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## Branding on the West Boulder

I scheduled our branding for May 20, and was rather looking forward to it. The century old tradition of ranches trading help to rope out the calves and drag them to the fire was largely a thing of the past, but we would be holding out for the old way.

Like everything else, ranching has become more high-tech through the years. Haying has changed from a large crew with many teams of horses to a couple of men with hydraulically-operated equipment. Likewise, feeding has “progressed” from forking hay out of a horse-drawn wagon to watching from the comfort of a heated as the hay is fed out by a machine. Help has become quite hard to find, and there are now many 1-man cattle operations. There are no longer large pools of labor from which to draw teams of wrestlers, and most ranches have turned to the use of “calf tables”.

At one time it was common to see several ropers heeling out calves to four or more teams of young ranch hands who would throw the calves and hold them stretched out on their sides as the calves were branded, castrated, de-horned, and vaccinated by a few more ground people. Each calf might only be restrained for one minute, with several on the ground at a time. A good crew of 15 hands can go through 400 head in 3 hours, and have plenty of time to drink beer. Brandings were community social gatherings, and a meal was nearly always served. The youth flirted, the women cooked, and the old men told how it was in their day.

Now you are more likely to find a couple of people pushing calves up a chute into a contraption that squeezes around the calf and then tips over to restrain the calf on his side at a handy working height. The calves can only be worked one at a time, and it takes a couple of minutes each. The new way takes far less help than the old way, and is really more time-efficient. But it is just another day’s work.

In the new millennium there are lots of town-folk, team ropers, “wannabe” cowboys, (and a few who “usta was”), that want to participate - or at least *feel* like they’re participating – in an old-style branding. I had a big enough crew lined up, and we were going to make the job fun!

But a dark cloud began to gather in the week just before we were set to brand. With all the town help, I needed some sure-enough stockhands to get the job done. Several of the experienced folks I had called weren’t able to make it, and I began to worry about halving enough *good* help.

As I drove home from the ranch on Friday night I was going over in my mind who I would have for what jobs, and the tools, equipment, and supplies we would need, when my pickup began to make a strange noise. When I arrived home and shut off the pickup, a cloud of smoke billowed out. A bearing had gone out of the front differential – I was afoot!

The next morning, we were up early. Kathi had her own troubles getting a meal together for a crew that might be anywhere from 20 to 40 people. We had to make a stop in town for food and ice on the way up to the ranch, and I was anxious to get there. As we left town it was raining hard behind us.

Several pickups with horse trailers had arrived at the ranch before us and were awaiting instructions. I had them move the bulls out of the corral and begin gathering the cows while I gathered up the equipment and vaccine and set things up.

I was near panic when I pulled the vaccine out of the refrigerator and read the label – it was the wrong stuff!! The vet himself had given me the vaccine, and he had handed me the wrong bottles for the cows. I called the vet’s office to report the mistake, and Kathi made a quick phone call to a friend who would bring out the correct vaccine.

The sky was getting darker, and showers were apparent on the horizon as the cows came through the gate. It was cold enough that I was wearing a wool coat, and I had on my overshoes as we sorted the cows away from their calves.

People continued to arrive as we sorted, and a rain shower settled the dust. You can’t brand a wet calf, as the steam generated will scald a large area and make the brand unreadable. I’d had enough trouble gathering this crew, and didn’t have much hope in getting them together again the next weekend. The year before we’d been rained out half way through, and had to finish up branding the calves on a table.

We could vaccinate the cows while we had them separated from the calves, however, and that would get *part* of the job done – as soon as the correct vaccine arrived from town.

But the shower passed. Everyone hadn't arrived yet, but we had enough people to start. We could get some of the calves branded today! I lit the fire and signaled to a couple of men to start roping.

We had a new tool to try for the first time – it was a Y-shaped steel fork that fit behind a calf's head. The fork is connected by rope to an innertube, and the innertube is connected by rope to a stake in the ground. When a calf is dragged out of the corral the fork is positioned behind his ears and the roper stretches the calf out against the tension on the innertube.

There are always plenty of people who want to rope and a branding, and it's hard to find enough competent wrestlers. In years past, the roper would heel the calf out to a pair of wrestlers who would throw the calf and release the rope while they held him for branding. With this new device, no wrestlers were required to hold the calf.

It took awhile to learn the technique for snaring the calf with the fork, but it took the pressure off the wrestlers. They were only needed for calves that were caught with but one heel, or for a calf that the fork-man missed.

We were getting up to speed when the sun came out. I quickly shucked my coat and overboots and started looking around for the water. Phil had come early with the horses, and Amy was following with the kids and the water jug. It was getting dusty again, and Amy was a welcome sight.

By 11:30 it was just plain hot, and I was getting anxious about the beer. Some folks from Bozeman were so excited about a branding that they volunteered to bring a keg. I had the ice, the barrel, the cups, and the thirst. I began to review in my head the instructions I had given them to find the ranch.

By noon we had the first bunch of calves done! Dinner wasn't quite ready and the vaccine had arrived. The beer showed up as we started the cows through the chute. With six cows at a time it didn't take long to get them done, and we were soon headed for the house.

In the morning's haste I hadn't had time to catch my horse. After a big branding dinner, I saddled up Thunder and led the crew back down to the corral.

Things were moving right along in the second group of calves when Jim got off his horse and told me to go to roping – he'd take over the branding iron for me.

My original plan had been to cut off the cows and work them first. With that in mind I had told the potential wrestlers to join us for lunch and expect to start branding in the afternoon. But the lack of vaccine and the threat of rain had caused a change.

With this second bunch of calves we were at full force. The sky was blue, the sun was hot, the beer was cold. The morning's activities had been a rehearsal, and now we were knocking out calves in a steady stream.

In two hours the calves were all done and people began to drift away. It didn't take long to run the second bunch of cows through the chute for their vaccinations, and soon the what was left of the crew was gathered around the keg as the bawling cows and calves searched for each other among the herd.

After a last beer we counted the cows out of the corral and back toward the pasture. The remaining horses were loaded into the trailers. The end of a line of stock trailers was just turning onto the county road when the sky opened and rain began to pour out of the sky. A week's fret and worry was washed away with the rain – we'd gotten the branding done for another year!