

On being a farm wife -And other hazards

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We've all seen the setting.

In the distance are purplish-colored hills, rising above rolling, grassy pastureland. Clouds of puffy white float through the deep-blue sky.

And dust begins to rise across this pastoral scene.

Then the TV or movie camera pans to the side, where a herd of spotlessly clean reddish-brown and white Hereford cattle—or maybe picturesque Longhorns—comes loping around a hillside. Flanking the streaming herd of bawling cows and calves is the most romantic symbol of the old West.

Cowboys. Sitting tall in their saddles, astride beautiful, muscular horses of chestnut brown, palomino gold or striking pintos of black and white. Cowboys who rarely lose their broad-brimmed hats—who gracefully switch directions on a dime to nudge along the independent-spirited cow lagging behind—who effortlessly lob a lasso that falls in place the first time on the neck of the errant calf headed for trouble.

Cowboys. We'd all like to be one.

There are still real working cowboys who do all that on real working ranches. And not only in the West, but on some places here closer in the East. And a popular vacation for some adventurous folks is to go spend several days on a working ranch geared to such visitors, where for the cost of room, board and a dependable horse, you can help with the roundups. Saddle sores are just part of the experience.

We have our own resident cowboy. Of sorts. He nearly ran over me a few nights ago headed out for the roundup.

Leaning over to wash and prep a cow for milking, I quickly pulled back into safety the part of me that was slightly protruding out into the center-alley of the barn, as he barreled by on his steed. A breeze stirred in his wake and bits of sawdust, flung into the air by his passage, settled back onto the floor.

There were four new baby calves scattered around the maternity pasture. Earlier, we'd herded their mamas in for their first trip through the milking procedure after calving. With moth-

ers settled into the milking herd, now the babies would be moved to the safety of the calf nursery.

Momentarily, he returned with the first black and white baby. No herding on foot for these day-old calves. This little heifer calmly lay across his lap, back legs folded under her, forelegs extended. Her head was up, ears perked and eyes wide, seeming to enjoy the trip in from the meadow on the three-wheeler.

Not all calves are so cooperative about being rounded up in our resident-cowboy, three-wheeler style. Often they squirm and wiggle, creating difficulty with holding the calf while also

steering the "horse." Some protest-vocally and loud. On occasion, one will escape and run away like a deer. Once in awhile, a nervous one will leave our cowboy with a slightly wet lap.

But retrieving calves is just one of the many uses we make for our three-wheeled horse, one of the hardest-used pieces of equipment on the place. It's invaluable for real roundup work, when the cows knock over a gate or the heifers discover that a rainstorm has shorted out the electric fence and they are free, free, free to go "explore."

This mount is handy for jumping on to ride to the fields to check hay or emerging stands of corn, to repair breakdowns, haul tools, move bags of feed and bales of hay. You never have to stop before an urgent heifer roundup to fasten a saddle or brush it down after a late-night maternity pasture check. And, frankly, a flat tire is more easily replaced than a lame foot.

On the other hand, how many horseback cowboys have to fight spider colonies homesteading within the front-end steering mechanism?

Plants Need Less Water

Here's some good news for weary summer waterers: Plants probably aren't as thirsty as they used to be.

Plants need carbon dioxide (CO₂) to grow. It acts on them just like a fertilizer. To get CO₂ from the atmosphere, plants open tiny holes called stomates in their leaves. These same openings let water escape from the plant.

But today's higher atmospheric CO₂ levels mean the plants don't have to open their stomates quite so wide, so less water is wasted, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture scientist Herman S. Mayeux Jr.

Mayeux and co-workers are finding this in experiments, growing plants in varying CO₂ levels. They range from the approximately 200 parts per million (ppm) of the Ice Age to today's approximately 360 ppm and the 700 to 1,000 ppm expected in the future.

In one test, the researchers

planted a rangeland brush species called acacia in rooms where CO₂ levels were 350, 700 or 1,000 ppm. The acacia in 1,000 ppm of CO₂ grew nearly five times as much as the plant in 350 ppm—but it used no more water than the 350 ppm plant.

In another experiment, Mayeux and colleagues Hyrum B. Johnson and H. Wayne Polley grew wheat in a specially constructed growth chamber in which flowing air's CO₂ content gradually decline from 350 ppm to 200 ppm.

"At the 200 ppm like that of the Ice Age, the plants did very poorly and required twice as much water to grow the same amount of forage or grain," Polley said. "As CO₂ increased from

the Ice Age levels to modern levels, the wheat's seed yield tripled."

Johnson said plant's more efficient use of water in higher CO₂ could explain how brush has spread across the American range. Photographs of Western rangeland in the 1800s show much less brushy vegetation than is present today.

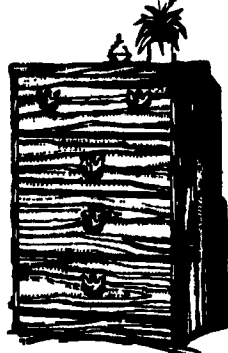
"Carbon dioxide levels a hundred years ago were about 280 parts per million," Johnson pointed out. "The rising CO₂ levels over the past century have meant that plants could proliferate on part of the range that formerly was too dry." (Agricultural Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture)

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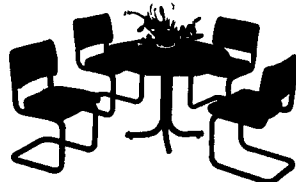
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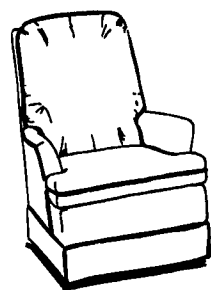
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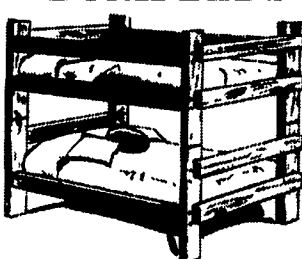


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