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And a cowboy laughed seconds after boards split in the chute and the final splat sounded of the cow's kick off my chaps onto my kneecap. "Grab the top board, old cowboy. Watch for splinters and try to breath through your mouth," I guided myself. "Son of a gun of a sapsucking black muley cow, may you die in the unrest of an isolated bone yard," I said, to reopen the scene. She hit the head gate full speed. My eyes fuzzed over too much to be clear, but she seemed to have all four under her in spite of the velocity of her kick and the recoil of hitting my hard kneecap.

Know right off I don't intend to die from post-kneecap trauma in the mouth of a cow chute on a dry grazing, bitterweed ranch. My chosen fate is falling from the sky in a silver TWA airplane, slowly spiraling to the ground, counseling the hostesses to be brave until the end. I mean a drama ending like ol' John Wayne propping Jane Russell up against a boulder to keep her from falling forward (Recall how topheavy she was?) to give her the last swallow of water from his canteen before the redskins attack again. Not falling from stumping the toe of a pair of Wellington boots in a cow corral, or passing out from being kicked by a black muley cow in a crowd pen.

Cow chute builders had cowboys like me in mind when the first one appeared in the West. In the old days of polished head and heelers, something had to be done with us besides using us to haul wood and put out flypaper around the bunk

house. Cow chutes, however, are not solely designed to provide a job for cowboys who figure-eight their loop and drop the coils before they swing. Nor are they designed to conform to anti-hazard and occupational safety laws.

Cow chutes teach cowboys where to put their hands through the planks and where to place their feet astraddle a cow if they climb over the top. Cattle can be doctored, branded, marked, vaccinated, ear tagged, hobbled (for fence jumping restrictive measures) and have their tails bobbed in chutes. Jammed up tight, horns can be tipped one at a time without catching their heads, if an error of three inches difference in each horn doesn't matter. Fellow way back named "Whistle" Wilson used to pull calves by himself in a chute. But I always figured "Whistle" was able to let down one side of his chute, or he'd of ended up pulling more than a calf before he was done, like dragging a cow out by her heels on her belly with her hind legs bending the wrong way.

The chute and chute area are also environmentally sound. The rails offer habitat for wood lizards and yellowjacket wasps; the space in front of the head catcher makes a prime location for harvester ants. One thing unsound for the new age is that once a squeeze chute is installed, dudes had better use long range lenses to shoot the action. Handles on squeeze chutes strike in more directions than the hooves of those dancing Austrian stallions. About every joint of one of those contraptions pinches or smashes finger nails and tears off the hide from the knuckles.

County agent columns haven't mentioned in a long time about being careful handling livestock around corrals. Whether a cow is crippled from kicking a man or his horse depends on how soon she hits her target. A long drawn out blow by a weak-hocked cow strains the muscles and tendons. I try to get the hands to rush the tail end of those chronic kickers and block the danger of them crippling themselves. An old sister hobbling around on three legs is hard to rebreed. As marginal as the hollow horn game is today, just junking one head is a serious matter.

I can't say I was kicked because I was absent minded or inexperienced. The truth is, the cow kicked faster than I was able to grab her tail or jump back out of the way. The situation has to be one or the other. I was either too far away to catch her tail; or as it seems, too close to miss her hoof ...