

16SHORTGRASS.doc

Winds rage so high on the 09 Divide, the cowboys struggle to heat branding irons. Gusts, especially from the north and west, bend the old tin barn doors inward eight or nine inches.

Propane cactus burners would require more matches than gas.

Last week, after branding bulls down on the highway in similar velocities, the men hauled a flatbed trailer half loaded with mesquite wood to go back to the old way. Cowboys chopped sticks into one to eight-foot lengths, dumped on the corral floor by the chute.

They dug a hole to reduce fire danger. The fire took three hours to burn down to coals suitable to heat the irons right ...

Part of the time was spent by a truck driver coming over to talk to the crew from a feed tank delivery. Ol' Manuel or Juan grew up on a ranch. If it's the outfit Dave and I day worked on one spring during World War II that paid school-age kids 50 cents a day less than grown men for a 14-hour day, his dad had to furnish the matches to build the branding fires.

The bawling calves and the wood smoke smell pulled me back every time I started to leave to go back to town. You

learn other reasons why corrals are slatted once your hind-legs become slower. Observation of the herd becomes possible without being in the way or being kicked or knocked to the rail.

Might say it becomes the time you stop trying to exchange body blocks with a 600-pound heifer, or your temper becomes stable enough to avoid a confrontation with her without pipe rails between you.

Over alone in a pen of eight cutback calves, I recalled the time the Big Boss offered my services to brand a few odd cutback calves left over or missed one fall during the Big Drouth in the 1950s. Only overhead was the part: "Hon, I am sorry, but I have to get finished branding my steers and move on to Fort Worth to the stockyards. I shore would like to be up there in that ol' Polo Club in Chi with you." (Sounds like a trail drive if you are in a polo club in Chicago, doesn't it?)

Next morning, after the horses were penned, he ordered a fire built on the downwind side by the cow chute at the railroad pens. We cowboys stood around awaiting orders. One morning, he might talk until 10 o'clock; the next, leave the house mounted in a high lope, leading a crew of men, or jump in his car to spend the summer in Colorado Springs unannounced beforehand ...

All he said was, "Son and I will brand the Gillis Trap calves; rest of you ride your pastures. Four men rode off; the Boss and I rounded up a 350-acre trap for 13 heifers.

Next scene, with calves penned in the crowd pen, I looked up from the branding fire to see what could be seen from a branding fire. The count was eight black calves crowded in a wide cow chute made for horned Herefords, five calves in a crowd pen big enough for 35 head of grown cattle, four cowboys riding apart in four pastures, and my ring-eyed dog "Spike" trying to pick a fight through the chute boards with the heifers.

The opening score at the cow chute was 13 to zero, unless you want to count myself and Spike as being the opposing side to make two. The brand "seven and a half h" has never come out more blotched on a cow hide.

The cowhands like for bosses to leave, in particular one who has been a cowboy one time, who might know what's going to happen after he leaves. One I knew once claimed he could look at a schoolboy and tell when he was the age to rope a calf too big to handle on the way back from the pens to the pasture. (Ask Lea Noelke on Park Street in Austin, Texas, or Ben Noelke in the same town.)

Big Boss died in May 1968 after going to the HemisFair in San Antonio. He rented a house on the fairgrounds to be closer to the party and not miss any acquaintances.

A bit of his bloodline cropped up in a San Angelo hospital last week. My son George Noelke, on a visit to my sick bed, found a guitarist playing to a sick guy down the hall.

George hired the troubadour just like his granddad would have to come to my room to play. The music was straight from the Angelo honky tonks and went back to ol' Ernest Tubb in World War II, except his granddad would have brought him back to the hotel to play from midnight to daylight.

The Boss would sure have been proud of his grandson, especially when he peeled out a bill to loan me to give to the entertainer.