

A good cowboy knows his cattle

During my growing-up years, my family and our neighbors relied mainly on wheat for income.

Everybody had cattle also, but they more or less represented a byproduct of wheat production. They gleaned fields after harvest and grazed parcels of land not suitable for tillage because of trees, rocks, or rough terrain.

My father put me on a tractor at the tender age of 10. Day after day, I drove a John Deere model D, my father's pride and joy (the tractor that is).

Plowing came first, then disking and harrowing to smooth fields, break clods, and kill weeds — an operation that happened multiple times throughout every summer.

I never felt like a cowboy while riding that steel-wheeled brute. The thunderous pop-pop of the engine prevented me hearing anything else. A cow could bawl right beside me and not be heard.

The steel seat, unlike a leather saddle, assaulted my backside, so I stood up all day long. I had to put my whole weight into steering the stubborn thing anyway.

In addition, I had to wear low-heeled work shoes instead of cowboy boots. How does any of that stroke the ego of a cowboy?

Although I spent considerable time in wheat fields, livestock, especially

cattle, were my real love, a love that bordered on obsession.

When I reached the toddling stage, my mother locked barnyard gates to prevent my mingling with the herd. When questioned about locking me out, she explained, "Some of the cows might hurt you."

"Why?"

"Because you're just a little boy."

In due time, I got up close and personal with cows. A good cowboy knows his cattle.

We always ran Hereford cattle and I studied them (learned them). Herefords have distinctive color and markings but, like zebras, no two are marked exactly alike.

Variations may be ever so slight, but I knew our cattle. If ours somehow mixed with neighbors' cows, I could pick them out without looking at brands.

More important than identifying them, of course, was caring for them. In summer, cattle took care of themselves as long as they could get to grass, water, shade, and salt.



Center Stage

Duane Portwood



Long, cold, snowy winters in northeastern Weston County, Wyo., however, required shoveling every mouthful of feed to them. At 7,000 feet altitude, snow covered grass as early as October and stayed on the ground until April or early May.

A real cowboy never quits the herd.

He feeds his cattle no matter what.

My favorite season, the least favorite for many ranchers, began at calving time, usually about mid-April. From the age of 12, I needed no alarm to wake me once or twice during the night to get dressed and check the springers (cows close to calving).

My mother often met me on the porch to find out if I needed help. She and I became adept at helping first-calf heifers. After each delivery, we shook hands like pals, big grins on our faces.

We joked about hanging out our shingle:

Lillian Portwood & Son: Expert Cow Obstetricians

The Hereford cow has tremendous mothering instincts; she is, therefore, an aggressive protector.

One event regarding my mother's help with calving sticks prominently in my mind. She spotted a newborn calf lying under a feed bunk, apparently abandoned. I watched as she pulled him out from under the bunk and got him on his feet.

Just then, we heard a beller and the sound of galloping hooves. We saw a white face attached to a speeding cow fast approaching baby calf and my mom.

I grabbed a pitchfork and ran to deflect the cow. Mom let the calf go and ran for the barn door about 15 yards away.

I never considered her much of a runner; in fact on several occasions I openly ridiculed her. Somehow, she ran fast enough to keep ahead of the cow.

The cow, probably because of her mothering intuition kicking in, quickly gave up the chase and gave full attention to her offspring. Mom stood by the corner of the barn and laughed.

What else was there to do?

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.