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An occasional — sometimes cherished — happening.

Round-Up

By Margie Snowden North

The alarm disturbs a sound sleep at six o'clock, and we're tempted to turn over and catch another forty winks. Instead, we roll out and hit the floor. Breakfast is hurried, the dirty dishes stacked in the sink to be contended with later.

These are modern days, so we don't saddle horses—though many ranchers still do—but we pull on our boots, and maybe hats, and step out into a fresh new day. It's still early enough to be cool down here on the river, and some of us are shivering. In an hour or two, heat waves will be dancing before our eyes and sweat dripping off noses.

It's round-up time on the BN Ranch, an activity that occurs two or three times a year on most Western Oklahoma ranches. In early spring, we round up in order to work (i.e., brand, castrate, inoculate) a new crop of calves and put tags in their mamas' ears. Number tags for identification purposes are thrust through the lower ear when cattle are purchased; tags containing an insecticide designed to ward off flies are attached yearly in the same way.

In the fall there's another round-up in order to separate calves from their mothers—the weaning process. If sickness occurs, round-up is necessary for the purpose of treating sick animals. Occasionally round-up is required solely for sorting cattle and moving portions of the herd to other pastures. In our case, with two Hereford bulls, two Beefmasters, and a Limousin-cross, and mother cows ranging from black baldy to Brangus and even a Longhorn-cross or two, there's a certain amount of shuffling required to keep certain breeds together

for optimum results.

Round-up today is no longer regularly scheduled for certain seasons of the year; it's purely a financial venture. We've got a note due at First American, and we'll run in the collateral and pick out enough to make the payment!

The three-wheelers and four-wheel-drive pickup have been gassed up and are ready to go. We head out, a small procession, through gates and cowlots and a triangle lane, toward the north eighty. Should the round-up occur in winter when cattle are accustomed to being fed and their dinner bell is a pickup horn, this procedure would be simple. A few toots of the horn and a parade of cattle would follow us straight into the corral. But it's early summer at present, and round-up is a different story—though still not a problem.

The BN Ranch is bounded on the east by Turkey Creek and on the north by the Northfork of Red River, extending for about two miles down-river. We're a relatively small ranch with less than a thousand acres in the initial block (rented property gives us an additional two thousand acres) and much of the terrain is rough: sand hills, bogs, ponds, washes, shinnery, sage, bear grass, native grasses, plum thickets. But today's small herd has already been lured by fresh pasture into a fairly consistent field—leveled by dozens of hours of labor, three or four hundred gallons of diesel fuel, and a hard-working four-wheel-drive Case tractor—so the operation will be relatively simple: all vehicles to the east end and bring them down.

Don't get in any hurry. Flap an arm at stragglers. Move easily, circling, nudg-

ing. Make a doughnut on the three-wheelers in order to head off an upstart. Dodge a clump of hackberry. carefully skirt the carcass of a beautiful black baldy cow that recently dropped dead for no apparent reason. Idly study the patch of newly sprigged grass on one side of the pond, and the waist-high haygrazer on the other side. What was once a strip of virtual wasteland is fast shaping up and you briefly consider the many remaining acres that need improvement.

Dust hangs in the morning air, as well as an occasional cry urging the cattle on. The sun is already beginning to get hot, the sky paling into a hazy light blue. A covey of quail scurries for cover in a shinnery patch. Calves bawl questioningly, even while ambling obediently for the corrals, unaware of their approachig fate.

We move steadily, everything under control. Across the remaining acres of the eighty. Through a shinnery patch at the west end, down the narrow little pickup trail, through the gate and the lane, through another gate. Cattle crowd a little, protesting, reluctant to be pushed into pens. But finally the last gate is latched and the animals are milling, half-heartedly seeking a way out, searching for stray bits of hay in the racks. Actual round-up is over, just that easily, and we stand for a moment looking the herd over.

Now for the sorting, done by size in this case. Think this one will go six? Run him in! Here's the little orphan. Doing better, but he won't make this load. This one--remember him? "Pulled" him early one Sunday morning. A first-calf heifer was the mama; she was too little

and he was too big. Ben tended to the technicalities while I turned the crank on the calf-puller (a nylon rope is attached to the calf's hoof). I braced myself in my boots and worked almost as hard as the heifer until it was over and there he was, huge and wet and bawling. My legs were trembling almost as much as his by then--and we still made it to church on time.

Here's that Brahman-cross heifer, still homely, but stretchy. Look at those legs, that straight back. Kick her back--we'll give her a chance to live up to her mother's standards.

Black baldy steers are still the best sellers. Cut out those three--they'll go. And that little red baldy. He'll go six, I'll bet my last year's hat, and the year's before (which is the same one). Run him in!

Head that Brahman-cross steer off. Man, he's sleek. He'll sure go. And that Hereford. Look at the size of him. If we had two or three hundred of that calibre, think of the interest we could pay!

Okay, that's twenty, a fair-sized bunch for the old goose-neck trailer. Back her in there now. Little to the left. Hold it right there. Let's load! Slam the gate--make sure the latch catches. Remember the time we strung them out from here to Erick?

Here we come, Hollis Livestock Auction. Got a load fresh off the river--how's the market today? Pretty stout, you say? Music to our ears! Maybe we can pay that note off now and relax for a few months 'til the next one's due. . .