

Old Time Cowman – His Ways

By Lona Tankersley Burkhart

A cowman is a breed apart. Yet how can you tell one of them from assorted cowboys, gunzels and dudes that copy their dress, and their way of life? This has been discussed quite a bit lately at the cowboy poetry gatherings. It always reminded me of the dudes that would look at a little mule and say, "what a cute burro", and then they would see a big burro and call it a mule. I was often asked how you could tell the difference. Well, try to explain it. They both have big ears, little feet and etc. But anyone who has ever been around them certainly knows the difference. It's the same way with cowmen and cowboys. We know one another. And what you wear and what you say can't fool us.

My father always said the difference between the cowboy and the cowman was the cow. That with a cowman, the cow always comes first. Her needs and her care. You'll never see a GOOD cowman chouse a cow unnecessarily. A cowman rides up on a bunch of cows that are bedded down and reins up his horse off a ways, lettin' the cattle get up on their own, stretch and stand. He enjoys watching them. He uses his horse to save his cow. A lot of horsemen work the horse on the cow. There is a difference. Which is most important to you. To save wear and tear on the cow, or the horse? When he moves them, the cows always set the pace. He handles them easy and ANY thing that upsets his cattle, upsets him. Seeing someone cussing a cow they can't handle always reminds me of the roper who can't catch something, cuss his horse.

Bad cowboys make bad cattle. Cattle reflect the way they are handled. If you don't really enjoy cattle, you will never make a cowman. You may own the biggest ranch in the country, or be a worlds champion, but you won't be a cowman. Its an under-standing between cattle and people. There is so many of these folks now days that think to be a cowboy it's beneath you to irrigate or put up hay. But what they don't understand is that, feed for the cow is part of the operation, without feed, no cow, without the cow, there isn't much use for a cowboy. A cowman knows his cattle. He don't need to weigh his calves to tell which cow is the best producer. He remembers each calf she ever had. He knows the cow born on the range, will do best there, and is worth more. She knows where the feed is best when it's dry, and where the first feed comes in the spring. If she loses her calf one year to the coyotes or some other reason, he don't sell her. He knows she'll have a calf next year, and she winters cheap. Much cheaper than a cow new to the country.

Times have changed, and so has the way we run cows. Country is smaller and we calve out our heifers now. We never used to WANT a heifer to calve young. They calved out on the range by themselves. Some of those ol' cows that never had a calf till they were three, lived and produced for a ten years and more. They were acclimated and never had any help.

I recently read in BEEF TODAY about a "new" way they are running cows on the Deseret ranch, owned by the Mormon Church. They are breeding the cows more in tune with the seasons, and letting them calve later, according to the natural feed, and cutting way back on the handling of both cows and hay. They are very surprised at how much cheaper it is to run a cow, and the end weights on the calves are better. It's the way it worked for years. That's sort of like rediscovering the wheel.

Some people seem to think that a new idea has got to be better, and sometimes that's so. But not always. One of the reasons the agriculture, (particularly cattle) industry got into such a lot of trouble in the 80's was we listened to a lot of a loan agents and advisors that were young and just out of school. They had no experience whatsoever. One of my acquaintance became loan officer for the P.C.A. right out of school. The only cow he'd ever owned was a 4-H steer. And there were plenty more just like him. He forgot that his grandfathers savvy had enabled him to go to college. His grandfather was a good cowman, and had seen both the good and bad, and would have made an excellent loan officer. These young fellows kept saying more is better. And it wasn't. Books are fine, but they will never replace experience. Then when they found out what a disaster they'd help create, they started calling loans, and multiplied the problem by pushing down land and cattle values with a flooded market.

