

Is it really that romantic?

Most of us have watched Western movies and seen many episodes of TV Westerns where the heroes are seen doing little except riding horses all day long. And the adventures I chronicle in the book [Ain't This Romantic](#) likewise focus on horses. But most people have a romantic idea about ranch life that isn't based on reality. As with police, fire, and emergency medical work, ranchwork is mostly routine and sometimes dead boring – but there is enough diversity in the tasks, and there are enough times of real excitement, to keep a guy interested.

The picture of cowboys following herds of cattle day after day comes from a short span of time over a century ago when steers were trailed through open range to take advantage of grass that greened up ever later in the season as the herd moved north. Most of these trail hands were indeed boys – in their late teens and early twenties. The job paid poorly, lasted only 9 months, and ended when the cattle were delivered to a railhead in Montana as winter approached.

It may *sound* romantic, but trailing day after day behind cattle grazing their way north sounds boring to me – and the prospect of camping out every night in every kind of weather is something I outgrew years ago. Most of the horses those trailhands rode were truly broke rather than trained, and most of the riders weren't any more skilled at handling cattle than were their mounts.

In the new millennium cattle are still moved from place to place a horseback, but seldom more than a two-day trip. The houses and fences are closing in most places, and modern semi-trailer rigs can move more cattle over longer distances faster, cheaper and easier. Ranches today are more and more using dirt bikes and 4-wheelers to move cattle – a person has to be careful about what kind of ranch he signs on to! Our place on the West Boulder is rough and steep, however, so horses are still the only practical way to work cattle.

On our own ranch it is only 4 miles from one end to the other. To trail the cows in from “over north” takes but a few hours, and is really only done once a year when the cattle are brought into the river bottom from summer range. Many

ranches *do* have summer range that is a day or two trail from summer range and I have made many of those trips. That may be the place to start.

Most ranches in Montana are cow/calf operations. The calves are born in the spring and sold in the fall, with the cows fed through the winter to calve again next spring.

As I said, the cow/calf pairs are gathered from the range where they have been grazing all summer, and trailed home – sometimes a couple of hours, and sometimes a couple of days, depending on the size and configuration of the ranch. I've spent many a fall day following along behind a herd of cows, and it's only romantic to the folks driving past in their cars.

Sitting on a plodding horse behind some plodding cows headed for home is monotonous, and it's cold. No matter how much clothes you have on, your hands and feet must be constantly exercised to ward off encroaching cold. I've climbed off a horse after hours in the saddle to find my legs numb clear up to my knees. I've often thought about pouring hot coffee into my boots just to warm up my toes. The calves are big enough to trail along easily, and the cows know that winter is approaching and they are eager to get home. There is seldom any reason to do any real cowboying.

When the cows are finally in the home corrals, the calves are sorted off and put into weaning lots or shipped to market by truck. Then the cows are worked through a chute for vaccinations, parasite treatments, and pregnancy testing - and it's all done *afoot*.

The chute is a long alley-way just wide enough for cows to walk through single file. One man gets the job of pushing the cows out of the corral and one-by-one into the back end of the chute. It's a dirty job – cows run past you, kick at you, crowd up in corners, and dribble shit everywhere they go. You come home tired, sore, and splattered from head to toe.

Several more people are working the cows up the chute, capturing them in the headgate, pouring on parasite treatments, giving injections, and doing the rectal palpation.

Of course you do start and finish the day ahorseback, and that makes it all worthwhile.

Depending on the size of the ranch, the trailing, shipping, and working cows can take a few days or a few weeks. The bigger ranches are your best bet, but there aren't many of them and it can be hard to get a job.

Most ranches sell all of their steers and most of their heifer calves in the fall, and shipping day is a big deal - it is the day when the ranch makes money. The neighbors are often engaged to help gather and sort cattle. And again the gathering is done ahorseback, and much of the sorting is done afoot. Few ranches have the quality of horses it takes to quickly and efficiently sort off the calves from the cows.

Quick and efficient is the order of the day, as 'time is money' - especially today when the cattle are in the corral shrinking. Every time one of those calves shit they are squirting money out on the ground.

The better heifers are kept back at shipping, for replacement of cows that leave the herd from age or poor production. These heifers are put in a corral to be weaned from their mothers, and must be fed daily. And from then until summer there are always calves to be fed hay, and maybe cake – 7 days a week.

After the cows have been worked, they are turned back out to fall grass. You might saddle a horse once a week to ride through the cows or to bring in something that's sick or lame, but there really isn't much excuse to ride until calving time.

In the fall there are a hundred other jobs – besides daily feeding the heifers - to be done on the ranch, and none of them are ahorseback. There is fence to be fixed, equipment to repair, building projects, farming, corral cleaning, manure spreading, and general clean-up. It's a relaxed time to work on all the things that didn't get done the rest of the year.

And before long it's time to begin feeding the cows.

Depending on the size of the ranch, the feed equipment, and the amount of help, feeding can take a couple of hours or all day. On one ranch I spent all

morning every day – **every day** - feeding off 450 bales of hay, and all afternoon loading up hay for the next day. On another ranch I fed using a team, and finished up mid afternoon. One year I spent all afternoon, every afternoon, the entire winter, building pens in the shed in preparation for calving.

On a good day, feeding can be a joy. Crisp, cold mornings, surrounded by dead silence, with the sun shining on a clean white expanse can be exhilarating. But when a storm comes in the joy goes out. Chaining up rigs, digging out of snowdrifts, searching for cattle taking shelter in the brush, and picking your way across a field in a white-out can try the patience of a saint. And when getting out feed is the hardest, the cows require a lot more of it.

Then comes calving. You are still feeding 7 days a week, and now you add to it all the work involved in getting new calves on the ground and up and running. But, after months of cold and darkness, the days are getting noticeably longer and warmer.

On a horseback ranch, calving is the horseback time of the year. I've made my share of joyously responsive cowhorses during calving. But remember – most ranches do *not* use horses to their full capacity, and carrying your *own* feet through the mud to do these jobs is a real drag.

The first job is cutting out heavies: riding through the herd cutting out the cows that are showing to be near calving and throwing them into a field close to the calving shed. Then there is the daily work of checking all the cattle, tagging, doctoring, searching for missing calves and errant mamas, and getting in cows that have problems. Then cutting out pairs. All of these activities hone the handling of a good horse.

But there is also the night-herding. Someone has to check on the cattle through the night. I absolutely hate getting up in the dark and going out in the cold when my metabolism is still asleep. It's hard to see with a flashlight in the dark, and most of the time there's nothing to see. But when there is something to see, your night is shot. First you have to fight off cold and sleep for a half an hour to be sure the cow needs your help. Then you work up a sweat chasing the critter into the barn. Next you peel off a layer or two of clothes in order to put on

some obstetrical gloves and pull the calf. And you end up with wet gloves from handling a slimy new calf.

Worst of all, the night work is nearly always done afoot!

And there is the daily shed-work. Calves that are weak, slow to suck, have mothers with bad attitudes or bad udders, or any of a number of other problems, are kept for a few days with their mothers in “jugs” in the calving shed. Jugs are small pens - maybe 12 feet square – where they are tended two or more times a day.

The cows in these jugs need to be fed and watered every day. That means throwing each of them a flake of hay twice a day, and either packing them 10 gallons of water each or letting them down to the creek for water once a day. The calves need to be fed twice a day also. Some need a bottle, some need to be fed with a tube into the stomach, some need to have their mothers restrained while they suck, and some just need encouragement.

Again, this is an every day job. The day help is out at first light to check cows before breakfast, and again at last light after supper. The worse the weather, the more important it is to be outside. There is seldom time during calving to put up your feet by the stove, and a trip to town is out of the question.

After a week or so the new calves are strong enough to follow their mothers out of the calving field and into a bigger pasture. That job of cutting out pairs is a nice relaxed job for a sunny afternoon. It can be done on a green horse, and the job really accelerates his reining.

Doctoring the outside calves takes a better horse. Bringing in a pair that has a problem can be challenging. And sometimes a calf must be caught in the field for doctoring – that requires roping.

The days are getting longer and the calves are getting bigger. Now it's time for farming. To achieve maximum production hayfields must be plowed up and re-seeded about every 7th year on a rotating basis. *And* someone still has to keep an eye on the calves periodically. And there is fence to be repaired. **And** we're still feeding hay every day. (*Every* day)

Finally the grass is getting tall enough to turn the cows out! For the first time in 6 months we can take a whole day off on Sunday. But then it's time to start irrigating – another **every day** job.

The grass is growing, and likewise the weeds. Poison Larkspur is a big factor in our part of Montana. I have spent weeks with a tractor sprayer, a 4-wheeler sprayer, and finally a backpack sprayer trying to manage noxious and invasive weeds that are getting bigger and harder to kill every day, and which will spread new seed for next year if they are allowed to bloom.

The calves must be branded before they get too far from headquarters, and the bulls are turned in. Fence must be fixed in the big summer pastures. And finally we get behind the herd for our first “trail drive”.

These early pasture moves with new calves are genuine cowboy events. This fresh crop of new babies has never before seen such things as creeks, bridges, and gates. They don't really understand the purpose of fences. And calves always get separated from mothers and try to turn back looking for them. A quick loop often saves a long chase!

When the trailing is finished and the cows are finally ‘out of sight and out of mind’ on summer range, it's time to turn our attention to haying. Cutting, baling, and stacking isn't so much an *every day* project as it is an *all day* job. There are breaks waiting for hay to dry and while equipment to be repaired, but in general you ‘make hay when the sun shines’. And the sun shines for 16 hours a day in Montana in June.

An exception to the ‘sun shine’ rule is baling. The more conscientious of us try to do our baling at night when the cooler air and higher humidity toughen up the alfalfa leaves and make firmer and more nutritious bales. I hate that job as much as I do night-calving, but the results are worth the discomfort.

Most cattle are on their own during the summer. Only a few big outfits can afford to have someone a horseback every day. A job often accomplished on a relaxed Sunday afternoon is that of taking out salt and looking through the cattle from the seat of a pickup. Horses are only used for moving cattle to a new pasture, or for getting in a critter that is sick or lame.

By late summer the days are getting shorter and the pace is slowing down. The irrigating is usually finished and the haying is tapering down. You may be back ahorseback to pull in the bulls and/or gather and ship yearlings. It's a good time to get away from the ranch and go visit your cousin in another state. There is always work to be done of course, but most of the jobs are past that needed to be done immediately, or even yesterday. Fall jobs are mostly those that could be put off

This particular fall I have a number of projects on the list: leveling and skirting the trailer house, dirtwork on the north ditch, pre-vaccination of the calves in preparation for shipping, digging in a collection system and trenching water to a new stock tank, setting culverts, digging water bars and clearing the road over north, repairing the foundation and roofing the barn, plowing 60 acres, fixing the brakes on the old truck, filling holes in the west road, rebuilding some fence up west, fencing off the bend in the river, resetting the tank and digging in a drain line and finishing the stretch of new fence in the calving field.

But we won't even get started on some fencing that has need replacement for a few years already. There are some 25 miles of fence on the ranch – much of it 80 years old. We should be rebuilding several miles a year until we get caught up again. The corrals at home and the corrals on top still have large sections of portable panels that need to be replaced with permanent structure.

Only too soon will the snow be flying, and we'll be starting this whole story again from the top.

Life on the ranch is far different from life in the city. We don't go to our job and then come home to our "life". The ranch is our life. We aren't looking in the paper to see what show is opening this week, or what movie is coming to town. We don't seek out the experience of fine dining, we just find something to hold us over until we can get home to a real meal. Shopping is a chore to be endured rather than a Saturday lark. We are content to 'be' at home rather than continually seeking entertainment from outside sources. We feel blessed to always be working from home, and never give a thought to the fact even when we are home we can never get away from our work.

I've read that 97% of ranchers don't really make a living from operations – their real income is from the appreciation of the land. Most ranchers are land rich but cash poor – the only ways to access the wealth from their land are to either sell a piece or borrow on their equity.

But for those of us who are addicted to the ranch life, there is nowhere else we'd rather be. In fact, if we won the lottery we'd just keep on raising cattle until the money was all gone!