

28. THE FERREE COWS

February 9, 1981 – we had bought Pat’s cows as part of the deal. They were due to start dropping calves shortly. The first order of business was to brand the cows with our brand – my father’s *reverse double lazy J* (show here) – that he had registered in Wyoming in 1917 and in Colorado about 1945.

Despite the obvious economy, we decided not to combine the Ferree herd with our cows at Rabbit Creek for calving. There was a particularly virulent strain of *e. coli* at Rabbit Creek that we didn’t want to subject the newborn Ferree calves to.¹

We decided that Kent would calve out our old herd at Rabbit Creek and that Jeanne would calve out the Ferree herd in the big hay meadow with me as backup.

We used a *Land Cruiser* jeep for calf checks and a flat-bed pickup for feeding. Jeanne kept her horse at the Ferree barn. She and I would usually feed the cows in the morning and get a good look before I left to work on other stuff.

During the day, Jeanne would spend time on horseback bringing cows and calves into the corrals if they needed doctoring or special attention. Toward dark she would spot cows hanging away from the herd (frequently back by the old cemetery) and drop off a bale of hay with each one in the hopes that the cow would stick around and calve nearby.

During the night we would make one or two rounds in the jeep. When we spotted a cow with a new calf, we would aim the jeep’s headlights on the calf so we could disinfect its umbilical cord, administer a dose of vitamins, apply caustic paste on any horn buttons, clip on an ear tag and, if the calf was a bull, put a heavy rubber band above its testicles (which would atrophy and drop off in a few weeks). On extra cold nights, we could get a newborn calf into the back of the jeep with the heater going to rub it down

with a towel. All this would take about five minutes after which the calf would be released to its anxious mother, ready to face the world.

Every once in a while, a cow would need some intervention. That involved moving her into the barn with a horse, getting her in a head catch and rolling up a sleeve to check inside her to see what was going on. Once hooves and other parts were located and straightened out, pulling chains could be attached to the calf’s hooves to give the cow some help.

Then there were the occasional post-partum problems: retained placenta, prolapse, impacted udder, mastitis, milk fever or a dead calf.

A cow that lost her calf needed a replacement calf ASAP, sometimes a spare twin from another cow, but usually from a nearby dairy. A stash of frozen colostrum was helpful to keep the replacement calf healthy enough until a graft could take. Getting a cow to accept a replacement calf involves a combination of brute force and some olfactory skullduggery.

Brute force requires tying up the cow so she can’t kick and then forcing the calf to nurse. If you don’t want to have to do this a couple times a day, it helps to have a calf hungry enough to be really motivated and then try trick the cow’s sense of smell.

For purposes of these illustrations, we’ll name our foster calf, *Wilbur*. (Please be advised that none of these tricks is particularly elegant.)

If there is some poop handy from the dead calf, you could smear that on Wilbur’s head and back for the momma’s inspection. In my experience, this is a questionable gambit, but worth a shot.

Another approach requires cheap scented hair spray. This solution has you dosing Wilbur’s back and head liberally, then giving the mother a blast right up her snoot. The hypothesis is that her sense of smell is now so overloaded that she’ll accept any substitute. Personally, I find the odor of cheap hair spray offensive. I’m certain Wilbur and his prospective stepmother would agree.

An old standby is to peel a ‘scalp’ about the size of a handkerchief from the back of the dead calf, poke a hole in each corner of the hide and tie it over Wilbur’s neck and shoulders with baling twine. This effort is often rewarded.

I made a long-handled shepherd’s crook for catching calves by a hind leg. On the rare occasion that roping a cow² was called for, Jeanne’s solution was to place a bucket of grain on the ground in the center of a noose. The other end of the rope was dallied to a bumper or trailer hitch. As soon as the cow had her head in the bucket, Jeanne would flick the rope over the cow’s head and pull. If the cow wouldn’t take the bait, Jeanne had a little toy that, when turned upside down, bawled like a distressed calf, which might lure the cow closer until the temptation of the grain could kick in. Jeanne took a lot of good-natured ribbing for her technique.

That winter, Pat watched Jeanne’s comings and goings with interest. “*Why, if I’d known women would do work like that, I’d ‘a been hiring them right along.*”

¹ Young calves are vulnerable to scours (diarrhea). Among the bacterial and viral culprits is *e. coli* bacteria, which comes in several strains, some more potent than others. If the Ferree cows had spent some time at Rabbit Creek before calving, they would have acquired some immunity to pass on to their newborn calves in their milk.

² Roping is not an essential skill on most ranches. For one thing, it’s hard on animals. On the Robert’s Ranch, Chet Crowe (1934 - 2008) was Evan’s hired man for many years. Chet couldn’t rope, but one time he determined that he needed to. For this occasion, he enlisted the assistance of his wife – June (b. 1935) was to drive an old pickup with those big front fenders. Chet was mounted astride the right front fender holding his loop in readiness. As the pickup gathered speed, June hit a gopher mound and Chet was bucked off and got his legs run over. June slammed on the brakes and then, sure that the pickup was stopped right on top of Chet, she threw it into reverse and ran over him a second time. In due course, Chet recovered to tell the story...often.



Jeanne on the Ferree Meadow after morning feeding