

Ranch Tales: Branding

Sandy Kirkpatrick, July 11, 2021

To "tenderfeet", branding is one of the most romantic rituals of ranching, so it wasn't hard for us to pull together three couples from Denver to help brand our steers at Bill Loring's ranch, where we were wintering them, in Silt, Colorado in March 1976. Libby and I were barely more than tenderfeet ourselves, but we did have the advantage of having branded 93 heifers at our own ranch the year before.

We gathered on Friday night at the Hotel Colorado in Glenwood Springs. Under daguerreotypes of Teddy Roosevelt's visits to the same hotel, we ate chicken fried steaks, danced the two-step and discussed what was going to happen the next day.

Branding yearlings like ours is a completely different operation than the one involving calves which is usually depicted in cowboy movies. Calves are only a few months old and weigh perhaps 120 pounds. Roping and then "flanking" them--lifting them with both hands and one thigh, dropping them on their sides, and kneeling on their necks while another cowboy applies a brand-is hard work, but it is possible for a mortal to do.

Our 450-pound yearlings are another matter. "Strong as an ox" is not a random simile. These wild and feisty critters need to be driven into a cattle squeeze and branded while they are upright but immobilized by the squeeze. While they are in the squeeze, several other indignities are also visited upon them.

Saturday dawned to light snow-borderline conditions for branding. If the hair is wet all the way to the skin, the brand will not take. If it's wet part of the way to the skin, the only inconvenience is that the smell of the burning hair is even worse than when it's dry, if that is possible. This day we were able to proceed.

Bill's cowboy had already gathered our cattle into a pen before we arrived. In fact, they had been there long enough that, between the snowfall and their manure and urine on the bare dirt of the pen, there was already a rich pudding of fragrant mud about ankle deep.

Our three-iron brand was reverse S, quarter-circle, reverse L (for Sandy and Libby). All the one-iron and two-iron brands have long since been taken; they are prized because they are quicker and easier to apply. While we fired up the oven to heat the branding irons, we began dividing up the work. There was the actual application of the brand: this was not a sought-after task because of the pain inflicted, but a volunteer was found. That person did double duty, as he also had to drop the gate at the back of the squeeze to prevent the steer from backing out. Someone else had to pull the lever to tighten the squeeze to hold the steer still. Not bad, but that person also had to inject the growth hormone, a slow-release capsule, in the ear. This job

was not popular, since it seemed even in those days to be tricking Mother Nature. Again, a volunteer was found.

Next was the hardest job to fill: cutting off the horns. Cattle this age have thick stubby horns about three inches long. They do too much damage, usually inadvertently, to one another when crowded in trucks if the horns are left, so they must go. The implements are a cross-cut saw like the ones used in miter boxes, and a hot branding iron to cauterize the wound. It's better to fill this job in advance: once your prospect sees the blood spurting out in rhythm with the steer's heartbeat, it's often too late.

Oh. One last job to be filled: chasing the steers, one at a time, from the pen into the alley and then down the alley into the squeeze. "Marshall", a very successful investment banker, was the only person left without an assignment. "I've lucked out", he said, when he learned his duty.

Marshall was dressed in an L.L. Bean tattersall shirt, wide wale corduroys, and topsiders. The topsiders were ill-suited for the footing in the pen: in fact, the suction in the ah, mud kept pulling them off his feet, leaving his next step to be taken with a stocking foot. Nevertheless, he persisted, and in a short time he had the first steer in the chute. He followed the steer all the way to the squeeze, then stood for a moment to admire his handiwork. When the white-hot branding iron was applied to the steer's flank, the steer, surprised and suddenly in great pain, lifted his tail and expelled the contents of his large intestine under great pressure, in a stream not unlike that from a garden hose. Somewhere there exists a memorable photo of Marshall: he has just brought the backs of both hands in a cleansing motion down the front of his shirt and trousers, but he hasn't yet shaken the offending material off his hands.