

Advantages Of Winter Roundup Few, But Shorter Days Do Help

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MERTZON — We have been gathering cattle for the past week. After waiting in vain for the calf market to make a substantial rally, we are finally pulling off the fall shipping two months behind schedule.

Holding roundup this time of year is much easier on men and horses than when it's done in the fall. The winter days have far less working hours. The modern cow can often be called out of the brush with a handful of feed. And the dust raised by the herd isn't nearly so bothersome when the cold air has already started your eyes and nostrils streaming.

But like drovers since the first herder went from the ground to the saddle, today's cowhands overlook the advantage of winter roundups. They howl and carry on continuously. A boss who doesn't learn to expect their complaining is as ill-prepared as a man trying to open a burlesque house during a world-wide shortage of women's garters.

The younger men wail loudest, and the main reason they are so beleaguered with aches and pains rests in their refusal to do any planning.

For instance, yesterday morning one of the boys was thrown from his horse. He'd been told a dozen time to always turn a bronc away from the herd before he was bucked off. Yet he left the saddle while his pony was headed straight toward some cows and calves. The popping stirrups and charging horse scattered the cattle over a section of land. Luckily none of them went through a fence, but it took us an hour to restore a modicum of order to our work.

By that time a 35-mile north breeze had brought in a cold mist. If the punchers would have straightened up in their saddles and stopped grumbling, we could have regained the lost time. Graduates of the most obscure agriculture schools know that tagging along and doing a lot of unnecessary teeth-chattering is no way to move a herd of cattle to the pens. But the whole crew was humped up in their saddles as if they were carrying the cows on their backs.

There wasn't much talk, but what little the cowboys did say would certainly have surprised the author of "Home on the Range." If he'd witnessed what I did, he'd never have dared sign anything about discouraging words never being heard in the rangelands.

As long as these men continue to wander through the winter months ignoring the invigorating aspects of the season, they will be unhappy. Just think how many city people would pay money to hear shod horses going across the frozen ground. Many a man spends his entire life without experiencing the tingling blow of a tree limb against a well-chilled ear. Not one out of ten town citizens ever knows how wonderful it is to find a lost glove on a cold day or to have a puddin'-footed old horse miss stepping on your nearly frozen toes.

Instead of enjoying these benefits of the open air, the drivers seem to rebel against them. It wouldn't be one bit surprising to see a half-jump bronc turner pull the same herd-scattering trick in the morning, and I'd bet a six pack that if the mercury drops another 15 degrees tonight there won't be a man in the bunch who will notice that beautiful autumn leaves are still fairly common in the pastures.

Don't get the idea that we won't get these cattle worked. We will. But it's doubtful if there's a hand present who will admit how lucky he is not to be cooped up in some weather conditioned office in a big city.