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Calving

To understand my life you must understand calving, as calving season is the peak season in a ranch cowboy's life.

In Montana, most ranches are termed cow/calf operations – the herd of cows is maintained year-round to produce a new crop of calves every year. The bulls are put in with the cows at a deliberate time in the summer so that the calves will arrive during a pre-determined two-month period in the “spring”.

I hedge a little on the term “spring”. Depending on the operation, calving begins anywhere from mid-January to mid-April. And depending on the year, the snow, wind, and extreme cold come intermittently at any time during that same period. Thus, weather is always an important factor in calving.

Cows are reasonably self-sufficient. For half the year they wander around eating the grass that grows underfoot. They keep track of their calves, which nurse whenever they like. In the fall the calves are sold to generate the year's income. In the winter the cows eat hay that is spread on the ground daily. In the spring they lay down and push out a new calf, usually without help. Outside of an occasional sick or lame animal, cows don't require much individual handling throughout most of the year.

But during calving season the cowboy operates under the sovereignty of Murphy's First Law: “Whatever can go wrong – will”.

For that reason, the cows are brought in close to the buildings in preparation for calving. In better-managed operations, those cows showing to be nearest to calving – the “heavies” - are cut out from the herd and put in a smaller field adjacent to the calving shed. A smaller 'heavy' bunch makes it much easier to check for problems, and a smaller bunch can be put in a shed if necessary.

The job of “cutting out heavies” must be repeated every few days to be sure that everything calves near the shed, and it’s a pleasant job - if done ahorseback. The cows must be cut out individually, and they can be quite determined to get back to the herd. With a good horse, this can be quite a fun operation. Afoot – or on a poor horse – the job is just plain work.

In addition to the 7 days a week feeding regimen that has been going on since the first of the year, calving is a 24-hour-a-day process. Cows are usually checked every couple of hours around the clock. Smaller operations utilize Ma, Pa, Grandma, and the bigger kids to make at least one of the checks at night. Bigger ranches often hire a “night man”, as well as extra help for a couple of months. When the weather turns bad it can turn into an “all hands on deck” affair to keep everything alive.

A new calf enters the world feet-first, as if diving out of the womb, weighing in the neighborhood of 70 pounds. And that’s when things can begin to go wrong. If anything but the front two feet try to come out first, or if the calf is much larger than 70 pounds, things will generally hang up.

A good cowboy is checking his cows every two hours and watching for the signs of imminent birth. A cow in labor will be restless, may get up and lay down, and walks with her tail outstretched behind her. If the weather is moderate, she is allowed to calve outside - the cowboy makes note of her and continues to check back with her until she delivers. If the weather is cold or stormy he may put her in a shed to calve.

As long as the labor is normal, it is better to leave a cow alone. But when it becomes apparent that things are not progressing, the cowboy must step in and help. He will don a long plastic obstetrical glove to examine the birth canal and determine the size and position of the calf. Likely he will go in next with an obstetrical chain that is several feet long and similar to a dog’s choke collar.

If one or both front feet are back he will loop the chain on them and pull them into the correct position. Sometimes the calf is just too big, and the cow needs help to expel him. Or the hind feet may be presenting.

Next comes the calf puller – a pipe about four feet long with a yoke at one end to straddle the cow’s butt, and a ratchet to apply traction to the calving chains.

That may *sound* simple, but getting the chains looped around a foot that is at arm’s length down inside the cow can be a frustrating and time-consuming ordeal. The shed is

seldom warm, and there are always blood, manure, and amniotic fluid present. The cow is rarely grateful for the help. Few calving sheds have the benefit of warm water to wash up after a cowboy plays midwife.

When the calf finally does arrive, he is soaking wet. And that is the second thing that can go wrong. An attentive mother immediately arises and begins to lick him off with her big, rough tongue. The licking both stimulates the calf and removes the excess moisture. Most calves are up and sucking within a couple of hours, still “wet behind the ears”. A brand new calf can stand an amazing amount of cold if he has been cleaned up by his mother and has a belly full of milk.

But sometimes the mother *doesn't* get right up. Without that stimulation from licking, a calf may never take his first breath. And sometimes the cow thinks no more of that new calf than if she had just dumped a pile of manure, wandering away to eat. If it is cold and/or snowy the calf can quickly become hypothermic with his hair still completely soaked in fluid.

In cold weather a cowboy can't lose much time in getting a wet calf to the barn. Every ranch has some kind of sled contraption to pull behind a horse or pickup. I have carried in my share of slimy calves draped over the saddle in front of me. Unless he is in really bad shape, a new calf will only lay across the saddle for so long before he starts struggling. They are hard to get up on to a wary horse in the first place; then the rider has to maneuver up behind them. Calves don't balance very well over a saddle, and there isn't a good way to hold on to them. They can reach up with a hind foot and put it in an uncomfortable place, or push themselves over the top and off the other side.

Once the calf is in the shed, the cow must be brought in. Most cows will remain where the calf was born, sniffing the ground and bawling. Some just wander off and disappear into the herd, requiring a search. In neither case is the cow *willing* to accompany the cowboy to the barn, and a good cowhorse becomes important. Calving sheds have a number of “jugs” – small pens usually about 12 feet square where a problem cow/calf pair can be isolated for a couple of days until the calf is strong and the pair are firmly bonded.

The next challenge is to be sure the calf is sucking. Some calves seem to be born without the instinct to search out a teat. Sometimes the cow will kick at the calf when he tries to suck. Occasionally the waxy plug that seals the teat is too tight for the calf to dislodge. And sometimes the cow has mastitis, or simply no milk at all.

Every operation has nipple bottles for feeding calves, and stomach tubes for calves that are too weak to suck. Morning and evening the cowboy must work through the jugs, helping this calf to suck, feeding that one, restraining a cow, doctoring, and generally making sure that everything in the shed gets something to eat.

Nearly every ranch ear-tags their calves. The tags provide a way to identify the calf and link him to a mother. If this is done in the first 24 hours, the job can be done afoot. After a couple of days it takes a lariat to catch the little boogers.

There is always a percentage of death loss at birth - ranging from 1 to 10% - leaving some cows without calves to raise. And there are always orphan calves – twins, or calves whose mothers are weak, lame, sick, un-motherly, or just plain mean. The orphan calves are grafted on a good young cow who has lost her calf.

Cows recognize their own calf out of the hundreds around them by their smell, and most cows will not let any other calf suck. So grafting can be a challenge. It takes about three days of nursing for the smell of the cow to permeate a new calf. A guy can stand threateningly over the cow while the calf sucks twice a day for those three days, or he can skin her dead calf and fasten the hide over the graft calf and attain instant results.

As the calves become stronger it is beneficial to cut those older pairs out of the calving field. That serves the dual purpose of clearing the “clutter” of calves from the calving field, and throwing them out into a bigger area where there is less chance of disease transmission. Those “outside” pairs must be checked daily to be sure every calf is healthy and getting enough to eat, and every ranch has to deal with “scours” – diarrhea in the calves. These are two more jobs that are done more efficiently from a horseback. .

Many modern ranches use pickups and four-wheelers year-round. There have been years when I worked on purebred outfits and handled all the cattle afoot. But I find it much more efficient to spread the cattle out over a bigger area where the job can't be accomplished without a horse. Without the stress of confinement and the accompanying accumulations of manure, problems are cut in half. I have made it a point whenever possible to work where horses are an integral part of the operation, and calving time for me has always been a horseback time of year.

Calves have to be caught for tagging and doctoring. After the first few days they can become frisky enough to evade a man afoot – and that's when a horse comes in handy again.

Occasionally a cow will become separated from her calf - another excuse to rope the little booger instead of chasing him all over the ranch. When scours get into a herd there can be a dozen or more calves that need a daily dose of medicine.

But using a good horse takes skill – and *making* a good horse takes even more. Building efficient levels of skill takes time for both horse and rider, and those skills deteriorate with disuse. Few modern ranchers have known the pleasure of a top quality cowhorse, and choose instead to rely on the “Japanese Quarter Horse” made by Honda.

As one friend told me: “You get your first 4-wheeler to do the irrigating, and you find out how effective it is for running the horses in to the corral. Then one day you figure you could be there and back on the 4-wheeler in less time than to catch a horse – and that’s the beginning of the end. One day you really *need* a horse, but he’s so out of shape you can’t get the job done. And it’s all downhill from there.”

Everyone is happy to see warmer weather come. As the snow melts, the calves require less vigilance and the cows require less feed. The days are longer and fewer layers of clothing are necessary.

Next comes branding. It takes several people about two minutes per calf to run each one into a chute where he is branded, maybe castrated and dehorned, and given vaccinations. It takes half that long with a good crew to rope and drag the calves to the fire for the same operation. It really isn’t nearly as labor-efficient to rope the calves, but it’s a lot more fun. And branding is a hot job that requires a lot of beer!

On a big ranch a man can be horseback for hours a day during calving, every day from the beginning of calving in March until the herd is moved to summer range in June. He can start calving on a green-broke colt and finish up the season having turned him into a cowhorse. During the time between when the cows are first brought in from the winter pastures until they are turned out on summer range a cowboy has spent many hours riding, cutting, and roping. The next phase of the seasonal nature of ranch work is haying – riding around and around in circles on a dusty, greasy, noisy machine – and the saddles sit gathering dust in barn while the horses get fat on new grass.

From my perspective, the cows aren’t really making you money anyway – the only reason I choose to raise cows is to keep my horses busy. So if you don’t use horses in your operation, you’d just as well sell the ranch and invest in something that does make a profit.