

Rainwater stands 10 inches deep in the depressions under the corral gates. Going from the feed barrel to the trough to feed the horses means bogging seven inches deep in black mud and layered barnyard muck.

As a safety measure, I wear a red bandana. Every morning, a neighbor flies his Super Cub over the ranch. Sure a long shot, but in case I fail to be able to pull my rubber boots from a quagmire, he might see the red handkerchief waving a distress signal.

The work is routine. Count the heavy heifers every morning and turn them in a trap. Gather the heifers for roll call to keep in the big feed pen and check in the night. Haul hay to spread in a big ring. Dump water from feed troughs and put out protein supplement.

What breaks the routine? Start the lesson by holding a heavy heifer back in the morning to check during the day. Admit you were mistaken and turn her out at lunch. Saddle and start looking for a heifer last seen leaving the herd alone. Recount to be sure one is missing. Scout and seine broomweed plateau, riding back and forth in hopes of seeing a black head arise in the yellow flowers. Ride back and

recount the herd. At dusk, drive the cattle to pen. Find missing heifer in jog behind the barn eating green gourds.

The rewarding part is saving a cow and a calf by the technical phrase "extra assistance in calving," or in ranch terms, "pulling a calf too big to come." The procedure has progressed from cowboys pulling calves with their ropes tied hard and fast to the saddlehorn to large animal vets throwing a cow on her back and performing a cesarean.

I think you know enough without going into the above methods. The in-between is the dreaded part. Two men and one horse can deliver a calf in the pasture. The two men are going to be out of breath and out of sorts at the finish line, especially if they are too late to save the calf, the cow is injured, and the horse has gone to the house dragging the reins.

Instead of going further into specific cases of corral deliveries and cows calving in trailers on the way to the clinic, let's address reformed first-calf heifer operators. The reason the ratite business began with such a boom of enthusiasm was the latent desire among herders to only have to find the nest and gather the eggs to produce young.

Remember hearing or experiencing how fast laying hens and broilers spread over the shortgrass country back in the middle of the last century? Same thing as the ratite dodge.

Hombres who hadn't added an improvement to the headquarters past a brush arbor the wet Mexicans built, pitched a lot of dough in the feed companies' account building fancy chicken houses.

The desire is there. Last winter the neighbor on the west calved a hundred heifers without ever rattling an obstetrical chain. To the south, a cowboy from Mexico shipped a 90 percent calf crop for his boss, the calves weighing more than 600 pounds off their heifers.

And you want to know what I did when my score was running high in favor of the turkey vultures and downhill for the ranch? First Sunday I had off, I went to the family plot at the Mertzson Cemetery, sat down on the curb and took off my hat. I addressed my dear mother, asking her forgiveness for not taking her advice to buy a bait stand at the high bridge of the Middle Concho River, even though the Concho is dry today and the bridge closed.

Hate to tell the next part, but by the next Sunday, we'd given 44 head of light heifer calves and 16 head of dry two's shots to synchronize estrus for mating with a half-dozen Longhorn bulls. Moved the cows down on the highway for the whole world to see. Didn't even have enough shame to go a full week after swearing to do something

useful with my life before I was back sowing and planting more grief.

One of the problems is that the strain of Angus cattle the family has bred since 1955 goes back to the famous herd sire, Invalid of Handicap 911. His offspring changed black cattle from dumpy show type conformation to the favored stretchy body type of today. However, the tradeoff for this increase in prime cuts was two-fold; one, an increase in the elasticity of all four stomachs, making filling them and keeping them full near impossible. And two, adding assistance to every facet of bovine husbandry from birth to birthing to hospice care.

The good market and good rains may be more prosperity than the shortgrass country can stand. Be something to raise a calf crop without supporting the cottonseed meal industry. Never was good at keeping my word. Maybe I can stop calving heifers next year ...