

# OUTSIDE THE BOX

## The two-edged sword of convenience

by Tom Field, University of Nebraska



Not long after exiting the rental car lot on a chilly late-fall morning, my hands sensed a distinct increase

in temperature on the surface of the steering wheel. Concerned, I pulled to the side of the road and began searching for the source of the problem — sniffing the air for any hint of smoke, glancing about the interior in search of signs of an electrical short — all to no avail. I grabbed the operator’s manual and discovered that the “hot wheel” was not a problem, but a newly added feature designed to make cold-weather driving more pleasant.

Safe in the knowledge that the steering wheel wasn’t about to burst into flames, I could enjoy the convenience of warmer hands. Yet, I am certain that my ancestors would have responded with a collective roll of the eyes and an expression of disapproval at how soft my generation has become. Nonetheless, humans have been in constant search for innovations and improvements that enhance the quality, efficiency or ease of their lives.

Ranching is no different. We enjoy a number of conveniences that make our work easier and more efficient than that experienced by previous generations. As time marches on, one generation’s convenience becomes a necessity to the next.

Considering the conveniences on our ranch, there are a few I would sure hate to give up:

- ▶ Multi-dose syringes;
- ▶ Electricity in the barn;
- ▶ Phones with easy connections to the vet, bank and neighbors;
- ▶ Comfortable saddles;
- ▶ Nylon ropes;
- ▶ Well-designed cattle-handling equipment;

- ▶ Polled cattle;
- ▶ Ear tags;
- ▶ Cattle transport systems (goosenecks to pots); and
- ▶ Video marketing.

The conveniences on this list have contributed to the success of our ranch and have provided comfort and enjoyment to our lives. However, convenience comes at a price. Robert Staughton Lynd once wrote that “the telephone is the greatest nuisance among conveniences, the greatest convenience among nuisances.”

A life defined by ease, comfort and convenience is sure to steal wholeness from the human spirit. Without the tempering power of struggle we lose our vitality. Our capacity to demonstrate grit begins to erode. The flame of our individual and collective resolve becomes but a mere flutter of illumination in the night.

For example, convenience in communication has moved society sharply away from transformational conversations, deepening of understanding and wisdom, and depth in human

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relationships into a realm of soul-deadening transactional approaches characterized by self-adoration, the destruction of listening as a key to understanding, and the elevation of outrage as the antidote for all issues both monumental and trivial.

The pursuit of convenience must be bounded within a set of constraints that prevent us from simply taking the path of comfort and ease at every turn. The absence of struggle, disdain for sweat-inducing work, and trading fulfillment born from embracing the full spectrum of experiences for another cheap convenience does not make for a better community. It is not conducive for raising up capable children, nor for assuring liberty for future generations.

For the first 25 years of my life, there were teams of draft horses on our ranch used to pull hay sleds in the winter so we could feed the cattle on snow-covered outlying

pastures. The heavy reins used to guide the Belgian horses required a strong grip, and I distinctly remember how cold my hands would get on those arctic mornings in the high country.

However, I also remember the sound of the runners on the snow, the creak of the harness, the wonderful smell of sweaty horses mixed with sweet mountain hay, the puffs of steam erupting into the frigid air rising from the nostrils of cowboys and equines, the beauty of God’s creation, and the fellowship shared with my family and our crew. I’d trade all the days of warm steering wheels for one more day holding those reins. |

Editor’s note: In “Outside the Box,” a regular, separate column in both the *Angus Journal*® and the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, author Tom Field shares his experience as a cattleman and his insightful perspective on the business aspects of ranching. Field is director of the Engler Agribusiness Entrepreneurship Program at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where he holds the Paul Engler Chair of Agribusiness Entrepreneurship.

