

We don't work big enough bunches of stock nowadays to stir the dust in the corrals. Weeds grow in the cutting chutes; ant beds flourish in the loading alleys. In my tender years, I wept copious tears at Roy Rogers singing "Empty Saddles in The Old Corral". The abandonment is so traumatic now that my lips won't pucker enough to whistle in the horses, much less hum an old cowboy dirge.

In spite of the change, the works on cool mornings can be pleasant. Two weeks ago from this writing, we gathered over at my maternal grandfather's place to pregnancy test a small bunch of heifers. The cattle looked better than the pasture. Status of cattle were that they had either lost their first calves calving or failed to breed the first time around. Pulling such a stunt as putting a bull in behind previous failure can't be sweated out in a mineral bath or blown from your brain cells by a powerful drug. "I know it won't work, but I'm still going to try it" should be a standing coat of arms of the hollow horn trade.

The veterinarian drove from way south to hit this small outfit north and east of Mertzon. Before the good doctor closed his pickup door, he launched a story of a German exchange student he and a horse trader had converted from animal rights to being a veterinary nurse and a tuner for the green horses the trader schools at her ranch. (The

German government recently passed a bill listing animal rights, so you see what Doc and the trader were up against.) The doctor's version was a touching tale of a conversion matched only on the TV channels spreading the Word on a Sunday morning. I avoided coming to tears as I was steeling my emotions to face the results of the doctor's examination of my cows.

My helpers, however, encouraged the doctor to continue by all but applauding each step of her change from animal rights to animal husbandry. Also, a cowboy's interest is easy to hold by the image of a robust young Teutonic college girl, her blond ponytail flopping against the back of her blue Chambray shirt, riding a dark bay colt in a tight circle in a waterlot. Twice, I tried to change the subject. The third time I suggested we test the cows, then go up under the shade of the mulberry my grandfather planted and devote full attention to this momentous conversion.

My suggestion worked. The chute sits on a slight curve. Cattle pass through easily, but the lead cow has to be caught quick by a bar, or she'll halt the whole procedure. I took the job of catching the lead cow. Just as I grabbed a pipe off the ground, the doctor said "animal rights" one more time. Bent over lifting the pipe slick with thin residue, I stopped and faced the doctor and the

two men: "Starting right now," I said, "cowboys are going to have rights. From this moment on, I am not picking up any more messy pipes until these black cows learn some standards of hygiene."

The cow responded by backing up, freed by a poor catch. The doctor and other guys tried tentative smiles. I emphasized my point by taking a discarded salt sack and carefully polishing the catch pipe. "Now hear this, all of you town dudes and passionate resistors devoted to making the raising of food for this country difficult: starting this day," I declaimed, "I am through standing behind cows and calves to be kicked to load meat on the hoof for an ungrateful world who believes the food in the grocery stores originates on a Styrofoam tray."

By then, the doctor and the men started releasing the cows in the back of the chute to keep one from being knocked down. Made no difference to me: "Just be on notice, if a cow brute steps on my toe, or a horse I am saddling steps on my instep, I am going to lead a charge on the biggest grocery store in San Angelo, Texas and dump the meat counter. First time it takes all morning to find a cow down calving, I'm going to make a red mark on the barn wall. When the score reaches 30 days, I am going to take a month off. If my cattle die while I'm gone, the protesters

can live on yard signs and stay their hunger holding marches."

I finally wound down. We ran the cows through without incident or much surprise at the results. On one count I am wrong: town folks better not depend on my judgement of breeding heifers for food. I sure bummed the deal on that bunch of cows, but what's one more longshot in this great game we insist on playing? — www.noelke.org/monte