

Branding Day

For the men, branding was just part of the job. For me I imagined it would be an exciting and novel look into the world of the West, a strange and exhilarating adventure. The men might have joked while completing their duties and exchanged news about family and friends over lunch, but, in truth, every task on branding day was a serious undertaking, which, left unfinished, would equate to a loss in profits for the rancher and his family. The men worked hard throughout the day, meaning us kids worked hard to keep up. By the end of the day, the mud caked my boots, my shoulders ached from wrestling with calves, and my nostrils burned with the acidic smell of burnt hair. The whole experience brought to life a culture that I had thought archaic.

I shook Jerome's hand, calloused, nails cut away, the lines of his palm engrained with dirt like the dashboard of the '82 Ford pickup we had driven to the ranch. His Carhart overalls, stained at the knees, Levis jean jacket, and mud encrusted work boots identified him as the owner of the Carlile ranch situated on the Smith River near Great Falls, Montana, and the uncle of my friend, Lindsay. A couple of days beforehand, Lindsay had asked me to join her for what would be my first experience at branding on her family's ranch. Now, I was not naive enough to believe that the day would be easy and clean, but the serious atmosphere surrounding the event surprised me. The tension of the day was evident on Jerome's face as he wiped his furrowed brow and continually looked skyward to watch for incoming clouds. Would the rain hold until nightfall? Would enough cowboys arrive to help? Jerome did not want to put off branding for yet another weekend. The calves were getting too big.

The reddish dirt road curved down through the valley surrounded by hilly slopes of Canadian goldenrod and sagebrush and tilled fields where winter wheat was starting to unfurl its green leaves. The ranch house, with its steep roof, wood smoke puffing from the chimney, and water beaten red siding, was small. Out back, a small creek ran into a tiny fishpond where, later that day, Lindsay and I would stalk turtles. They sat sunning themselves with their necks outstretched to the warmth. The cobblestone path from the front door led past the dog's house where a mutt, black with a white eye-patch, lay stretched out in the weak sunlight. He leapt up and followed us as we left the house and made our way toward the sounds of the corral.

After Lindsay had introduced me to Jerome, we hurried out to the branding area. It had rained the night before so we slipped and slid through the mucky film on the ground to the six-foot high wooden and worn fence enclosing the main corral. Before we had arrived that morning, Jerome and his hired hands had separated the young calves from their mothers. We peered through the rough planks into the adult cow enclosure for my first close encounter with a steer. Now, as a child, I had visited wild animal parks and even ridden a camel at the zoo so my interest in a simple cow was rather nonexistent. I was not expecting to be in awe of these creatures, which I considered docile and somewhat harmless. Looking through the fence, I was

shocked by how intimidating the cows were up close. The herd of cattle seemed to be on the verge of panic; they butted into each other, churned the mud into a soupy concoction, and lurched at the ranchers. Snot and mucus ran down their wet snouts, and their eyes rolled wildly in their sockets, front to side, up and down. At points I could only see the whites of their eyes transforming them, for a second, into a crazed alien life form. Their muscles stood out against their rough hides, and the fence groaned and cracked when they accidentally brushed their bulk against it. Periodically, one cow would throw itself on top of its neighbor, which, at a quick glance, looked like a mammoth grizzly bear with its huge humped-back lumbering through the herd. The power of the animal, the sheer size, and pure strength baffled me. I realized that this animal could pommel me into the muddy earth without a second thought.

The older cows bellowed again and again filling the air with their deep elongated moans. These frightened mothers, separated from their calves that were in a smaller pen, gravitated toward the fence, and the calves, bunching together at the far end of the corral would answer in their own higher bleats hoping to be rescued. At several points throughout the day a calf would suddenly lose what composure it had and throw itself repeatedly at the fence attempting to rejoin the adult herd. I saw in their panicked expressions and actions, the fear threatening to tear the young calves apart. When the ranch hands were not looking, I would try to calm them with a loving pat on the head and a scratch behind the ear. Although I am sure it did not sooth the calf, my guilty conscience was somewhat placated.

Branding has evolved from the early days of roping and hog-tying. Today it resembles a fairly orderly Henry Ford assembly line operation. The youngsters like myself comprised the front line of attack. Our job was to move the calves into a shoot from the small corral where they remained trapped. We would race at the calves with dirt flying, waving our arms, yelping "Yahhh!" at the tops of our lungs in an attempt to herd them toward the shoot. Some were sufficiently startled to head into the shoot without further intimidation on our part, but others were not so convinced by our shows of bravado. Wearing gloves we grabbed their heads and twisted their necks forcing them to turn toward the shoot. Bucking and kicking they wheeled us around as we fought for footholds. Sometimes they won, sending us reeling with a stomped foot or kicked shin, but, in the end, they all made their way into the line for the "table".

A gate blocked the other end of the shoot, which opened into the corral where all the cowboys stood. Once the gate was open, the calf had to pass "the table" which could be rolled from the normal upright position to a perpendicular position, a table turned on its side. The wide-eyed calf, bolting toward freedom, would attempt to pass the perpendicular table top but before it could escape two claws, which were attached to the table, would crash down over the body of the calf, one trapping the head by enclosing around the neck and the other tightening around the belly below the ribcage. A cowboy would then flip the table upright consequently laying the calf on its side. The calf would flail its legs, running in midair but firmly

stuck in place. Then, the ranch hands descended on the frightened creature. The calf must have felt it had been caught in a maelstrom with a continual battering of all its senses. First the calf's neck was stuck with a nightmare of syringes for vaccines like IBR, which would protect against rhino-tracheitis and PI-3, which is used to fight parainfluenza. Then, large hole punches were used to punch through the calf's ear and the cowboys inserted plastic identification tags into them. The calf's newly grown horns were burned from its head with fiery metal rods. Finally, all the calves were branded on the left rear flank and the males were castrated. All within about four minutes.

The smell saturated everything including my clothes and my hair. The calf's hair sizzled and burned away. When the fiery iron began to melt the skin, the calf bucked its small head against the restraints and cried out in pain and surprise. The calf could not see what was occurring because of the head vise. The wind swept the smoke across my face and the rank aroma infiltrates my senses, stung my eyes, and wrinkled my nose. It was almost like burning plastic but earthier.

At one point I had just pushed a calf into the shoot when I felt a sudden warmth envelope my thigh. Startled and confused, I backed up. Running down my leg was a gelatinous, dripping smear of poop. Pure terror had twisted this calf's bowel movement into a gooey, disgusting solution, which now covered my quite putrid smelling leg. Jerome burst out laughing at such a wonderful example of "the Hershey squirts". I was horrified but watched as, throughout the rest of the day, this gross liquid sprayed a few other ranch hands. Every time, laughter erupted. In most circles an occurrence such as this would evoke screeches of disgust, but apparently life is different on a ranch.

My father had warned me that the male calves would be castrated. The ranchers castrate the young steers, because it makes the males grow larger. He had told me with beef prices at \$1.30 per pound and with potentially 500 pounds on each feeder calf at slaughtering time, the ranchers were hopeful to increase their profit margins. The idea of castration certainly bothered me; I found myself upset that a poor baby steer should have to go through something so appalling for a few extra dollars. Even through the first few, which I could not help but watch, I cringed when they tied a rope around the calf's hoof, pulled it back, cut through the scrotum, and removed the testicles. But I also watched the cowboys' faces. They performed what was obviously a painful experience for the calf and I never saw any emotion. They talked about things like the weather and their families but always continued to conduct the process smoothly. I understood that ranch hands could not pamper the steers since they were not objects of affection or endearment but a part of their livelihood, but I, personally, could not have completed the task of castration without some feelings of guilt. It was not that the cowboys did not care for the animals but neither did they treat them as one would a loyal dog. They were animals, not pets. Castration was not a special event full of angst on the part of the cowboys. It was simply the way it was done.

Finally at the end of the day, the sun began to sink behind the hills, which illuminated the fields. The grasses began to glow golden yellow against the darkening, steel grey sky. The last calf for this year had been branded. Lindsay and I had been playing by the little pond when one of the cowboys warned us to stand clear, because they wanted to release the herd back to the open range. Scrambling atop an old John Deere tractor, which smelled of grease and last summer's hay, we watched the cattle traipse by us. A look of calm had replaced their earlier panic. They seemed to have forgotten the pain, stress, and fear of the day. The adults plodded by with heads lowered, swinging back and forth while the calves trotted near their mothers and periodically tossed their heads about as many playful young animals do. The ranchers, like the cattle, did not look back on the day, and, yet, I continue to reflect back on branding day. For the ranchers branding was just another day at work. I, on the other hand, remember everything. I can easily recall my misty breath in the morning, the sweat dampening my forehead under my hat brim, and the taste of the dust in my mouth. Having never experienced such a mixture of rough and rustic activities, I would never want to erase the memories gained throughout branding day.