

Nothing like trailing cattle to stockyards

Boy, do I ever miss trailing market cattle to the railroad stockyards in Osage for shipping.

We ran all classes of cattle in one big pasture — cows with calves, dry cows, bulls, and yearling steers and heifers. We never kept steers through a second winter, as some ranchers did to ship as 2-year-olds, for two reasons: (1) we wanted more pasture for cows and younger stock, and (2) older steers often became wild, mean, and fast enough to outrun a horse.

We spent days before the drive on roundup, combing pastures and riding through neighboring herds looking for missing cattle. Sometimes bulls fought through fences, broke wires, and laid posts flat.

Some people didn't keep fences repaired very well, and herds mixed during the summer. Neighbors often announced, "I found a few of yours runnin' with mine," or, "I've got some of yours in my pasture."

Everybody knew everybody else's brand.

As the roundup progressed, we moved cattle to smaller pastures closer to home and to wheat fields, where they gleaned grain heads missed by the binder and grazed on grassed areas fenced in with those fields. Sometimes gathering cattle and finding strays took several days.

Good sorting corrals were nearly

nonexistent in our neighborhood. Cattle were usually crowded into a fence corner or between fences on a county road for making the cut for market.

Throughout that process, a good cutting horse really won the respect and admiration of his rider and others close enough to enjoy his display of sidesteps, twists, bends, and crouches while he showed off his concentration and cow savvy. We drove the cut into a small pasture and waited for shipping day.

Boy, do I ever miss that early morning frost on cured grass sparkling in the new day's sun, rollers in horses' noses during saddle-up, and the lined jacket that soon came off and was tied behind the saddle. We trailed leisurely through neighbors' fields and pastures until finally reaching the county road leading to the railroad stockyards at Osage.

An early start meant no need to hurry. Cows are not fast walkers by nature, and when allowed to graze along the trail, the drive is slow and tedious, but we didn't care. These cattle were headed for market where they



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sold by the pound, so why hurry and take pounds off?

We reached our destination at midafternoon and loose-herded the cattle in a community pasture a short distance from town until time to move them into

rail yards for sorting into classes to be loaded into cattle cars. We ascertained the expected time of loading by making a quick ride to the station.

The agent always told us the approximate time, which, for some reason, was always late afternoon or evening. Many times, we had to turn on floodlights to illuminate corrals and loading chutes.

Finally, the train crew puffed into town in a noisy steam engine and treated our herd to its first train whistles while spotting cars for loading. Neighbors helped each other as we loaded bulls first.

If gentle enough, we put heavy rope halters on them and tied them in one end of a car. If not gentle enough, we partitioned the car for them, since we never did have a full carload of bulls. As much as possible we loaded

cattle by class keeping younger cattle separate.

Cowboys usually handle cattle quietly. Punching them up chutes and into cars is an exception. The faster they moved the better.

With yells and a lot of noise, we crowded them in until all cars, except maybe the last one, were full to capacity.

My dad, and many other ranchers, always accompanied cattle by riding the caboose to Omaha. We wanted cattle to take on a good fill and look fat and sleek on Monday morning.

That is when stockyard commission men and cattle buyers settled on a price and cattle received a new owner. Then my dad usually took vacation time and visited relatives in Iowa.

Boy, do I ever miss that ride back to the ranch in the dark with a led horse. I liked the thought of being my own boss for a short time.

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Center Stage is written by friends of the Senior Center for the Sheridan community. It is a collection of insights and stories related to living well at every age.