

I may need to tell this story more than you need to hear the story. An April of 1969 photograph surfaced in a bottom desk drawer last month, bringing back memories of a period of high-pitched livestock activity in the shortgrass country. Evidence of an intense roundup was a black and white picture taken at the front door of the Monument ranch house of my son Ralph Noelke, his friend David Low and myself.

Printed at the bottom of the photograph was "Young Cowboys," as Ralph and David were 10 years old. David Hills, a family member, took the shot the Saturday we finished a weeklong lamb marking expedition. Bloodstained clothes stuck to our bodies in the mark of the trade. Our faces showed late afternoon weariness from a six-day work beginning before dawn and ending in pastures as long as two hours' ride from the house.

Expressions on the boys' faces show distrust of strangers as Mr. Hills was new to the boys. What aren't shown are how many miles the two apprentices had trailed behind on horseback, following Jose or Felix. Two boys filled with the grit necessary to stay with the crew across slick ledge rocks, thick unweilding brush, and obstacles

ranging from crossing the iron rails of the Santa Fe to passing under concrete bridges on Highway 67.

I recall now how we never thought of letting up for the boys, but lots was overlooked in those hectic times. The shortgrass country was fully stocked in 1969. Herders hauled trailer loads of horses, hands riding in the back on frantic races to do the spring work on any piece of ground for lease or pasturage. Hombres like Lea Aldwell and "Bully" Johnson started rounding up way south of Sonora to hit somewhere close to Robert Lee, then swing by Barnhart and Stiles to finish in El Paso weeks or months later.

Part of the scene was ranchers gathering before daylight to drink coffee in a rush to hit the ranch. Given a break, we helped neighbors mark and shear, or run outlawed goats for sport. One spring, a big crew from several ranches started marking lambs down close to Mertzon and stopped at night on the county line 13 or 14 miles from the beginning. My sons slept in the bed of the pickup going home, but were rested enough upon unloading to stage a wrestling match in the front yard.

How or why did we carry off the mass hysteria to work so hard and take so many chances? Today, seeing how empty the country is of the past, seeing ghost ranches turned to deer camps, the question is harder to answer than the work

once done to hold the country together. Let me try, please:
The ranches, the pastures, the corrals, the horses, the
livestock were and are our place in life. We, the few left,
belong under open skies unshadowed by buildings, guided by
the winds, free to stop without signal or sign, and safe to
walk out into star-filled nights without guards or
guardians.

Sound over-dramatic? Go back then to the horse trap in
front of the Monument ranch headquarters, the source of my
obsession. Drive a herd of 50 head of saddle horses along
the east fence. Be sure two head wear bells instead of the
usual one horse. To please the Big Boss entertaining guests
on the bunkhouse porch, three hundred yards from the
corrals spook those ponies into a run on course to
overshoot the pens, pass in front of the bunkhouse and pile
up between the big draw and south division fence.

Try to capture the surge of wild energy pulsing blood
to your temples, riding far to the outside of horses racing
full speed, "Ol' cold-jawed Benny," the night horse,
kicking dirt clods to the sky, swirls of dust rolling along
trying to stay up with the herd, by giving a pickup full
throttle after you hit the asphalt going to town. Can't be
restaged, of course. The Big Boss is dead, his horses sold

long ago. And the lands divided and operated by business people too sensible to stage a wild horse stampede.

Last week, the last horse to come from the old ranch died. She was over 30 years old. John Noelke broke her whatever summer he broke horses at the line camp after high school. Her red roan coloring gave her extra bottom. All my grandkids rode her, up to the newest crop. You may remember my bragging on how she was able to stay under the worst cowboy to ever come onto the ranch.

I don't recall feeling so bad about the horses dying in the old days. I asked a man I work with if the new age cowboys feel sad over totaling a four-wheeler. He answered: "Do if the four-wheeler rolls over on 'em."