

When you are bamboozled by a cow

We should have known better.

We had handled cattle all of our lives; should have never let that cow out of our sight.

My brother, Francis, and I saw her standing in a meadow near the edge of a stand of half-grown ponderosa pine trees, about a half-mile from the highway. As he drove, I studied her through an olive-green pair of Army-issue field glasses.

“She had her calf last night. It’s up and nursing, so everything is OK,” I announced.

“That’s good, all the cows have calved now,” Francis said. “We’ll saddle up and bring the rest of the cattle into the little horse pasture by the spring. Then you can ride over and bring her and her calf in.

“While you’re getting them, I’ll splice the wire in that draw where snow broke the fence last winter.”

We planned to drive this herd, 76 pairs of cows and calves, from the calving pasture to fresh pasture three miles north. He steered the truck off the highway and parked it near the right-of-way fence.

Horses nickered greetings to us as we crawled through the fence and walked to their corral. We felt no need to hurry and took our time brushing and saddling our mounts.

I had Chief, a blaze-faced sorrel with flaxen mane and tail, and he had ‘Pache, his favorite paint cow pony.

I asked, “Don’t you think maybe I should get that cow and calf before we bring the rest of the cattle in?”

“No, they’ll be OK. That little feller will need a rest after his breakfast. Anyway, he’ll travel better after his nap.”

On this pleasant spring morning, our cows grazed on 240 acres of meadow and native pastureland. I counted them as we rode to the far end of the pasture, pleased to find them all out in the open and not scattered through the timber.

All we had to do was move them toward the west boundary fence and along it to the holding pen. The mini-roundup took about 45 minutes. Most of the time during the gather, a small hill prevented us from seeing the new mother and calf.

I closed the gate to trap the herd in the holding pen, remounted, and reined Chief toward the place we’d last seen the cow and calf. Meadowlarks, in full voice, entertained us as my horse stretched into his ground-eating running-walk.

The color of meadow grass blended nicely with darker green pine trees, whose spicy scent floated on the light morning breeze.

I rode loose in the saddle, letting my body sway with the motion of my horse’s gait, enjoying the clean prairie air, the creak of leather, and the rhythmic sound of hoof beats on sod.

A good cow horse, Chief spotted the cow before I did and pointed at her with his ears. He swerved toward her without any signal from me.

She showed no sign of alarm or nervousness as we approached, and regarded



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us with surprising indifference while continuing to munch meadow grass. I didn’t see her calf, but wasn’t surprised, assuming it had found a bed nearby.

As I rode a complete circle around her, I noticed half-dried

birth blood still clinging to her tail. Curly, semimoist hair on her flaccid udder indicated she gave her baby a much-enjoyed meal. Nothing about my horseback presence caused her to be concerned for her calf.

Still not finding the calf, I rode in ever-widening circles around her, looking behind rocks and searching through timber for hiding places behind logs and under juniper bushes. I thought if I got close to it, she would run to protect it.

I watched her closely trying to catch her looking in its direction. She grazed contentedly, never doing anything to give me a hint of the calf’s location.

I hid from her in the trees and sounded out my best rendition of the bleat of a calf in distress. A moment later, I moved to a new place and did it again.

My vocals apparently did not closely resemble the real thing. After every one of my bellers, I peeked at her from behind a tree, only to find her calmly eating.

After several attempts at trying to mimic a tormented calf, I dismounted and

tied Chief to a sapling. I thrashed around through the trees and brush, thinking I might be more of a threat to her calf when on foot. She still paid no attention to me.

Francis finished his fence repair and joined me on ‘Pache. We rode through timber for a long time, hunting and trying to think of ways to make her go to her calf.

As a last resort, we drove her around through the trees and brush, hoping if she got close to her baby’s hiding place, she would call to it, or at least look toward it.

Francis finally said, “She knows exactly where it is, but she’s not telling us and we need to get the herd moved. We’ve wasted too much time already.”

We rode back to the holding pen and I opened the gate. The cattle filed through and we drove them to summer range.

On our return ride, the sun went down as we rode tired horses past the holding pasture. There, in the pen near the spring, lay the uncooperative cow placidly chewing her cud.

Two feet from her chin, her calf lay with his neck curled back and his head resting on his flank.

I pointed, “Well, how about that? We’ve been bamboozled by a cow.”

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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.