

Forty four days into a rainy heifer calving, we have pulled more than one third of the calves and more black mud than a desert herder pulls in his lifetime. The good part is that the new mothers have green winter grass to eat. The bad part, trudging to the barn every night, makes my ankles swell so big they'd make the infamous country girl "Ida Red's" underpinning look as delicate as a Russian ballet dancer's legs.

Thanksgiving Day, two heifers went into labor before the turkey was done. I became so distraught, I began to confuse the reading on the meat thermometer with the reading on calving. A 20-pound turkey at low temperature is ready to cool in four hours or a tad more. Miscalculation means a vegetarian feast. If an Angus heifer in labor over an hour doesn't change in 45 minutes, her calf may have to be extracted with stainless steel chains in the next 30 minutes. Bad call means a dead calf.

Cooking a turkey begins by thawing the bird in the refrigerator for five days in advance. Short-age two year-old heifers need to be hospitalized in a small trap before the gestation date. (I expect calves as much as 10 days early; had one frozen turkey thaw in four days.)

As time nears on fowl or cow brute, the cook or doctor, whichever the case, needs to devote full attention to the task. The turkey goes in the oven at six a.m.; the suspicious heifer is penned minutes later. My meat thermometer sits on the top of the stove, heating from a thin wire inserted in the meaty part of the thigh. An alarm clock on the breakfast table times the heifer.

Ranch house windows facing east overlook the big water lot holding the patient. The west wall of the kitchen floors the cook stove roasting the bird. After 30 minutes the oven temperature needs to be reduced from 400 degrees to 250. Should be light enough outdoors to ease the heifer into a smaller pen. Don't leave the oven door open long enough to lose the high heat, as 30 minutes is cutting it plenty short to brown the back side. Be easy penning the heifer, as over-exciting the patient can delay the beginning of serious labor.

It might help to use a pen mate to console the heifer, and it would be a good idea to consult one of your helpers (daughter-in-law, in my case) on the future use of oven space. Check to see if anyone present has worked in a veterinary clinic.

At the next bell, or about one and a half hours into roasting time, turn the turkey breast side up on the rack.

Isolate the patient in a corral visible from the front door. Take a firm grip on your grandson's shoulder until he admits where he left grandfather's binoculars, needed to watch the cow. Disperse the crowd from the kitchen with a sweeping scowl heated to the temperature of a missile silo.

Incidentals to check are: Sneak a refresher peek at the folder on the desk about heifer calving; go through a numbered ritual committed to memory on final steps for roasting big turkeys. Look for clean hot pads in the pantry; stuff two plastic surgical gloves in the pocket of your work jacket. Freshen up a bit by shaving; trim fingernails short enough to be ready to pull a calf. Do a few bends to be more graceful pulling the oven racks to baste the turkey; flex the fingers 10 times on each hand to improve the touch for slipping the chains on inside a cow.

Pause for a holiday treat like, say, holding a powwow with a grandson home from college yet still not removed far enough from the campus to know he is at the ranch. Talking with him doesn't cause an intellectual strain. He will make a good ally lifting the turkey from the boiling grease or taking a double wrap on the halter rope snubbing the cow to the chute gate.

Order prevailed until dinner. Then my son Lea drove a second cow just starting into the pen. We set the turkey on

the buffet, bedded in parsley and kale. Shifted the new patient into a second corral and moved her roommate closer to the chute. Changed to a clean shirt; asked my pal to find her boots and coveralls, but to keep her apron on until dinner was served. Muttered a short version of the table blessing; mumbled a heartfelt plea that those two cows calved without assistance.

Thirty-five minutes later, my pal and I folded our napkins. I carved the rest of the turkey; the bell rang on the kitchen table. Changed into our work clothes faster than firemen. We rejoiced at the sight of one cow licking her calf. We flinched as we went into action at the size of the calf to still to be pulled. Recalled the wild rice dressing was still in the oven.

But that's enough for now. Three calves came on Thanksgiving Day. The turkey wasn't burned and the calves are alive and well.