

2SHORTGRASS.DOC

The '06 heifer calving opened under nights cooling, illuminated by full moons on a shift running from dusk to dawn, unless my relief gets in a jam during the day.

The first problem case fell at midnight, the fourth of October. After two hours' labor, the heifer quit trying at the point of her baby's hipbones. To stave off suffocation, I cleared the nostrils and jerked the calf free by the forelegs. The sudden motion caused the mother to leap up and stampede through the herd. The only clue of her disappearance resounded in netwire creaking, mingled with the pounding of racing hooves, drumming the tune of the fleeing and fled - the escaped and the escapee. Twenty or so heifers swarmed over the new calf.

Cursory investigation under flashlight failed to show that a cow jumped the fence. Two audits came up short two head. Defeated, I dragged the calf up against a stump to keep the other cattle from trampling it in their hysteria.

On the way back to the house, over the same grounds covered as a lad, whistling "Little Joe the Wrangler" and dreaming of owning a big cow outfit in Montana, an attempt to rehearse "The Sweet By and By" resulted in lip muscles too tense to pucker and dreams too empty to program.

Next morning, the calf lay in the same place, alive and hungry. Over between two trailers, the pushed-over fence dangled, a post broken off smooth with the ground. As soon as the horses came to feed, a saddlehorn search netted two cows a half-mile from the pens. Once penned, the mother refused to let the calf suck in the pen or the chute.

(Unless they lick the calf off ... Oh, you know that.)

By then, my pal came to help milk the cow and feed the calf. Be reminded or advised, milking range cows teaches milkmaids to be nimble-fingered and fast to withdraw the hands and bucket from the chute. (The flavored language of chutes is a bit below the level of sailors whipped by canvas and anchor rope on a wet deck.)

The sheepherder's trick of rubbing blood and placenta on the newborn to induce adoption failed, but my partner never wavered. She used her talent tubing the calf with the cow's first milk. ("Tubing" means sliding a rubber hose attached to a bottle down the side of the calf's mouth, allowing time to swallow the tube to avoid the milk going into the windpipe. Takes practice and patience.)

The new model Angus cattle are different. The breed has overcome the short, squat heavy front-end profile of the first black cattle imported from Scotland. Best improvement is the stretch in the loin and longer legs. But

mine in the course added longer heads, diminutive hindquarters, higher tailheads, and less matter inside the brain cavity.

The latter condition is the worst feature. The deficiency tilts the cerebellum hoo-dinky, causing black oxen to charge and threaten gray-bearded stockmen. Further, it forces we old and weary ones to circumvent pens with one hand sliding along the top rail for immediate escape from being trampled and butted into crippled wretches too feeble to be accepted into nursing homes.

Now about this fence-breaking business, lots of criticism comes in these hard times of short labor and tight money over the condition of ranch fences, especially on public roads. The criticism is unfounded. All of today's breeds have longer legs, right? So all step higher than the old-time cattle.

For example, the county road and Highway 67 were fenced through Grandfather's estate lands, respectively, in 1910 and 1934. Vital parts have been replaced; spans stand at original heights, especially where forked limbs hold up the net. Also, those fences reached around pastures so big that cattle ranged a long time before developing wanderlust. But the clincher is that lengthening the loin and reducing the hindquarter prevents bovines from jumping

without the strong muscles in the hind end. Thus, they have to step over the fences to break loose. (Some heifer bulls are so slim, the hindquarters look surgically altered.)

In my case, a piece of 33-thread nylon rope, threaded through the tailgate of a 16-foot trailer and looped over a fence post, anchored the fence stout as the gate at a lion's cage. It took a mighty charge for those two heifers to break the fence down. (Securing the post to the trailer gate stems from observing how well a runaway car on the highway plugs a hole in the fence until wreckers ruin the deal.)

The cow refused to claim the calf. A guy over at Angelo with a nurse cow bought him after we tried three days to pair the two. My partner wasn't willing to give up trying. Her background and bloodline flows strong in hollow horn husbandry. Bad luck the fence-breaking cow didn't have the same instincts.