

Winter Sports

When I drove out onto the feedgrounds I could see that we had visitors – there were about 30 head of big black cows scattered among our herd of red cows.

The first winter storm had blown in the middle of December, bringing wind, snow, and below zero temperatures. The cows had holed up in the protection of the brush, and were reluctant to come out for feed. But they needed to fill their bellies in order to weather the cold, so I had taken them some hay to eat and straw to bed on.

A couple of weeks had passed and the cold hadn't yet let up. There were some cows still out to pasture in a neighboring field who had been looking longingly over the fence as I daily spread hay for our cows. They did have plenty of grass, and tubs of a molasses and grain supplement that provided them with an adequate ration. And in fact if I'd had a supplement on hand for our cows I would not have been so hasty to give them hay.

But “the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence”. And cows being cows, those across the fence had finally found a low spot in the where they could get through.

We drove along the fence until we saw the tracks in the snow where this bunch of cows had come in. It was in a corner where the brace pole had rotted off and the post had leaned over. The fence was still a couple of feet off the ground, but those cows had jumped over without so much as snagging a hair.

I left Gary to the task of screwing up boards on the new windbreak while I drove back to get a new brace pole and some fencing tools. Gary met me on my return to say that after going to water, those black cows had split off and were headed back toward the hole in their fence. Sending Gary ahead to open the gate and cut back any of ours that were in the bunch, my dog I followed along behind holding the bunch together.

Even as we were herding those cows back towards their gate, I knew that this was an exercise in futility. Without a horse we would run our legs off and

abuse the pickups, and only get most of the cattle. We would still have to come back tomorrow to finish the job. The most that we could hope to accomplish would be to keep the portion of the cows that we *did* manage to cut out from eating our expensive hay all night.

Max and I did get about 20 head bunched up and headed down the fenceline toward the gate. If Gary had given those cows a little more "air", they'd have turned out the gate. But Gary was too close to the hole, and a bunch of cows split off and ducked around him, heading down the fence behind him. Jumping Max into the pickup with me, we sped across the hayfield and around some rocky knobs to get head them back again.

Most of the cows were compliant enough, but one ill-tempered old gal spun around to challenge Max. She blew past me and headed on down the fence, finally crashing through the fence and breaking 3 wires before heading west to join the cows that had turned out the gate and headed for home. Max and I left her and returned to the handful that were headed back up the fence for a second run at the gate.

As we swung out to their flank to wing them out I felt a sickening clunk as we came to a sudden stop. I didn't need to look under the pickup to know that we had high-centered on one of the many rocks that inhabit the West Boulder country.

Afoot, Max and I tried to turn this last little bunch out the gate. But they had other ideas, and Max's urgings only made them go faster in the wrong direction. We had just wasted most of an hour of daylight accomplishing nothing of much value, and leaving the pickup perched on top of a rock.

Gary brought his pickup over and we connected the big tow-rope to my trailer hitch. Several attempts, with escalating force, to drag my pickup off the rock were unsuccessful. I pulled out the High-Lift jack.

Wedging the jack under the front bumper I lifted the front wheels off the ground and tipped the pickup off to one side in an attempt to free it, but I was still stuck. Moving the jack to the rear bumper I jacked up and then tipped the pickup

forward. On the 3rd go the transmission slid off the front of the rock and I was free.

We *had* gotten about 15 head out the gate – about half the strays. But now there were two holes in the fence. We didn't have any splice wire with us, so we pulled the broken wires together with bale twine, then headed up to the corner where the cows had come in.

It didn't take long to fit in a new brace pole and screw it into place, tightening the wires to block their avenue of escape. By now it was dark, and we'd mostly wasted an afternoon.

Now that these cattle had tasted our hay it would be increasingly difficult to keep them out when they weren't being fed by their owner. Montana is an open range state: even though most of the state is fenced, the cattle owner has no legal obligation to contain his livestock – rather, a landholder has the responsibility of fencing **out** unwanted animals.

I couldn't read the brand on the stray cattle. The ranch from which they had come was owned by a fellow from Maryland who spent his summers in Montana but wintered back on the Atlantic coast. He had leased out this pasture, and I didn't know where these cows were from. Later in the evening after a few phone calls I finally made connection with their owner.

Tim was apologetic. He was embarrassed that he hadn't taken them home sooner, and sorry that they had broken through the fence. He promised that he would be up the next morning to take care of them.

I woke up to a temperature of 10 below. The nearest corrals were a mile away. To sort them in a corral would require us to trail the whole herd there, cut off the strays, and trail them back. We had tried to do the job with a pickup the day before, and had only wasted time - and I was lucky that I hadn't incurred a big repair bill. Today we would do the job properly.

This was the first bitter weather of the year and I wasn't yet hardened in. It would take a lot of clothes to keep from freezing – and at 10 below I am talking about *literally* freezing. With no pickup cab and no sunshine to warm us, the frigid air could be dangerous.

I began with a pair of silk long johns. Next a light wool union suit. Wrangler jeans and shirt, silk neck-scarf, insulated bib overalls, down vest, wool coat, wool sox, felt-lined packs, leather mitts with wool liners, and a wool ear-lap cap. I would have preferred to ride my “Kentucky Colt” for the job, but decided to ride Buddy instead. The half-thoroughbred colt was just too tall for me to get astride with all those clothes.

Kim and I saddled 3 horses while Gary went ahead with the tractor to feed. As I said, it was the first bitter cold of the year. In fact, it had been only a few weeks earlier when we were pounding posts and farming. My saddle still had standard stirrups – I had to change to the larger “overshoe stirrups” to accommodate my “pac” boots.

Before putting the bridles on, we put water on the bits. The coating of ice would keep the cold metal from sticking to the horse’s mouths. Finally aboard, we let the horses out into a swinging trot as we rode the two miles up west to the edge of the ranch.

Gary had laid down a line of hay on both sides of the line fence, leaving a space between the hay and the gate. He climbed out of the warm tractor cab and onto the cold saddle. With Gary to hold the herd on the hay and Kim to watch the gate, it didn’t take long for me to cut out the 15 cows that we had missed the afternoon before. Their owner pulled up in a pickup as we finished.

“I got all the cows with your eartags,” I told them, “but there is one no-tag black cow. We have a few black cows also, and I can’t read any brands with all that winter hair.”

Tim walked among the cows and looked over that cow that didn’t have a tag.

“I think that’s number 243,” he said. “She has some white between her front legs.” So I cut her out the gate too.

“We’ll never keep them out now,” said Ted. “It’s time to take them home. We’ll have to get them up to Terry’s corrals to load them out.

We were there with our horses, so we gathered up the cut and headed them west to the corrals on the ranch Tim and Ted had leased. While Kim and

Gary took the cut straight up the fence, Max and Buddy and I swung up and around to pick up the rest of the cattle in the pasture.

I'd stayed warm enough trotting out to the herd, and cutting the strays through the gate. But the sun couldn't get through the thick cloud cover to warm the day, and there was a gentle breeze in my face as I followed the cattle over the hill and down into the corral. I wasn't suffering any, but I wondered if my help had on enough clothes.

Kim and Gary reached the corrals before I did. As I penned the last of the cattle, Kim hollered over that one cow had broken back and that Gary had gone after her. Kim went back to help him while Ted and I pushed the cows across the road into a field far removed from where we were feeding.

As we closed the gate behind the cows I saw Kim and Gary coming with the renegade. It wasn't long before the cow jumped through the fence and headed back toward our herd. Gary had chased her all the way back to our fence once already, and now the cow was steaming that way again. Buddy and I gave chase.

Ranger dog was along with us today, as well as Max. I remembered that dog-fighting bitch that had torn up the fence the afternoon before and I was looking forward to putting both dogs on her at once – one on each end. She would learn some respect!

I had pulled Buddy's shoes a couple of weeks before when we had finished the fall work on the cows. There were several inches of snow and I wasn't real excited about giving him his head as we ran to turn that cow. I would have felt safer on the Kentucky Colt who had sharp shoes and snowball pads.

Twice we had the cow turned, and twice she ducked behind us – Buddy just didn't have cow-sense to anticipate her stops. I pulled down my lariat. As the cow steamed on toward our herd I juggled the rope in my mittened hands, trying to straighten the coils.

From her actions, it was likely that the cow was ours after all. But she needed to be roped no matter who the owner was. If she belonged to the

Watsons, we would have to rope her to get her in their trailer. If she was ours, she needed to learn some respect for a horse.

I got ahead of the cow and opened the gate back into our field, still trying to untangle the rope so I could make a throw. Finally I stopped, put on a pair of gloves from my saddle bags, tightened my cinches, and organized my lariat.

These gloves were the thinly-insulated rubberized gloves that I kept for handling slimy new calves in the spring. They were no match for the below-zero weather - my fingers were numbing fast. But that cow wasn't going to get away from me.

Now pasture roping isn't anything like arena roping. In a rodeo, the cow steer is held captive in a chute until the roper "gives the nod". The horse is fresh, having only loped around the arena a few times to warm up. The roper is on a big, stout, well-trained rope horse, has on a particular style of glove, and is bearing a carefully selected lariat that has been meticulously arranged, and holding a loop that is precisely measured.

The scrawny little steers burst out of the chute with a slight lead onto a level and prepared ground surface, and with a second horse flanking him on the right to hold him on a steady course. Only a second or two elapse before the cowboy dabs a loop on the horns of the steer that is only a few feet from his knee, and his partner just as quickly snares the hind legs, and this 600-pound steer is laying on his side.

My little horse had already carried me 5 miles through the snow, and had cut out 20 cows. There was no chute to hold the cow - which was bigger than the horse - until we could get up beside her. We had to follow the ducking, swerving cow through rocks, badger holes, and irrigation ditches until she lined out straight enough that we could pour on the coal to put me up close enough for a shot.

On the second throw I had her! I dallied up. But this cow was bigger than my horse by several hundred pounds, and we weren't controlling her too well. My rear cinch wasn't as tight as I thought, and my saddle was riding up as the

cow stood facing us with her tongue hanging out. We waited for her to run out of air and tip over.

My fingers were freezing and this cow didn't seem to be weakening. We gave her a little slack and she headed for the cows at water tanks. As she passed the water tanks I threw a dally around a sturdy post and pulled the cow up short. With the piggen' string I carry behind my saddle I tied her hind legs together.

Just as I got this cow tied up, Ted Watson pulled up in his pickup. Not everyone shares my cow-handling philosophy and I wasn't sure what his reaction would be to having one of his cows roped.

But Ted had a grin on his face.

"We inseminated some 500 head a year on the Wilson place," he told me. "I bred a lot of them on their side. We headed and heeled them and stretched them out. They say you can scare the heat right out of them by handling them rough, but that's baloney. When they're in heat they're in heat."

This cow had covered about 3 miles since we first cut her out the gate, and the last mile had been at a run. She had burned off all the snow that had been on her back. With the cow immobilized and at close range, I could now read her brand: she was ours!

This no-tag cow knew where she belonged, and was determined to get home – but that didn't excuse her lack of respect. The next time she sees a horse coming, however, she will yield to the pressure, and go in whatever direction that cowboy points her.