While some Americans were watching reruns of *Lonesome Dove* and remembering Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving, Australian drovers were moving 18,000 head of Brahman cattle 2,500 kilometers to make trail drive history in the 21st century.

All we can say for sure is that in 2013-14 this was the largest trail drive in Australian history, but no one can remember when more cattle were moved over a greater distance any place in the world. It would be analogous to walking 18,000 cows 1,553 miles from San Antonio, Texas, to Winnipeg, Canada, on horseback through six states and one Canadian province in nine months. But how would an American cowboy get past the fences?

Tom Brinkworth didn’t set out to break records, but he was trying to move $8 million worth of stock from his point of purchase to his 35,000-hectare property (86,487 acres) near Hay, New South Wales. Brinkworth is an Australian farmer known as a mover and a shaker in the agriculture sector. In Australia, “farmer” is an encompassing term for anyone who uses the land to produce goods or livestock. In Texas, we would call him a cattle baron.

Australia’s largest cattle business was carrying too many cattle in the drought stricken Northern Territory in 2013 and couldn’t sell or feed them through to the wet season. Brinkworth purchased them for $400 each, making it the biggest livestock sale conducted in Australia’s history between a single buyer and a single seller. The purchase came in the midst of a severe drought when North Australian farmers were looking for every opportunity to offload stock. Prices hit rock bottom. For some it was cheaper to shoot cattle than pay to cart them to a sale where they would fetch less than the cost of freight.

After the sale, Brinkworth’s challenge was how to move such a large mob (herd) of mostly 8-month to 2-year-old breeding heifers. He decided to follow in the footsteps of Australian cattle king Sidney Kidman (1857-1935), the first landowner in the country to move large numbers of cattle long distances by building a vast network of connected stations (ranches).
TRAVELLING STOCK ROUTES

Today Australia has what is known as Travelling Stock Routes (TSR), authorized thoroughfares for farmers to walk domestic livestock from one location to another. The TSRs are known collectively as “The Long Paddock.” They exist throughout the nation and consume 7.9 million acres with no fence or obstruction except the cars and trucks that share the rural roads.

These established routes were recognized and dedicated as roads between the 1860s and 1890s. A TSR is easily distinguished from an ordinary country road by the fact that the grassy areas on either side of the road are much larger than usual and the property fences are set back from the roadside at greater distances. The large grassy areas allow stock to forage on the vegetation that grows on the side of the road as the cattle travel along the route.

The traveling stock must travel at least 6 miles a day by law to avoid all the roadside grass being cleared in a particular area by an individual mob. Bores (wells) equipped with windmills and troughs may also be located at regular intervals to provide water in regions where no reliable water sources are available. A Travelling Stock Reserve is a fenced paddock (pasture) to allow overnight watering and camping.

Brinkworth determined that the cost of trucking the stock to New South Wales was roughly the same as walking them down the long paddock. The drought was the key to his decision. In Australia, many graziers (ranchers) “go droving” in a severe drought, which means moving animal herds long distances along the stock routes to keep their livestock supplied with pasture. When droving first began in the 1800s, the point was to get livestock to market or move them between properties. As railways, roads and livestock developed, droving became a thing of the past—unless there was a drought.

“Brinkworth chose to ‘trail’ the cattle because he was hoping it would rain in the time it took them to get to his station in New South Wales,” explained freelance photographer Alice Mabin, who joined this epic journey unexpectedly and later produced a 200-page coffee table book of the trip. “He wanted to have fresh new grass growing on the destination property once they got there.” She said Brinkworth split the cattle into nine mobs of 2,000 cattle each with nine teams of drovers “that would be married to the cattle for the next nine months.” Not only did the “boss drover” have his own mob to worry about, but he also had to oversee the other eight mobs behind him. In June 2013, they spread out and headed south from Winton in central Queensland to Hay in central New South Wales.
Living ‘in the Swag’

Mabin had studied photography, marketing and journalism and was looking for new challenges when she approached the cattle drive for what she thought would be a weekend “to get some happy snaps.” Her weekend turned into five months of photographing people, horses, dogs, cattle, red earth, dust, dry creek beds, and landscapes that were both harsh and beautiful.

“It was my opportunity to record a way of life that was long gone and record what the team of drovers achieved on that long trek,” she said. “I took over 10,000 photos throughout the drive, cut them back to 2,000 and then to 280. When I wasn’t taking photos, I was droving, so I was an extra set of unpaid hands.”

An experienced horsewoman, Mabin developed a rapport with the drovers and lived “in the swag” alongside them.

“I can’t explain how horrible the days were when it was 40-plus degrees (more than 104 degrees Fahrenheit) and you’ve gone to bed and you have to have your swag over your head because all you can hear is mosquitos buzzing around you,” she said. “You’re going to bed sweating. There is no cool part of the day.”

The Australian media would come and go in their rented cars, filming, interviewing and taking photos of the drovers and cattle, but “being part of their camps and riding a horse got me places that even the technologically savvy with their drones couldn’t get,” Mabin said.

Mabin decided to self-publish *The Drover* and launched her first round of printed books in June 2014 with 1,000 copies. After the first order of books arrived, she sold out in less than a week. Today she has sold more than 30,000 copies, which is six times the number required to be an Australian bestseller. In addition, *The Drover* is considered an international bestseller.

Mabin was named Asia Pacific Female Entrepreneur of the Year in 2015 at the Business Excellence Forum Awards. One of the judges described her as the No. 1 Rural Lifestyle Photographer in Australia, a “brand” that has become synonymous with her name, Mabin’s work; including information and photos from *The Drover*, can be viewed and ordered online at www.almabin.com. Book orders also can be made through amazon.com.