

The End of My Rope

It was time to move the cows to fresh pasture. Not a big deal, but a few hours of riding during a time in the summer when there was haying and irrigating to be done, and I really didn't have those few hours to spare.

We had only to gather them from a field of some 300 acres and push them through the gate into the next field. What made it a bit more of a challenge was the hills, coulees, rocks, brush, and trees.

Of course we had to ride the whole field to be sure we had all the cattle, but most of the herd was hanging in a bunch high up on the ridge in the direction I had elected to ride. When I started them off the mountain they chose a route down through the trees into a very steep draw with numerous low branches, rocks, and springs to make travel precarious. My two helpers that day didn't trust their horses in that rough terrain, and chose to walk down behind the cows.

A few head tried to run off in the wrong direction, and my horse had to work pretty hard to scramble back uphill to get around them. My young dog sometimes chased them further away rather than running them back into the bunch. But we gradually got the last of them worked out of the trees and through the gate.

There was one lame cow and one lame yearling heifer that were in the back of the herd, and I stepped in and cut them back before they got away, closing the gate in front of them. With all the rest of the cattle into the next field where I wanted them, our main mission was completed. I circled around the heifer to throw her together with the lame cow and her calf so I could take the three down to the corral where we could give them a course of antibiotics over several days.

But the heifer had different ideas. As soon as I headed toward her she broke and ran for the brush, blowing right past me and my horse.

I was riding Thunder - a 4-year-old Thoroughbred / Quarter Horse cross - and he was up to the game. We circled up the steep hillside and above the brush, stopping only to tighten the cinch and build a loop in my lariat. I really expected

her to brush up and sulk, so I was surprised to see the heifer come steaming out the other side. But I was ready.

Thunder and I built to her, and I threw my loop as she headed across the sage and rocks, hell-bent for gone.

My aim was a little short, and the loop hung on her nose. I continued fishing as we broke over a divide and headed down the other side. In very quick succession, the loop fell into place, my horse jumped a tall clump of sage, and the heifer ducked behind us. We spun around hard to follow the heifer and the rope, but we pulled up quickly at the edge of a big patch of thornbrush just as the heifer disappeared into a small hole. I felt the knot on the end of the lariat pull through my hand before I could dally.

I turned the pretty blue sky just a little more blue with a few well-chosen words. The heifer was gone with my favorite rope, and retrieving the two was going to be tough.

This was a big and dense patch of brush with a few trails that only a thick-skinned and determined bovine could push through. Neither horse nor man, not even a man afoot, could claw through to the other side. It would take six riders and 8 dogs to force that heifer out, and I had hay to bale. I turned my horse and rode away – defeated.

As I baled hay in the field along the river, I looked up at the brush in the coulee above me and tried to come up with a plan to retrieve the heifer and the rope. If she were to get the rope tangled in the thornbrush she would surely pull back until she choked to death. The only clue we would have to her demise would be a flock of magpies rising out of the brush after picking at the remains; her bones would never see the light of day.

Headed back for the house at suppertime, I cast one last glance up the mountains. To my amazement, that heifer was out in the open and headed back toward the gate through which we had pushed the rest of the cattle that morning.

My horses were standing in the horse pasture between the heifer and the house. There was a stash of grain in the garage, just for catching horses. It was only a matter of minutes before I had a fresh horse saddled, with another lariat

hanging on the horn. Leaving the gates open as I went, we quickly climbed the mountain and circled wide around the heifer, who was still trailing my rope.

The heifer turned toward us and shook her head as we approached from above her. I pulled up and waited, until she turned and took a few steps down the fence.

We followed at a distance until the heifer stopped and turned to face us again. And again we pulled up and waited. It took quite a few repeats of this stop-and-wait-her-out routine before the heifer finally lined out down the hill at a trot.

She moved right along through the first open gate, out into the horse pasture, and up to the sagging 2-wire fence around the yard. I held my breath as she looked it over, and looked on in surprise when she decided to go around it and out the next open gate.

I quickly shut the gates behind us as we headed down toward the flats, and hurried to catch up. The next gate was open into the corral and we broke into a run to turn her in.

But the heifer accelerated as we did. She blew past the corrals and across the bridge. We raced to get around her and turn her back, but she took the next gate – which *wasn't* open – and kept right on going. The heifer was through one more gate before we caught up with her, a fresh loop at the ready.

As we pulled alongside into position to rope, the heifer turned toward us and took my horse. My loop went deep this time, and caught her around the ribs. I dallied and turned my horse toward home - the heifer bouncing along behind us.

With the rope pulling around her ribs the heifer wouldn't choke down like she would if it were around her neck. We were making good progress, and I stopped to rest my horse for a bit.

Soon we started out again, the heifer in tow. The next time we stopped to blow, the heifer kept coming, and took my horse again. The horse didn't appreciate the treatment she was getting, and the piles of rocks in the field added to the peril of this dance.

We played chicken with this heifer through several more rounds until at last she caught us in a compromised position, and I lost my hold on a second rope!

The rope was thirty-five feet long – and that’s as close as I could get to her. Each time I got near the ends of the two ropes, the heifer would whirl and charge, and I would scramble for the safety of my saddle. Would she have turned away from us, I could have gotten a fresh hold on the rope. But every time we got within reach, she would spin to face us, snagging the rope on her hind feet and jerking it away, shortening the distance between us to 25 feet – close enough that she would take offense and charge again.

I was tired and hungry, and I was making no progress. We turned toward home, beaten again, leaving *two* ropes hanging on this belligerent bovine.

I called my son-in-law and told him my plight, hoping he’d take the opportunity to come to my aid. But he was too busy with his own work to come up for a little R & R – riding and roping. My neighbor Lon was likewise tied up. So I called Phil, who had made the deal with me to bring in the yearling heifers for summer pasture. He and his neighbor Jamie would come up at the first opportunity.

The last I had seen the heifer was in the 300-acre field south of the river. Cattle - especially young cattle - are herd animals, and I expected her to seek out more of her own kind. It would not be surprising to find her through the fence and into a neighboring herd. But my wife had spotted the heifer hanging with a lame bull along the river.

When Phil and Jamie arrived a couple of days later, we headed upriver where the bull had been for several weeks. The field is covered with rocks, and filled with ridges and potholes among which cattle can hide. (This wasn’t named the Boulder valley for nothing!) But it wasn’t long before Phil found the heifer, looking across the fence at the neighbor’s cattle.

I had warned them that the heifer was on the fight, driven by the pain in her foot. We approached her with caution so as not to drive her through the fence.

She moved out quickly as we closed in, limping markedly, but yielding easily to the pressure from our horses. Only once did she make a run to evade us, but she turned back toward the corral as I rode in to head her off. It wasn't long before we had the heifer in the corral. I stripped my rope off her neck as we ran her up the chute and into the horsetrailer for the trip home.

My accomplices were surprised at the ease with which we had captured this heifer, after having heard my account of bringing her off the mountain. They made some snide comments between them about me having used her as practice for the upcoming ranch rodeo.

But I felt justified in my handling of that wringy bitch. She had needed a lesson in what happens when you ignore the guidance of the attending cowboy. And the repentant attitude that she was expressing today was living proof of the value of the lesson I had given her at the end of a rope several days before.