

Despite Big Plans, Roundup Time Came Before We Could Rehearse

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MERTZON — We haven't got around to staging the mock roundup that I worked so hard to plan. A time or two we have come close to pulling off the maneuver, but then a bull would come down with wandering fever and tear down some fence; or just as we were about to gather the horses a windmill would quit pumping and take two or three days to hammer and wire back together.

Then it was time to ship calves. That meant we hadn't even had our tryouts on opening night of the play. However, nothing was lost by not rehearsing because, by the time I'd spent all my waking hours for three days in scouring the town and countryside for a body or two to throw in the gate, I realized that if we held a puppet show and required a man to take up tickets, we'd be understaffed. So there was no use bemoaning our failure to practice something that at its best was going to be lonesome as single-seat space capsule.

The real McCoy turned out to be close enough to my idea of a practice session anyway. I do not mean that we failed to get the cattle to the pen. Nor would I have you think that the buyer in Iowa, spent three or four days meeting trains and wondering where the calves were. We shipped them right on time.

But there were some incidents that, had not some mysterious administrator of good fortune intervened in our behalf, would have made some of us look more like play actors than hands dead bent on gathering cattle. For example, on opening morn as we set out work the first pasture, two of the hands were riding so close together that, but for the heat of the early sun or the bite of a vicious fly that made them split up before they struck some cattle, they might have qualified for a part on Mr. Favor's Rawhide show — as the cook.

Or, and I hate to relate this inasmuch as I was the star of this incident, if the boss hadn't chosen to come roaring through the pasture in his pickup just in time to spot two cows with big calves within 50 yards of where Blucher (my listening horse) and I had just passed, my horse and I might have made the Ed Sullivan show as the outstanding mounted clown act on Broadway.

Then there was the time we paired black cows and black calves intending to put mothers and sons together but ending up with aunts and nephews in the cuts.

One morning we spent three hours trying to decide whether the calves we'd gathered were going to be 13 pounds too heavy to suit the buyer, or five pounds too light to avoid the boss's wrath.

At dinner one day I advised the men that in case a threatening cloud in the east produced rain they should put their matches in the cellophane around their cigarettes as the boss didn't like for us to waste matches. The whole crew grew sulky. I assume they got the impression that I was more concerned over the matches than their persons.

But in general the roundup was much like all the other dusty gatherings of the past. The cows showed the same obstinacy toward being driven anywhere, the horn flies swarmed till they shaded the sky, and I found I still held the unsought honor of being the patron saint of all Spanish-speaking hands who were out of smoking material.

Some of these days we're going to hold that mock roundup and be ready for the real thing, even if it's in the dead of winter and the mesquites are covered with ice. That is, if the boss doesn't soap both Blucher and me for missing these cows and calves on this one.