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## Cutting Pairs

The primary type of ranch found in Montana is the cow-calf operation. Calves are generally born in the spring and sold in the fall, when they are shipped to feedlots in the Midwest to be fattened for beef. There are numerous occasions during the year when cattle must be sorted, and it is essential that the cow and her calf are not separated.

On most ranches the calves are given an ear-tag soon after birth that matches up with the mother. The cows stay pretty close to their calves for the first few days especially, and it's usually easy to tell which two are a pair. But as they get older, the cows and calves get pretty mixed up in the group and it can take awhile to get each pair headed off together.

Keeping the cattle paired up is of continuous importance for the 6 months of the year when the cows have calves. There are plenty of opportunities for the pairs to get separated. If they don't find each other within a couple of days the calf ends up as an orphan. A calf will grow an obvious pot-belly if he hasn't gotten a reasonable amount of milk during his first few months, and will never catch up in size to his peers.

During calving season a stockman is constantly reading every cow and every calf to be sure that the cow has been sucked and the calf has a full belly. Neither cow nor calf are taken anywhere separately unless something is gravely amiss. If a cow becomes separated from her calf, both will wander around bawling, looking for the other until they reconnect.

The first cutting of pairs is done a few weeks after birth. The cows generally calve in a period of 60 days. During that time the "heavies" – cows that are getting close to calving – are kept in a field where they are checked regularly.

In most management situations the pairs are moved to another field a week or two after birth, as they become old enough to move out well with their mothers.

Ranches that use horses daily during calving are becoming fewer and fewer. That job of pairing out cattle afoot from a lot deep in manure is a tedious and frustrating one. On a

“horseback” ranch, however, the job is pleasant - to be done in a small pasture from a good vantage point on a sunny afternoon.

When calves are ear-tagged, the job of pairing is made easier – simply look among the herd for matching numbers. Some calves can escape the tagging process, however, and the larger ranches don't ever tag the calves. When there are no tags, the pairing job is done by feel.

When the calf is sucking, the identification is positive. But they eat only so many hours a day. Some cattle get real ignorant when you try to pair them up, and the cow and calf take off in opposite directions. Other times they just show no interest in each other. It is necessary to watch each cow and calf until they “talk” to each other, or make some other indication that they belong together. Then the pair can be sorted off with confidence

A rider or two might make several passes through the calving field in an afternoon, throwing together a handful of pairs on every pass – whatever the riders can keep track of – and pushing them into the next field, keeping a precise count of the numbers.

There may be reason to sort pairs again after calving, before taking the cows to summer range. They might be sorted by age, by color, by ownership, or by breeding group. This time, rather than gathering pairs out of a field of heavies, the group of cattle may be held up in a fence corner while the pairs are identified. Then you can move in and work the two from the herd until the pair is out together, and send them to join the rest of the cut on the other side of the gate.

Cutting pairs is a good time to develop reining skills. Leading your horse in the ‘dance’ of working this cow and that calf – who might be separated by several other cattle – out of the herd and through the gate really enforces an interdependence. Usually the pair will stay together pretty well when they are sorted out together. But occasionally they'll split up on the way out, and some fancy footwork will be necessary to keep them both in the same bunch.

The dance gets more intricate when you are working with a good team. Each rider circles through the bunch cutting out pairs, always watching his teammates to help turn back a cow here, turn out a calf there, throw in another pair or two to a cut moving out from the herd, and keeping each group of cattle on the appropriate side of the gate.

In the summer, if a cow or calf needs to be brought in from the range to be doctored, they are always brought in by pairs. It much harder to trail a cow whose calf is behind you,

and almost impossible to drive a single calf without his mother. And you want the calf to have the benefit of his mother's milk during the time either one may be in a corral for treatment.

Later in the fall it may be necessary to cut pairs again. This time to separate herds that have been pastured together, or groups of cattle to be shipped at different times.

A couple of situations stand out in my mind:

In the fall of 1973 I was working on the Mitchell Ranch, in the Bear Paw Mountains 34 miles south of Chinook. They were running 1200 cows, and the corral facilities at the headquarters would only hold a fourth of them.

Nearly all of the cattle work we did there was in whatever field the cattle were at the time. We had a portable corral setup that was transported in a trailer that doubled as a loading chute. With all the panels in a circle, we could corral about 400 pairs. We branded in the portable corrals, and we did the fall pregnancy testing in them. We would also ship out of them.

With 1200 calves to ship in the fall, it would take 10 truckloads to get them all. (A semi hauls around 100 calves, and we kept back some 200 heifers for replacements.) There were only 5 semis hauling cattle in the area, and loading all of them would be a day's work, so we had to be prepared to ship on two different days. Steer calves bring about 5% more per pound, and must be weighed separately. We also needed to cut out the top end of the heifers to save for replacing cows as they got too old to remain in the herd.

The week before we would ship, we brought the entire herd up closer to the headquarters. Five of us were ahorseback: Lawrence Mitchell - in his 60s, Doug Mitchell - in his 30s, Doug's wife Joanne, Doug's brother-in-law Noel, and me. We gathered them into a fence corner and began sorting off the steer calves and their mothers.

We couldn't separate the cows from their calves with a week to go before shipping. The calves would have lost some 25 pounds apiece and would be far more likely to get very sick from the stress of weaning and shipping. Neither could we deal with the whole herd on the days that we would be shipping less than half of them. So we had to separate the 1200 pairs into 3 herds that would be handled on different days.

With the herd in the corner, each of us ahorseback would study the cattle in front of us looking for a calf to "mother up". As soon as any of us spotted a pair, that person would swoop in, cut them off, and head them for the gate. If anyone else had a pair headed out, we might

throw ours in with theirs as they headed out. The remaining riders made sure the herd stayed in the corner.

As a rider pushed more cattle out the gate he would add them to the tally, and as returned to the herd he would holler out the total number we now had out. It was into the third day when we had 500 steer pairs out the gate.

The week had started out with nice fall weather – 40° and sunny during the day. By Wednesday, however, the temperature had dropped and snow was falling.

I had been riding my horse Red for the first two days. He was a 4-year-old QH/Arab cross, and an excellent cow horse. I had broke him the previous winter, and used him every day for several months during calving, branding, and trailing. After being out for the summer, I had ridden him again trailing the cattle home from the reservation. But after two solid days of cutting, Red was tired.

On the third day I gave Red a rest. Charley was a big tall horse that was used as a spare. When I started out on him I understood why. He was tall enough, and I had on enough clothes, that I had to maneuver him into a low spot to get my foot into the stirrup. His gait riding out to the field was rough and awkward. And when we started cutting out pairs, it was obvious that he had no cow savvy.

By that third day we'd already gotten all the steer pairs that mothered up and handled well. Now we were after the renegades that were hiding among the heifers. They were harder to find and harder to cut out. I was on a horse that didn't understand what we were doing, and didn't have much rein. The weather was colder, the light was poor, and the snow made traveling more difficult. Cowboying was beginning to lose its joy. I was sure glad to head back to the barn later in the afternoon.

On the fourth day I saddled Red again. It was great to be back with my partner! We had enough steer pairs to fill the first group of 5 trucks, and now we were sorting off the better heifer pairs that would be kept on the ranch.

The snow was beginning to pile up, and footing was becoming a problem for the horses. The snow began to cake up under the shoes, making snowballs that could build up several inches thick. The weather had been nice when we started, and none of the horses had pads under their shoes. I tried spraying "Pam" on the bottom of their feet, but the oil soon wore off and the snow built up again. Without shoes the horses would have no traction.

Noel had an old school bus outfitted as a camping rig. By midweek we pulled it into the field so that we could go inside to take a coffee break and get out of the weather. And it kept on snowing.

At noon on Thursday, Red was dragging again. I took Charley for the afternoon work. By the end of the day I was worn out from pulling, turning, and spurring that horse to do my share in sorting out heifers.

On Friday we were getting toward the end. With 500 steer pairs and 200 heifer pairs out, there were still 500 pairs. We opened another gate so that we could send steer pairs one way and heifer pairs another. The job went faster with the herd trimmed down in size – a fourth the cattle makes it four times easier to match up what's left.

I started out on Red, and rode him until morning coffee. Then I changed to Charley and rode him until noon. Neither Red nor I were having fun when we went back out after dinner, and I swapped horses again mid-afternoon, but we finished the job just at dark.

On Saturday the horses finally got a rest – but not the men. The cold and snow would pull weight off those calves that would cost thousands of dollars. We would have to feed them until shipping day.

Fifteen years later I was calving 800 cows on the Blacktail Ranch west of Valier. Most days we would spend a little time cutting the older pairs out of the calving field and into “the Brush”. The calving field was some 40 acres near the house that was flat and open. The adjoining field was some 80 acres along the river, covered with trees and brush. The cattle were protected from the weather there, and the field had a bench that was high and dry and a good place to feed and look the cattle over.

As cattle prices began their cyclical increase the spring of 1987, the owner began selling pairs. I would get a phone call on Monday to confirm how many trucks to expect on Wednesday. Each truck held 45 pairs, and it was essential that the cattle on the truck were pairs.

After the first phone call, I attempted to cut out pairs in the traditional way – I rode into the field, cut out a few pairs, and took them across the bridge into the next field. But I soon realized that this wasn't effective. The older calves would quickly disappear into the brush, leaving the younger calves near the gate. There was too much cover and not enough help to gather all the pairs into a fence corner.

The next week I tried a different approach. Riding into the “Brush” field from the calving field, I set my dog on the first calf we came to and I began to whistle and holler. The calf let out a bawl, and cattle began to bellow all through the brush. We raked through the field, pushing the older pairs toward the bridge where I had left the gate open. Anything that was young or not mothered was left behind. With this strategy it was the oldest and wiliest calves that were the first ones across the bridge.

When we got across the bridge I closed the gate behind us. The bunch that we had started out of the brush was now at the end of a long, narrow, open field. Now we simply positioned ourselves to let the cattle sort themselves.

As a cow left the bunch and started walking down the fenceline, we watched to see that she took her calf. Often the pair left together. Sometimes a cow would walk a little ways, then stop to call her calf. If a cow kept walking without her calf, we could take a step or two forward and turn her back. If two calves were following a cow we could turn the whole works back to mother up again. As each pair went past us we added them to the tally until we had a truck load, then we followed them up and locked them in the corral. The dregs we turned back into the brush, to be paired up another day.

My method worked well, and I had no complaints from the recipients of the cattle, until “Oly” was sent to work with me. This fellow was as big and strong as an ox, and did about that much thinking. I had watched him load hay on a truck one day, standing flat-footed on the ground to pull bales off the stack above his head, squat down and throw them up on top of two tiers of hay already on the truck – I’d have stood on the truck and pulled the bales right straight across.

We almost had a fist-fight the first time he went out with me to sort off pairs. He wanted to ride into the brush and pull off pairs one-by-one as he had been taught to do. I assured him that wouldn’t work in this situation. He was furious when I pushed a big bunch of mixed cattle across the bridge so that I could let them sort themselves out in the open. He never did concede that my way was better, but I refused to take responsibility for the load as he would have put it together. I was certainly relieved when I was able to leave that situation and go back to haying on my place a few miles downriver.