

Montana Cowboy College
Kent Hanawalt
Fiddle Creek Road
Livingston, MT 59047
Home:406-686-4426 | Work 406-683-9111
NeckRein@MontanaCowboyCollege.com

Blizzard!

April 15, 1973 began as a beautiful spring day in the Bears Paw Mountains. The sun was spending more time in Montana, now, after wintering somewhere farther south. The color of the prairie was rapidly changing from the bleached brown of last year's grass as the new shoots of green pushed through and took over.

I'm not much of a tractor man, but I had agreed to plow a small field not too far from where my growing family was camped. I usually get quickly bored with the driving around and around in circles that makes farming, but the view today kept my mind occupied.

Overhead was a clear blue sky. Underneath lay fresh-turned earth. Behind me were the crisp, clean mountains. Ahead of me, across the prairie and on the other side of the Fort Belknap Reservation, was the outline of the Little Rockies.

At noon my ears were relieved as I shut down the noisy diesel contraption and walked the half mile home for dinner. Fresh antelope steaks were cooking on the wood stove in the abandoned bunkhouse that we had reclaimed from the mice. I sat down at the table and pulled Amy, my year-old daughter, up onto my lap. My wife Barbara put some dishwater on the stove to heat.

The big south-facing windows of the bunkhouse let in a lot of light. This was an important feature of the building as there was no electricity. The main house had been sold and moved off the foundation several years before; the power poles had been used to build a shed. We did have "running" water of a sorts - it was running by in a little stream.

As the noon hour passed, clouds gathered between us and the sun. The light coming through the windows became less and less. By the time I was ready to go back to the farming, the wind had turned cold, and snow was coming out of those clouds! I never did like to drive tractor, and this weather was all the excuse I needed to quit for the day.

The wind and snow escalated all afternoon as I scurried around to find a few more fence posts to

saw for the fire. By morning there were 3-foot drifts and visibility of about 20 feet.

For three days we sat by the fire and watched the storm rage. We'd have liked to get up to the ranch headquarters to take a shower and wash clothes, but it would be foolhardy to set out in this weather. Evenings were mighty short and the nights long without electricity to augment the meager light coming in the windows.

On the morning of the fourth day the wind began to lose its fury. The snow eased up and visibility improved. By noon the sun was again shining over the prairie. We were still thinking how nice a hot shower would feel, but our pickup would never make it through the drifts that had piled up downwind of every rock, bush, and tree.

Suddenly I heard the roar of exhaust as a pickup clawed its way into the yard, chains on all four wheels. "Grab your coat and your overboots", said the driver, "We've got a hell of a mess at the home place."

As we headed back toward the headquarters I looked all around at the landscape. Drifts were everywhere, the coulees full of snow. The ridges had blown almost clear, leaving patches of frosted grass. Cows and calves stood in bunches everywhere, all of them bawling. A tractor was plowing over, under, around, and through the drifts to break trail for the pickup following the tracks with a load of hay.

We picked our way where the snow seemed the most shallow, gunning through the spots where it had piled up deeper, and found our way to a haystack. Surveying the stack we found the easiest access and used our scoop-shovels to clear a path in.

Leaving the stack with a load of hay, we were soon met by a noisy crowd of hungry cows. In the storm the cattle had drifted with the wind into the fence corners. They had been standing with empty bellies for three days, humped up and shivering with the cold. Now the cows were famished, and the hay disappeared as fast as we could haul it out to them.

The hair on a cow, even in the winter, is rather sparse. It could never be considered "fur" as on a bear. In cold weather, cattle depend on the heat generated by the digestion of the roughage in their diet.

A good ranch practice is to lay in a supply of straw for the winter. During arctic weather, a cow will consume twice the feed that she needs in nice weather. Straw does not have much food value, and is therefore relatively cheap. But the inefficiency of digestion is an excellent heat source, and the leftovers make a wonderful bedding to insulate the animals from the frozen earth.

But the winter was past, and most of the year's feed had been fed. The stacks of hay were

dwindling.

We put off a couple of loads of hay before we saddled our horses. Cows were stranded here and there by the deep snow. We broke trail in to each little bunch and then pushed the cows over to where hay was spread. By dark we finally had all the cattle fed. I took a pickup and followed our tracks back home. After supper and a sponge bath, I fell into bed exhausted.

The next day dawned clear and bright. The spring sun was much higher in the sky than it had been during the winter, and it glared off the new snow. Feeding the cows was much easier now that we had trails opened up, and it only took us until noon. After dinner we were a horseback again.

As we fed we had noticed lots of hungry calves, and an equal number of cows with tight udders. Many of the pairs had been separated in the storm and the calves had not sucked in days. Cows identify their calves by smell. A number of the cows had either forgotten their calves, or the distinctive odor of their offspring had been overpowered by other smells in the crush of bodies during the storm. Anxious mamas and babies were bawling in every direction.

There was no way to know which one of the 1200 cows was the mother to any particular starving calf. Four of us rode until we found a bawling calf, gaunt and hungry. Then one of us would rope him and tie him down in the pickup while the others looked through the herd for swollen udders. Spotting a cow who hadn't been sucked, a pair of us would swing in behind and rope her down. Using rope braided from bale twine, we hobbled her hind legs together, and pushed the motherless calf up to suck.

Most of these newly-orphaned calves were a little head-shy. They had been kicked off before when they had tried to steal a meal from other cows. After a few tentative motions, however, the calves quickly went to work on the udder of the immobilized cow. In the meantime, someone would have found another calf who needed a mother, and the process was repeated.

At suppertime I again longed for a nice hot shower. But this would not be a possibility for awhile - the power lines in to the ranch had been blown down in the storm. In fact, supper would be a problem for those at the ranch headquarters. While my family had the dubious luxury of a wood stove, two of the three kitchens at the home place sported modern electric ranges!

Automatic forced air heating systems had likewise replaced the less efficient but simpler modes of heating in the newer homes. Our wood stove required a fair amount of labor to saw and split the fuel, but it continued to serve us well when others around us were trying to heat their homes and cook their meals with a fireplace. When I returned home I informed my wife of the good fortune of our

independence from electricity.

On the third day after the storm, Doug's father, Lawrence, left us to battle the drifts and feed the cows. He took some warm clothes, a scoop, and his checkbook, and headed up the road toward town. It took three hours of plowing through the small drifts and shoveling through the large ones to make the five miles to the wide spot in the road called Cleveland. But the snowplows from Chinook hadn't yet reached there. After a little gossip and couple of drinks at the Cleveland Bar, Lawrence headed back to the ranch.

Again the next day Lawrence tried the county road. He arrived home after dark with a heavy load on his pickup. In the box was a tractor-mount snowblower. Trailing from the hitch was PTO-driven generator.

Before retiring for the night, the men attached a tractor to the generator and connected the output to the electric panel of Lawrence's house. For the first time in a week they had electricity to run the lights, the furnaces, and the pumps!

The next morning the generator was moved to the panel of Doug's house. During her eight hour shift of electrical service, Doug's wife, Joanne, washed the past week's accumulation of laundry, and cooked us a fine dinner. Mid-afternoon the generator went back to Lawrence. At bedtime the generator moved again. The night shift went to the two big freezers up in the shop.

And so the power was parceled at the ranch for two more weeks while utility crews worked long hours replacing miles of downed poles.

Meanwhile we continued to find calves that had been weaned in the storm. Each of the three milk cows was given four calves. Twenty-five more calves were fed with bottles. A five-gallon butterchurn was used twice a day to mix up milk replacer for the orphan calves.

The milk cows were fun to watch. After several days of being forced to let the strange calves suck, the cows claimed all four of the calves assigned to each of them. The cow would call her brood and smell each one before going out from the barn to graze. The experts say a cow can't count, but these old girls always knew when one of their four was missing.

Pleasant weather returned quickly and began to turn the snow into mud. But the snow wasn't gone soon enough to prevent a new problem: sun-burned udders.

We tried to keep the cows in areas where the snow was tramped down, but they liked to range off in search of the tender new shoots of grass. The bright spring sun reflecting off the snow caused the

bags of lighter colored cows to become cracked and tender. Now we were roping cows for the purpose of greasing their teats.

And then we ran low on hay. The extra feed required by the late storm had emptied the stackyards of bales. One morning I was given a pitchfork.

I had seen some structures from afar which I had taken to be straw-roofed sheds. The sides were made of slab-wood and a black thatch was visible on top. When we got closer I discovered that there were no open sides. These were old stacks of loose hay surrounded by slab-wood panels.

Pulling open the panels we found tightly compacted mounds covered with a musty, weathered scab. Under this crust we found beautiful green hay! These stacks had been there when the Mitchells had bought the ranch seven years before. They had shrunk to half their original height, but six inches down the hay was just as clean and nutritious as the day it was stacked ten years before.

We continued to feed loose hay every morning until we had the last stack cleaned up. Our afternoon work included the job of roping cows to cut off the rope hobbles that were no longer necessary.

By the first of June even the deepest drifts were gone. The moisture was quickly absorbed into the earth to come back up in the form of grass. The country was green and lush, the air balmy. It was hard to believe how fierce the weather had been just six weeks before.