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Springtime is best for building fence because postholes are easier to dig when soil is moist, almost impossible to dig after summer's sun bakes the ground.

Snow, piled by wind in low places, breaks barbed wire, and cattle have an uncanny knack for locating those breaks. Wild animals, wind, and wear and tear loosen staples leaving wires dangling.

Good managers make sure fences are in good repair before turning cattle out on pasture; another reason for fixing fence in spring.

One spring during my early teen years, my dad leased additional ranch land. A portion of its north boundary had no fence, but the property owner agreed to furnish posts and wire if we would build one.

He told us, "I hired a guy to cut posts two years ago and paid him for enough posts to build five miles of fence."

"If there are any posts on this place, I sure don't know where they are. I've looked all over and haven't seen a single post," said my dad one evening.

"I know where they are," I piped up.

"Where?"

"I found them today in a canyon clear down in the southwest corner of that big pasture where we put cows and calves last week."

"I didn't know there was a canyon. What were you doing over there?"

"Ridin' fence."

I told him the west-line fence followed a canyon's rim for about a quarter-mile and then sloped down to its floor. I found a trail so steep I was afraid to ride down it, so I dismounted and walked beside my horse holding onto the saddle horn. That way I

could jump out of his way if he lost footing.

We half-stumbled, half-slid to the bottom. I remounted and headed up-canyon beside a streambed formed by years of runoff.

Within 250 yards, the canyon widened and pine timber grew on slopes on either side. A fire had burned a large area on the east side. That is where I saw hundreds of pitch posts, neatly split from blackened snags and dead timber and stacked in small piles.

The canyon continued to widen as I rode and the rims finally curved toward each other and connected, so the canyon was really a gigantic bowl. Lush, green grass covered the bottom, timber grew thick on the slopes, and gray rocks formed the rim.

One has to be in backcountry to find scenery so breathtaking. I pulled my horse



**Center
Stage**

Duane
Portwood



to a stop, then turned a full circle to take it all in. A small bunch of Hereford cows and calves grazing near the timber made the pastoral setting complete.

I backtracked looking through timber for a trail out of the canyon. About halfway

through the burned area, a cattle trail zig-zagged upward, so I followed it.

The slope was much gentler than the one I came down earlier and the trail topped out on a narrow strip of hard shale. The only way to get posts out would be to skid them up that trail with a horse.

For several days, I harnessed the team at daybreak, grabbed my lunch bucket, and headed out to skid posts riding Prince and leading Muggins. I carried one singletree and a 16-foot log chain.

Skidding posts is not really an exciting job, but I enjoyed the sense of accomplishment as the post pile, accessible by truck, grew and the small stacks in the timber disappeared. I skidded every one of those posts, about 10 or 12 at a time.

There was a little tension on the first day. In the forenoon, I rode Prince. I started the

afternoon by leading Muggins because she was a bit touchy and not broke to ride.

After a trip to the top and back and about halfway up again, I decided to use my head instead of my feet. On one of the steeper sections of the trail, I took hold of the bridle's cheek strap with my left hand, seized a harness hame with my right hand, and jumped on her back.

She became somewhat confused with me no longer beside her on the ground and tried to turn back.

I knew she couldn't buck dragging the load uphill; downhill would be a different scenario. I pictured me, posts, chain, singletree, harness, and horse strewn all over the hillside.

With stubborn muscle, I was able to rein her back onto the trail still headed uphill. When we reached the post pile on top, she was broke to ride.

From then on, we used teamwork, Prince and me in the forenoon, Muggins and me in the afternoon.

An accomplished writer and cowboy poet, Duane Portwood has been volunteering his time and talent at the Sheridan Senior Center for more than two years.

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.