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Branding

In the large acreages of the west, branding is a necessary part of cattle management. It is impossible to keep all of the livestock within the fences all of the time. The pastures are often miles from home, and it may be weeks between checks of the cattle. There are usually mountains and valleys, trees and brush for the cattle to hide in. Livestock can disappear for months - branding provides a “return address” for cattle and horses.

Montana remains an “open range” state where, with the exception of a few isolated “herd law districts”, the law requires a landowner to *fence out* the livestock of others, rather than *fence in* his own.

Brands are registered with the state brand office, with each owner’s brand having a precise character layout and position on the animal. (My own 3 hanging H is registered to the left shoulder – the same brand on the *right* shoulder is registered to a different cattleman.) Brand inspections are required for movement of cattle and horses across a county line in Montana, and for change of ownership.

Branding is done when the calves are 2-3 months old – before they are turned out to pasture. In Montana, the brandings begin as early as March – for the January calves – and climax in May. The actual brand application requires only about 3 seconds from a hot iron – the hair re-grows in a changed pattern that is permanently visible. Of course the calf is not a willing participant in the process, and must be restrained in some way.

For many years brandings were done with horses to catch the calves and wrestlers to restrain them. But over the last few decades the wrestlers have been mostly displaced by a modern contraption called a calf table.

The calf table is set up at the end of a short chute, and one (good) man (or a couple of kids) push the calves in one at a time. The headgate is slammed shut on the calf, the sides squeezed in, and the whole contraption is tipped to hold the calf on his side at a handy working level.

The calves can only be worked one at a time with this set-up, but 3 or 4 people can accomplish a task that formerly took 15 or 20. Running calves through a table is only half as fast as heeling calves out to wrestlers, but it takes only a fourth the crew. (Of course you only get a fourth as many volunteers for branding with a calf table because it’s twice the work and half the fun.)

The spring of 1973 found me on a 1200 cow outfit in the Bears paw Mountains south of Chinook. The cattle had been paired out after branding into 3 bunches of 400 cows each. Branding those cattle was spread over three days - one day for each bunch.

We began the day by setting up a circle of portable corral panels in the corner of the field where the day’s gather was pastured, leaving a large opening along one fence line. Rigs began to arrive from neighboring ranches at about 9:00, and we saddled up to gather the field.

When the pairs were all in the corral, a couple of ropes were hooked to the end of the corral, and horses helped drag the panels into a tighter circle, overlapping several lengths to make a 16 foot wide alley leading out of the corral. The cows were eager to escape, and a couple of guys afoot in the alley were able to let them past while turning the calves back into the corral. A couple of the better ropers were positioned at the exit to catch any calves that snuck past the men doing the sorting.

With the cows now on the outside and the calves on the inside, we pulled the corral into a smaller circle and set up the propane branding pot near the throat. While the irons began to heat, and the syringes were filled, the rest of us made our first trip to the ice chests. When the irons were deemed hot enough, the boss raised an arm and made a circling motion with his wrist, and the first three ropers went in.

These ropers rode into the bunch, standing a loop just ahead of a calf's hind legs. As the calf stepped forward, the roper pulled his slack, dallied to the saddle horn, and turned for the fire. Four teams of wrestlers were waiting. A team would step out and throw the calf on its side while the horse pulled past, drawing the calf into a good position near the fire.



When the wrestlers had the calf on the ground they pulled off the heel-rope and awaited the convergence of the rest of the ground crew. Castration of bull calves, dehorning, vaccinations, and branding were accomplished. In an hour we were through the first 100 head, and the women showed up with dinner in the pickup.

I had been working with my brother Mark for the last couple of months, and we naturally paired off to wrestle. We had a good system and we were enjoying the work. Our strategy was to take opposite sides of the rope as a horse came between us. One of us would take the rope and the other the tail, pulling in opposite directions to throw the calf. When the calf reached the fire, one of us sat behind the calf holding one hind leg and bracing a foot on the other, while the other of us kneeled with one knee on the calf's neck, pulling back on a front leg. It worked well for us and required a minimum of effort on our part. The country was pretty, the weather was nice, and there was an endless supply of

beer.

Better than wrestling, however, was roping – and we looked for our opportunity to get in there ahorseback. All it took was short run where the wrestling was going a little faster than the roping and one of us would ride in and start heeling. Depending on how hot my roping was for the day, I could heel around 25 calves before I got tired enough to relinquish to another roper.

In the 70s most ranches were feeding small square bales and we loaded them all by hand. It took more labor to run a ranch in years past. Town jobs didn't have the same appeal that they seem to now, and the country

had plenty of young men like Mark and I to do the wrestling. The girls from the neighboring ranches attended also, and the brandings were a social occasion as well as exchange of labor.

There were 4 of us working on the Mitchell ranch. A good branding crew required 3 roping, 8 wrestling, 2 vaccinating, 2 branding, 1 castrating, 1 dehorning, and a few for spares and consultations.

For 3 days in early June we had some 15 of the neighbors helping us brand, and it took another 10 days of branding on other ranches to repay the help. So for two weeks we were at a branding nearly every day.

When the brandings finished it was time to move the cattle to summer range on the reservation – we had been ahorseback every day while we were calving in March and April, and here was another week spent exclusively atop our horses.

Over the next 20 years I worked all up and down the “Rocky Mountain Front” between Augusta and Browning, and brandings were the same everywhere – everyone who came had plenty of experience at the job. My first wreck came in 1982 when it came time to brand cattle at the TN Quarter Circle Ranch out of Bynum.

I was hired to run the place for a fellow who had made his money in the car business and had invested in a couple of places in Teton County. His son was on the wrestling team at Fairfield High School, and had plenty of brawny buddies. I was assured that we would have plenty of help. The place was located in the band of transition between the foothills ranches and the flat-land farms – the neighbors with whom I was acquainted were mostly farmers.

I had never thought of a branding as requiring any particular skill – just catch ‘em, hold ‘em down, and slap on a brand. But I soon found that my crew of farmers was out of their element. I had enough friends to cover the essential jobs, but it certainly wasn’t a smooth operation.

The owner had some buddies who were into team roping, and thought they were qualified to heel calves. They could sure catch a steer running out of a roping chute into an open arena, but I quickly saw that neither they nor their horses understood how to handle a bunch of calves in a small corral.

In a roping arena, one steer is released at a time. The two horses burst out after him and have him headed, heeled, and stretched out in a few steps and a few seconds. The heeling horse needs only to follow the steer until the heel loop is thrown, then stop and hold the rope tight long enough for the heading horse to spin around and face back down the rope toward the steer.

In a branding corral the horse has to move into the herd and position the rider for a throw, without stirring up the calves. Then he must turn and drag the calf to the fire, sometimes at odd angles from where it is caught.

And I saw more trouble brewing when they started pulling calves toward the ground crew. An experienced wrestler will throw a calf *before* it gets to the fire so that it can’t make a sweep on the end of the rope and “clothesline” the people afoot or escape unbranded into the herd of cows outside awaiting their calves. The wrestler will *control* the calf, while letting the horse do the work of dragging him in.

These high school wrestlers had enough energy that they wouldn’t wait for a heeler to catch one, but would “leg” one out and drag him in themselves. Or they might grab the rope as the horse came toward them and

take over pulling in the calf. These town boys didn't understand about controlling the calves to prevent wrecks, nor about conserving their energy until the job was finished.

And when they *did* throw a calf, the partners didn't work as a team. One of them may be trying to throw the calf to the right side, while the other was trying to throw him to the left. They didn't understand how to leverage the pull of the rope to help them throw a calf, and often worked *against* physics – making the job much harder on both the wrestlers and the calves. They weren't attentive to operations being performed on the calves and often turned one loose or simply let him escape before all of them were accomplished.

That was the only branding I ever attended where a calf got hurt. Somewhere in the fracas one of them had its thigh bone broken by an over-eager and under-organized team of wrestlers.

The owner wanted to try his hand at roping too. But neither he nor his horses had the skill or experience to accomplish anything. Luckily, they didn't get into a wreck.

We only had 270 head to brand, and we should have had them done in a couple of hours, but the job drug on and on. The slow gain in efficiency as the crew got some experience was canceled out by their loss of coordination from the consumption of beer. And it was a pattern I saw increasingly as the years went by.

A couple of years later I had broke a palomino gelding for some folks near Simms. When it came time to brand their cattle, they called me to come down and heel off him.

This horse had been a little more goosey than most, and the work would do him good. I had no cattle to work him on when I broke him so this would be a good experience for him. I loaded my family into the suburban, threw my saddle in the back and drove down to Simms.

The horse was skeptical about the job he was being asked to do, and he was pretty jumpy for the first few calves. But we were soon doing alright. Things got pretty western, however, when a calf circled around and pulled the rope under the horse's tail.

It happens regularly that a heel loop closes on only one hind leg, or a calf kicks a leg out of the loop. Occasionally a calf will run around the horse, challenging the rider to keep from getting tangled in the rope. To avoid a wreck, you must rein your horse hard in the direction of the calf's circle to keep the horse headed away.

This palomino never had a particularly willing attitude, and he hadn't taken as good a rein as most colts. I



had spent 30 days on him, and had him working as well as could be expected, but the owners had not ridden him again after I turned him back to them. When a calf pulled the rope behind his rump, the horse didn't respond quickly enough to keep me out of trouble – and the horse bucked high and hard.

Of all the times to have a camera handy, one of my kids got a shot of me with a foot of daylight between my ass and the saddle. My hand was still down near the horn as I quickly dropped my dallies, and my kids claim

that I was “grabbing leather”. (I have destroyed four prints of that picture, but new ones keep cropping up.)

I got sidetracked for a time in the healthcare profession and got back into the cow business in another place and time. As cattlemen abandoned horses for 4-wheelers, they also turned toward calf tables to do their branding.

While I was working as the CEO of the hospital at Townsend I heard of a good old-fashioned branding to be held that weekend. I hit up one of my doctors for the use of his horse.

“You’re welcome to him,” the doctor said, “but he won’t do you any good.”

“I’ll get by with him,” I said. “And can I get away with your trailer?”

“You’re welcome to that, too,” he said, “but you’ll never get him in it.”

The trailer was a small two-horse outfit with barely enough room for either. I had no doubt that a horse would be reluctant to enter its claustrophobic darkness, but neither did I doubt that I could accomplish the task.

On the appointed day I drove out to the corral and hooked up the trailer. I caught the horse and led him to it. Of course he balked at the sight of the dark interior of the trailer, but I was prepared with plenty of rope. Ordinarily I would saddle the horse before putting him in the trailer, but there wasn’t enough room in this one for a horse *and* his saddle. I ran my long soft rope from the halter, through a ring inside the front of the trailer, and around the butt of the horse. The butt-rope gave him extra incentive to go in, and the halter end kept him aimed the right direction. It took only a few minutes to convince him that there were only two choices here: the easy way or the hard way. It wasn’t a question of if he would get in that trailer, only a matter of how soon.

The horse hadn’t been trained around cows. In fact, it didn’t seem like he’d had much training of *any* kind. I didn’t feel conspicuous on a green horse - the outfit doing the branding ran dudes when they trailed cattle to summer range and moved them around in the Forest Service lease, and there were a high percentage of farmers and town folk among the crew.

There were already too many ropers in the corral when we were ready to begin, and I ended up wrestling with a fellow who was dressed real fine. He had on a tall felt hat, high-waisted brown duck pants with suspenders, a bib-front shirt, and expensive chaps. The guy had a good-looking horse with a nice custom-made saddle. He looked like something out of an old photograph, and I labeled him in my mind as an “O C”: **O**stensible **C**owboy. “Real” cowboys simply don’t dress like that.

But my first impression was quickly dispelled – this fellow knew what to do with those calves. He handled them safely and efficiently, and we worked well together. I admired his saddle and chaps as we worked, and told him that I had given up ranch work after 20 years when I finally realized that I would never be able to buy an outfit like his on ranch wages.

“Ranch wages didn’t buy this outfit,” he said. “I’m a truck driver.”

The wind came up as we worked through the calves, and it soon exceeded 40 MPH. I pride myself on having lived 20 years along the Rocky Mountain Front where the wind is a constant factor. I have learned to keep a hat on my head in any weather by keeping the top of my head tilted into the wind so it is blowing *on* rather than off. I traded my hat for a scotch cap that day, however, when I took my turn at heeling.

Those town ropers had burned out pretty quickly. The wind was especially daunting to them. We weren't half done with the calves when the pace had slowed down enough for me to mount up on my borrowed horse.

As I said, this horse didn't have much training, and likely not much experience either. He was pretty smart, however. It didn't take too long for him to get over his apprehension of the calves, and he was soon putting me in a good position to heel calves. But he never did get over his fear of the roaring propane branding pot, and I had to "pedal" the horse through the ground crew with each calf. The doctor had forbidden me to use spurs on his horse, although this was one of the few horses I had ridden that I'd have liked to use them on.

The wind continued to increase as the afternoon ground on, and the number of eager ropers dwindled. My whole body was tired – my arms from reining the horse around and from throwing the rope, and my legs from continually urging my horse. But there weren't any other volunteers to rope. I was bringing in every second calf. When the roping is going well, everyone is too busy handling cattle to pay much attention to the ropers. But when things slow down, the whole crew is watching every time you miss a loop. The wind was making the job difficult enough, but a poor rope, lack of practice, a green horse, and lots of eyes made the job that much harder.

I hadn't been directly invited to that branding, only heard about it second hand. They started out with more ropers than wrestlers. Yet by the time it was all finished, I had drug in nearly a third of all the calves. It seems like they would *still* be there branding if I hadn't showed up with that borrowed horse!