

Hell of a Roper!

I had made good progress at bringing in a new calf and his mother to the calving shed, where Ben and Steve were standing near the door. This calf was still pretty wobbly, and was just learning about this bright new world. He had followed his mother along pretty well until this point, but just as the cow turned into the shed the calf turned away and headed under the gate.

In the first few days of life the instinct of a calf is to follow that big form next to him, and he hasn't yet learned the difference between his mother and the horse behind her. It's very hard to turn back a calf with a horse until he learns that the cow is safety and **cowboys** are danger. So when the calf took a wrong turn I quickly flipped a loop under his belly, picked up his hind legs, and pulled him the last few feet into the barn.

Steve watched the whole proceedings from a few feet away. He understood exactly that my move was far more efficient than climbing off the horse, grabbing the calf by the hind leg, turning him around, and pushing him in the door – meanwhile giving his mother a chance to escape. Being an accomplished roper, Steve approved my strategy, and appreciated the fact that it had taken only a couple of seconds to accomplish.

Turning calmly to Ben, Steve said “He’s either awful good, or awful lucky.”

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A couple of years later I was out at Emma’s ranch during calving. She had been bragging on Carl’s roping talent after he snared a calf with a lariat out in the field while he was afoot. It kind of grated on me that she appreciated that farmer, without paying homage to my superior abilities as a cowboy. I had to wait for a chance to prove my aptitude at cattle handling.

Emma’s system was to tag each calf soon after birth while he was still unwary and uncoordinated enough to be caught afoot. Each calf got an ear-tag and a vaccination for “overeating” - a virus that causes a quick but agonizing

death. That practice worked well most of the time, but occasionally one missed being tagged in the first few days and became too quick and agile to be caught by a man afoot in an open field.

One such pair had escaped capture for a couple of weeks, and Emma was especially worried about getting the calf vaccinated. I saddled a horse. It didn't take long to get the pair into the corral where we could accomplish the tagging and vaccination.

The calf was now old enough and big enough to put up a fight, and I have always been lazy enough to do a job the easiest way possible. I had a horse, a rope - and a saddle horn to take the strain of the struggle. There was no question as to the appropriate way to accomplish this task.

Just as I had in front of Steve and Ben, I dropped a loop, picked up the calf's hind legs, and dallied. Tying off to the horn, I went down the rope, picked up a front leg, and tipped the calf over. With me on the front and the horse holding the rear, the calf was laid out securely, flat on his side, with very little effort on my part.

Just as Emma handed me the syringe full of vaccine, however, the calf found enough slack in the rope to pull one hind leg free. He planted that free hoof right in my belly, knocking me on *my* ass - scattering me and the syringe all over the ground as he ran away - making a fool of me right in front of God and Emma.

It took few more years to convince Emma of my great prowess as a cowboy.