prompted her to leave the security of the grassy field to investigate the scant remains—already picked over by buzzards the previous day. She peered timorously toward the center of the road, considering the dangers of the open expanse. Two nights ago an owl had swooped silently from the darkness and snagged one of her young. Now, with only four offspring left, she weighed the risks against obtaining life-sustaining nourishment that both she and her young needed to survive.

She stood motionless, surveying the moonlit roadway, her paper-thin ears swiveling back and forth. She heard chirping crickets—which she would investigate later—and a distant, resonant droning wafting through the valley and down the highway. They were familiar sounds—not predators, nor anything else she associated with a threat. Assured that all her young were clinging tightly to the grizzled fur on her back, she hurried toward the enticing aroma in the middle of the highway.

She approached the miniscule bit of carrion warily, sniffed and listened one more time then ate the meager scraps. As she finished, a fusion of blinding light and a thunderous roar filled the air. Terror-stricken, she made a panicked dash to escape. The four tiny siblings instinctively tightened their grips and hunkered down on her back.

As the truck sped past the spot where the possum had reached the shoulder, Leonard glanced at his right-side rearview mirror. He saw only darkness behind him. *Must've missed*, he thought dejectedly. *But I'm wide-awake!* A smug grin crossed his face. *I've made it!*

Leonard guided his truck carefully between the two enormous oaks just ahead. The trees had been planted, one on each side of the road, by the town's founder in 1880. Their massive branches now met over the narrow highway creating a thick green canopy. They marked the western city limits of Bacon Banks, Texas. The truck's twin exhaust stacks brushed the oaks' leaves as it barreled along under their arched branches.

Two of the young possums had tumbled free at the savage impact that had spun their mother into the brush. The other two still clung to her back, unscathed.

A trickle of blood oozed from the mother's mouth and one ear. She lay on her side, dazed and gasping for air. She struggled to roll over and get to her feet, but no part of her body would respond. She strained to look around in a desperate attempt to locate her young. Driven by intense primordial instinct she continued her efforts to rise and protect her babies. Finally her labored breathing slowed...then stopped. Her glazed eyes reflected the half moon high overhead.

Soon, the two dislodged babies found their mother and joined the other two still frozen in fear clinging to her back. The four siblings peered wide-eyed into the darkness, their pink noses twitching nervously. After a long while one baby climbed down and wriggled into his mother's pouch. Feeling secure, he drifted off to sleep. The others nuzzled their mother in desperation. There was no response. Confused and exhausted they too fell asleep. Their fate now lay with whatever the long night might bring.

Brenda Shaw hurried down the hallway hoping to get to her classroom before the first-period bell rang. She always stressed punctuality to her students, and she didn't want to be embarrassed on this second day of school. The bell clanged the start of the school day just before she thrust open the classroom door—and spilled the contents of the manila folder she carried. Twenty-one pairs of eyes stared silently scrutinizing her predicament. She looked down at the papers on the floor, then

at the students. Some of them drummed their fingers on their desks. Others sat with their arms crossed. All glared in mock sternness and seemed to be awaiting an explanation. She had made it clear just the day before—the first day of the semester—that tardiness would not be tolerated unless one had a very good excuse.

“I overslept,” she said, remembering that, in her customary first-day orientation, she also stressed honesty. “It’s not a good excuse and I’ll put myself on today’s detention list.”

The students erupted in laughter. Coy Hudson stood up shaking his finger “Well don’t let it happen again!”

Brenda held up both hands as though surrendering. “I won’t! I won’t!” She laughed then stooped down to retrieve her scattered papers.

“No, allow me, Miss Shaw,” Coy said as he walked to the front of the room. “You go sit down.”

“Why that is so kind of you, Coy. But it won’t help your grade,” she kidded.

After Coy picked up the papers he placed them on Miss Shaw’s desk and returned to his seat.

Brenda Shaw held the stack of papers up in front of her. “These are the responses that you all wrote yesterday about why you took this class and what you expect to get out of it. I was impressed by the comments—at least most of them. I know that about half of you are seniors this year and have been putting off taking biology until you absolutely had to. But that’s all right. Biology isn’t everyone’s cup of tea, and I will make your time spent in my class as interesting as possible and, hopefully, you will develop a new appreciation for biology—the science of *life*.”

“Sounds good to me,” Coy responded.

“Me too,” others chimed.

Brenda smiled approvingly. “Well, I always give a grade of 100 on this first assignment. So as of right now everyone of you begins this class with an A+.”

The class applauded themselves. Some reached across the aisle and patted each other on the back.

During roll call, only one student was absent. “Has anyone seen Howie? Oh there you are!” Brenda said as Howard Carson entered the room.

“Sorry, Miss Shaw.” Howie carried a brown paper bag quickly to his teacher’s desk then opened it for her to see inside. “I found them by the highway on the way to school.”

Brenda gazed at the four small fuzzy possums cowering in the bottom of the bag. “Aw, they’re so cute.” At that, many of the students rushed up to see what was in the paper bag.

“I didn’t have anything to put them in,” Howie said, “so I took the stuff out of my lunch bag.”

“Where’s your lunch?”

“It’s on the seat of my pickup. It’ll be OK ’til lunch time.”

“Where exactly did you find them,” Miss Shaw asked.

“Near the twin oaks. I saw one of them about to cross the road, so I stopped and got it then I looked around for the mother.”

“Did you find her?”

“Yes...she was dead, laying in the weeds near the road.”

Brenda peered solemnly at the orphans. “Road kill?” she asked, clenching her teeth.

“Yes ma’am, it looked that way.”

“Did you check her pouch?”

“Yes. There was one in there. And two more hanging onto her. I looked all around the area—that’s why I’m late. Anyway, I think this is all of them.”

Brenda examined each possum. “They seem to be in pretty good shape...no apparent injuries. But they’re probably dehydrated. Also, we need to keep them warm. Howie, would you go out to my car and bring me that large Tupperware container—you know the one. And bring that little blue blanket. I’ll mix up some Pedialyte. It’s in the kit in the trunk. I’ll need the small bottle with the special nipple...”

“Yes ma’am. I know,” Howie interrupted. “Let me have your car keys.”

A few minutes later Howie returned with the Tupperware container filled with the other items. Roy Aims, principal of Bacon Banks High School, followed Howie down the hall and into the classroom.

“What’s going on here?” he asked, looking directly at Miss Shaw. The students made way as Mr. Aims entered.

“Oh! Mr. Aims...it’s just some baby orphaned possums. I’m...”

“Step outside please,” Mr. Aims demanded. Brenda followed him out to the hall.

“I’ve asked you before not to practice your...your *hobby* in the classroom, Miss Shaw.”

“It’s *not* a hobby. You *know* I’m a state certified wildlife rehabilitator.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter. I don’t want you bringing your extracurricular activities into the school. And I don’t want the students exposed to whatever diseases those rodents might be carrying.”

“They’re not rodents, Mr. Aims. They’re *marsupials*. One of my students found them this morning and brought them in...to save their lives.”

“Nevertheless, I want them out of here. They’re wild and they’re not on the approved list of animal exhibits for the classroom.”

“I don’t have a class second period. I’ll take them home then.”

“OK, good. You’ve got to understand my position here. I’m ultimately responsible for the safety and well-being of all students and faculty at Bacon Banks.”

Brenda walked back into the classroom and shut the door. “Let’s everyone sit down now and read the first eighteen pages of Section One, *The Unity and Diversity of Life*. We’ll have an oral quiz this Friday.” She began mixing distilled water with the Pedialyte.

“Anything else I can do?” Howie asked.

“No, thank you, Howie. I can handle it from here.” Brenda cradled one of the possums, belly down, and pressed the bottle to its mouth. The possum latched onto the nipple and suckled greedily, emptying the bottle.

Leonard awoke from a sound sleep and glanced at the clock on the nightstand. He groaned and reached for the phone. He called the American Western Savings and Loan.

The receptionist, Colleen Ramsey, answered, “American Western. How may I help you?”

“Hi, Babe. It’s me.”

“Oh hi, Lennie! How was your run?”

“Great—picked up an additional load in Phoenix on the way back and unloaded at El Paso.”

“So what are you going to do with all that extra money?” Colleen asked.

“Well, you’ll see. Can you take a late lunch? I got in kinda late last night and I just woke up.”

“Sure. How ’bout one o’clock?”

“See ya then. Love ya.”

“Love you too, Lennie.”

Leonard showered and shaved quickly. As he combed his sandy-brown hair he paused and looked closer into the mirror. His face seemed a little harder—older than it should be—for a man who just turned thirty. But he stepped back and smiled. His six-foot frame still carried the same weight and tone as it did during his high school football days. He patted his tightened abdomen and decided all the exercise was worth it after all.

He pulled on a pair of freshly pressed Wrangler’s before donning his ostrich skin boots. After tucking in his shirt he buckled his silver-tipped belt. A bolo tie with a silver longhorn keeper completed the ensemble. He drank a cup of coffee, grabbed his Resistol hat, then stepped out onto the porch of his mobile home and stood admiring the new art work on the side of his Kenworth’s sleeper compartment. It depicted a buxom beauty with angelic features and flowing auburn hair. She was adorned only by sheer gossamer that streamed from her ample breasts to her bare hips. Her seductive blue eyes seemed to yearn for attention. Beneath the figure was printed: *The Colleen Express*. “She’ll love it!” he whispered to himself.

Leonard surveyed the rest of his half-acre, admiring it as if it was a 10,000-acre spread. The storage building and workshop connected by a decorative brick sidewalk to the mobile home’s back porch were among the improvements he had built himself. His Kenworth sat on a long concrete pad that merged into the driveway next to the mobile home. A year ago he had pleaded with rancher Lyle Hudson to sell him this small plot on the eastern outskirts of Bacon Banks.

Lyle Hudson didn’t want to relinquish any part of the Triple H Ranch. He felt he’d be giving up part of his family’s hard-won heritage. But Leonard was a favorite of his many Bacon

Banks' friends. Leonard was like a big brother to Lyle's son, Coy. Coy, now the star high school quarterback, owed much of his prowess on the football field to Leonard's unofficial coaching and encouragement beginning when Coy was only six. A dozen years before, Leonard led the Bacon Banks Javelinas to their first-ever state championship. He still enjoyed "hero" status, or, to some, "legendary" status with the townspeople. Now, at the beginning of his senior year, Coy Hudson stood poised to help capture the state title once again.

Leonard stepped down off the porch and placed the lawn sprinkler in the center of the front yard. Recent drought had yellowed everyone's lawn in this part of Texas, but Leonard was determined to keep his grass thick and green—unless his water well went dry.

Across the highway a meadowlark sang atop a cedar fence post, its yellow breast heaving with each melodious whistle. A mockingbird, perched above the barbed wire fence on a telephone pole, trilled its repertoire of other birds' songs, competing with the meadowlark.

Leonard unhitched the trailer then drove the Kenworth cab onto the highway and headed towards town, the 600 horsepower diesel purring smoothly. He turned on the air conditioner to counter the soaring August heat. The highway curved and dipped through the San Gabriel River Valley. Triple H ranchland reached several miles on both sides of the road all the way to the city limits. The usually verdant pastures were now showing the effects of the drought. Withering stands of live oaks stood as sentinels in a futile effort to block further advancement of the ubiquitous mesquite invasion. Prickly pear cactus commingled with hardy Texas Thistle and White Horse Nettle along the fence line—offering some color to the otherwise brown landscape.

Leonard reached the American Western building and stopped directly in front of the entrance, the truck's engine idling in a low rumble. A short blast on the air horn signaled his arrival.

Colleen smiled and rushed outside. Her jaw dropped and she covered her mouth with both hands. The life-size "Colleen" painted on the truck caused her face to turn crimson.

“What have you done!” she shrieked, her embarrassment growing as onlookers gathered.

Leonard hopped down from the cab and draped his arm over Colleen’s shoulders. “It’s *you*, Babe! I had it done in El Paso. This guy down there is great with an airbrush. Just give him a photo of a person and he can paint their identical twin.”

Colleen stepped closer to the truck. “It looks exactly like me...at least the face. But the rest...the body...”

“Well, I had to describe *that* to the artist. He only had your portrait to go by. Sooo, what do you think?”

“I think you’re crazy, Leonard Sowder. But I love you just the same.”

“I had it painted on both sides. *The Colleen Express* will be seen coming and going from Texas to California!”

Colleen stepped back and cocked her head sideways. “I kinda like it. Do you *really* think I look like that...the body I mean?”

“Of course. Sheer perfection.”

Colleen studied the painting for a few more seconds then asked, frowning, “But how much did this cost, Lennie?”

“If I told you, you’d just love me that much more. But, I *did* have enough left over for this.” He placed the small black velvet box into her hand.

She opened it slowly, trembling.

“Chief, come take a look at this,” Patrol Officer Colby Creech shouted. He had been watching from the police department’s second-floor window directly across the street from the savings and loan building since hearing the air horn a few minutes earlier.

Police Chief Warren Dulin laid down his apple and his two-bladed Uncle Henry then rose from his desk and walked over to take a look. He saw Colleen hold her left hand up, then embrace and kiss Leonard. The small sidewalk crowd began applauding.

“Well I’ll be...looks like Lennie finally popped the question,” Chief Dulin said.

“How long have they been going together?” Colby asked.

Chief Dulin smoothed his full gray mustache. “Let’s see...’bout four years now.”

“What do you think of the new paint job?”

The chief chuckled. “Well, it’ll raise a few eyebrows in this town. But everybody knows Lennie. He’s always been a little wild...flamboyant.”

Colby turned to the chief. “Why does Lennie drive a truck? I mean, you’d think he’d be playing pro football—from all the stories I’ve heard about him since I’ve been here.”

“Yes, that’s what everyone expected. But Lennie always wanted to drive a big-rig...just like his daddy. Even after his daddy died. Lennie was only fourteen then. His daddy never got to see him play in high school.”

“How’d he die?”

“Truck wreck...went off a mountain road in Colorado.”

“So, Lennie never played in college?”

“College? Naw, he went to Houston to a truck driving school...drove for several companies there until he was able to buy his own rig and become an independent.”

Chief Dulin sat back down at his desk and began peeling his apple. He rotated the apple while holding it against the blade of the pocketknife. The peeling came off in one continuous spiral. He set the peeling on a napkin then began cutting wedges off the denuded apple and eating them.

Colby, bemused by the chief’s meticulous stripping of the apple, asked, “What’re you doing, Chief?”

Chief Dulin glanced up at Colby. “Cholesterol problem...my wife says apples can help lower it. I eat two a day now.”

Colby laughed. “No, I mean peel it like that before you eat it...anyway I believe the peeling is what is supposed to lower the cholesterol.”

“You’re right—and I’ll eat it in a minute.”

“So you’re going to eat the peeling, but you cut it off. Why not just eat the apple unpeeled?”

Chief Dulin swallowed and leaned back in his chair. “Son, do you remember when you were a kid...something that brings back good memories?”

“Hmmm...you mean like a first date, or kiss?”

“No, I mean before that. Before your life got complicated—by responsibilities and all that.”

“You mean *childhood*? I’d have to think about it.”

“Well, when you get older...around my age, you *will* start to think about those things. Anyway, when I was a kid my mama

would peel an apple—with one of those old machines that you stuck an apple on and turned the crank. It peeled them perfectly. Anyway, she'd sit there with me and we'd share that apple. We didn't eat the peeling though.”

The chief seemed to gaze back in time. “You know, I didn't think much about the past until after Mama died. Now I recall all sorts of things...little things that I thought I'd forgotten.”

Colby tried to visualize an “apple peeling machine” then put his hat on as Chief Dulin picked up the peeling and began eating it. “Guess I better get back out on the road, Chief. I'll see you later.”

“OK, Colby.”

Coach Bill Grimes beamed with pride at the end of the team's third day of practice. He called the team to the center of the field. He stood between quarterback Coy Hudson and wide receiver Cisco Alvarado. “We came close last year...*real* close. I know...I think we *all* know the Javelinas are back! I said it last year, and I'll say it again now. This is the best team I've coached—*ever*. We're going to take the state title. It's ours. Don't forget that. We're doing it for the school, the town—and most importantly—for ourselves. Believe me, you'll remember and cherish this for the rest of your lives. But we have to take it one step at a time. Right now I want you to focus on one thing: That's beating Cedarville Friday night! Now hit the showers.”

Coy hooked an arm around Cisco's neck. “Come on, let's get out of our gear and pump some iron before we shower.”

“Are you *crazy*? I'm beat. You know how many sprints I did today, trying to catch your wobbly passes?”

“You caught everyone of them. They were perfect. I put them all right on your numbers...made it easy for you,” Coy boasted.

Cisco laughed. “I know. But all you have to do is stand there 'til I get downfield. I'm running like a jackrabbit all afternoon while you just traipse around like a ballerina. Anyway, I might lose some speed if I bulk up by weight lifting.”

“You need to bulk up. You let that skinny body get hit by the big boys when we're playing for A&M next year, you'll wish you had more meat on those bones.”

Cisco knew Coy was right. *Maybe I should add a few pounds...lean pounds. Might add some power to my speed.*

“OK. Let’s do it, but just a short workout tonight. I don’t want to strain something before our first game.”

“Great. I’ll race you to the field house!”

Cisco grinned. “I could give you a fifty-yard head start and still beat you.”

Both Coy and Cisco looked to the school’s parking lot as Cisco’s sister drove up, honking the horn.

“Hey, there’s Angela, here to pick me up. Saved by the bell...er, horn I mean,” Cisco said, grinning as he broke towards the parking lot.

“Not so fast, *Lazy Boy!*” Coy dashed after him, catching up just as they arrived at the car.

Angela smiled impishly, one eyebrow cocked. “Looks like Coach Grimes didn’t work you guys hard enough today—all that energy left over.”

“You’re right!” Coy agreed. “That’s why we’re going to the weight room.”

Angela turned to her brother. “How long will you be?”

Coy answered for him, “Not too long, but I’ll take Cisco home...so you don’t have to wait around.”

“Yeah, go ahead Angela. Tell Mom I’ll be there in a little while.”

As Angela started the car Coy leaned into the window. “Wait, Angie. We *are* all set for Saturday night—to celebrate our first win of the season—aren’t we?”

“Yes, but remember, if the Javelinas don’t win Friday night—no date Saturday night!”

Coy grabbed Cisco and pulled him to the open car window. “With me and your big brother on the field, Cedarville doesn’t stand a chance! So be ready at eight o’clock.”

Angela backed out shaking her head in feigned disgust, waving as she drove away.

Coy and Cisco walked out into the clear fresh evening air after their weight lifting session. Coy inhaled deeply and glanced up at the first stars appearing overhead. “I feel great. How about you?”

Cisco thrust his shoulders back and rotated his arms. “Pretty good right now...but ask me again tomorrow.”

They got into Coy’s new GMC Sierra pickup and headed out of town on Ranch Road 486 for the two-mile drive to Cisco’s house, the pickup’s radio tuned to an Austin Country-Western station.

The western horizon showed only a thin ribbon of fading red as the sweltering day ended. Dusk brought a cooling breeze just as it had through all the cloudless days of the preceding three months.

As Coy approached the twin oaks a cottontail hopped onto the highway and began to cross. Coy floored the accelerator and swerved abruptly towards it. The rabbit skittered to the other side of the road and into the brush in a blurred streak. Coy almost lost control when the pickup skidded on the gravel shoulder. He quickly steered back onto the road, just missing one of the big oak trees.

“What are you doing!” Cisco shouted.

Coy laughed. “Just having a little fun.”

“But you tried to hit that rabbit. Why did you do that?”

“Relax, Cisco. I just scared him. He got away. If I wanted to hit him, I’d have *hit* him.”

Cisco studied his friend contemptuously for a long silent moment.

Coy glanced over and tapped Cisco’s shoulder with the back of his hand. “Don’t look so serious. It was just a rabbit.”

“I know, but *why*? What’s the point in trying to run over a little animal?”

Coy’s grin faded. He stared into the windshield and cleared his throat. “An *edge*, Man. You’ve got to keep an edge...to stay sharp, competitive, focused.”

Cisco’s head snapped around toward Coy. “*What* are you talking about? What does running down a rabbit have to do with...?”

Coy cut him off. “You don’t understand, do you?”

“I guess not. Clue me in,” Cisco replied dryly.

“Control...coordination, attitude, mental toughness. You need all that to excel at most everything you do...to compete in life, to face challenges. Right now, I’m honing my skills for the playing field. That’s what it takes to win...win consistently, not

just football but in *everything*. That rabbit was a challenge to my reflexes and my coordination. When I see an opportunity to test—or improve my abilities—I go for it! You may have your own philosophy—I don't know—but I do what works for me.”

Cisco sat quietly, uneasy about what he just heard from his best friend. He had always known that Coy was a fierce competitor in his every endeavor, but he had never witnessed this seemingly ruthless trait before.

Coy rolled to a stop in front of Cisco's house. “You and Teresa meeting Angela and me at your mother's restaurant Saturday night?”

“Yes, we'll be there. Mom is saving us a table. You know how crowded it gets on Saturday night.”

“Great! I'll see you tomorrow at school.”

“OK, Coy...one other thing though. Don't *ever* try to run over an animal if Angela is with you. She'd never go out with you again. She doesn't go for any kind of violence.”

“I know, I know. She's a very *sensitive* girl. But thanks for the advice.”

Coy cracked a smile as he backed down the driveway. He pulled out onto the highway and headed back towards Bacon Banks and the Triple H on the opposite side of town.

## Chapter Two

Dusty pickup trucks encircled Esperanza's Cafe. Area ranchers gathered there early every weekday morning for breakfast, coffee and, most importantly, to discuss the state of affairs. Esperanza Alvarado always made sure that several tables were placed together prior to opening each day—with enough chairs for the dozen ranchers that attended this traditional meeting.

The two cooks moved around the kitchen in choreographed precision—one spooning huge dollops of buttermilk biscuit mix onto a greased baking sheet, while the other laid thick-sliced bacon strips and sausage patties onto the grill. Cream gravy simmered on the stove next to a pan of steaming hominy grits. A basket of fresh eggs awaited their turn—to be cracked, then fried or scrambled just before the biscuits were removed from the oven so they would be served together savory and hot. Esperanza herself prepared huevos revueltos—scrambled eggs with tomatoes, green peppers, onions and chili powder, and breakfast quesadillas—scrambled eggs, bacon, cheese and picante sauce sandwiched between two tortillas. Those that ordered either of these were convinced that only Esperanza had the culinary skills to properly blend and cook the ingredients to their flavorful perfection.

Each rancher finished a cup of stout coffee just before the first batch of golden biscuits was removed from the oven. Some lit up a Winston or a Marlboro before their coffee cups were refilled. As the breakfast platters were delivered, mixed aromas of biscuits, bacon, eggs, coffee and tobacco smoke permeated the restaurant's atmosphere.

Esperanza allowed smoking only during the first round of breakfasts each morning. Her place was not large enough to properly accommodate a *Smoking* and a *Non-smoking* section. Everyone knew that Esperanza's Cafe belonged to the ranchers from seven to eight o'clock each weekday morning. A few

non-smokers, addicted to Esperanza's elegant cuisine, were also regulars at this early hour.

"Good morning everyone! *Como esta?*" Esperanza said as she placed Jake's platter of quesadillas in front of him.

"Great! *Buenas dias!*" Jake replied in unison with the others.

"Your son gonna get us some touchdowns tonight?" Jake added.

"If Coy can get the ball to him," she kidded, nudging Lyle Hudson with her elbow.

Lyle shot back, grinning, "Oh he'll get the ball to him. Question is, will Cisco be able to hang on to those bullets he'll be throwing?"

Esperanza's dimples and laugh lines deepened as her permanent smile widened. She waved him off and turned to go back into the kitchen. "I'll see you all at the game tonight. We'll see what happens."

Bill Lasater was the last to arrive on this day. He placed his hat on the deer-antler hat rack along with all the others then slid into his chair at the table. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead.

"Running a little late, Bill?" Lyle asked.

"Yeah...one of my bulls—the braymer—went through the fence again. It took me and a couple of my hands half an hour to get him corralled."

"That bull's gonna kill you one of these days. Why don't you sell him?"

"I still need him for my cross-breeding. He's improved my stock a considerable bit over the years."

Jake Cameron sat across the table from Bill. "Don't know why you're pursuin' any kind of breedin' program now. With this drought, cattle's becomin' a liability. The more cows you have, the bigger your problems—waterin' and feedin' em."

The others nodded in agreement.

"How 'bout you, Lyle...what's your plan if this keeps up?"

Everyone looked down the table, interested, as always, in what Lyle Hudson had to say. The Triple H was the largest ranch in the area—and the best managed in most people's minds. The original Austin colony land grant of one square league—4,428 acres—had remained in the Hudson family since 1824. Lyle's ancestors had survived battles with Comanches, withstood fierce Texas floods, heat and droughts,