

The most beautiful lady at the branding

Growing up on a ranch is a fantastic experience, one enjoyed by too few of our youth today. This story, however, is not about the philosophy of rural vs. urban living. The manner in which ranches were (and are) operated varies with management, ownership, family size, location, tradition, and a host of other considerations.

For instance, when I was a kid growing up in Weston County, Wyoming, crews of men handled jobs like haying, threshing, branding, butchering, dehorning, etc. Womenfolk always busied themselves in the house preparing huge meals and handling the subsequent clean-up.

Life takes a variety of twists and turns. After leaving home, I acquired a small ranch and basically, by use of a system of stalls, alleys, chutes, and calf tables designed for one-man operation, took care of my small herd by myself. Neighbors helping neighbors became less commonplace for two reasons: On the one hand, size of ranches and cow herds shrank. On the other, groups of adjacent small ranches got swallowed by corporate entities and became large ranches which hired management and labor.

Economic conditions became less favorable for making a living on a small ranch and I found myself working off the ranch more and more, finally giving up land and cattle to take a job in management of a rural electric cooperative. Several years into that job, I met and married a new bride. We joined a square dance club and a member of that club owned a large ranch. One fine spring day, he invited us to a branding.

My bride grew up and lived most of her life in the beach cities area of California. She knew nothing about cows, or anything else connected with ranch life. She worked as a medical assistant for years before we married. Additionally, her wardrobe included no Levis, Wranglers, or blue denim jeans of

any kind. Naturally, the question of what she should wear came up for discussion.

She fretted about what to wear so I called upon my early life experience at brandings where men worked outside and women stayed inside. My advice to her was, "Wear anything you want, you'll be helping in the house anyway".

She chose some comfortable bright yellow pants, a white and brown checkered blouse, and a nice-fitting pair of new shoes. She looked to me to be perfectly decked out for a day in the kitchen. I told her she would be the most beautiful lady at the branding. She smiled prettily.

After a drive of about seven miles of dirt road through draws and over hills, we arrived at the ranch and I took her inside before heading for the corrals. I understand the women, all dressed in blue denim, commented upon her nice yellow pants. One nice lady took time out to snap a picture to remember the event.

Connie helped in the kitchen for a short



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time before the ladies announced that everything was ready. All that was left to do was barbecue hamburgers after the branding. She accompanied the women to the corrals where she found things less than clean, and soon noticed that

the rest of the ladies went right to work at their assigned jobs. Someone suggested she stand by the fence and watch. The unfamiliarly unique yellow pants in the corral caused women to politely laugh behind their hands and men to impolitely laugh out loud, with remarks about hoping her cute yellow pants weren't new. Somehow I got the feeling I was responsible for her discomfort and embarrassment. I hated myself.

She stayed by the fence for a time hearing the din of cows and calves bawling for each other, smelling scorched hair and hide, feeling heat from the branding fire, seeing blood from the occasional use of a dehorning spoon, and tasting the thick smoke rising from the bodies of calves. Rather than being scared, she was interested admiring the way strong arms handled calves, gave shots, tagged ears, branded, castrated, and implanted growth hormones. She had never been around ranch women before and wanted to be one of them someday.

She refused to stay on the sidelines and started helping in any way she could. Her shoes got caked with mud and manure. The yellow pants took on variegated hues of green. Some of the men tried to scare her or make her sick by waving fresh uncooked Rocky Mountain oysters in her face. Her medical background helped in that regard and her looks of disdain soon discouraged further fun along those lines.

That day she definitely passed the test of being a future ranch wife. Through my guilt I had great pride in my bride. She also gained the respect of everyone at the branding.

A few years later, we got a little ranch of our own and she became a true ranch wife. I'd put her up against any ranch wife anywhere. Her love and compassion for cattle (especially calves) place her high among the best cattle women I have ever known.

We have never forgotten that day, and thinking back I can't help having a modicum of regret for not advising her more appropriately on how to dress for a branding. A burn pile claimed the yellow pants and comfortable new shoes. Come to think of it, she hasn't owned a pair of yellow pants since.

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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."