

Outside the BOX: Cowboy stories

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Getting bucked off the first time; pulling the oil plug before the engine cools; delivering a calf in a tough situation without Dad, Mom or the vet's help; or making that first cattle purchase — these are the kinds of experiences that tend to stick with us. More often than not,

these are life moments that have their own storyline, and over time the lessons learned from both success and failure become the heart of the matter.

It has been said that the difference between a fairy tale and a cowboy story is that a fable begins with the phrase, "Once



upon a time in a land far away," while the cowboy precedes each recounting with the statement, "No kidding, this really did happen."

Lessons learned

We were driving a three-quarter ton Dodge pulling a gooseneck filled with five saddle horses across the county from one ranch to another to help finish up spring branding. Todd, one of the best cowboys in our valley, was at the wheel as we observed a car come to a stop from a side road. Then, without warning, the small two-door auto pulled out into our lane. There were two choices: one would most certainly have killed the driver and passenger of the small car, while the other would involve an unexpected trip across the bar ditch up onto a service road.

Todd chose option No. 2 as we sailed off the highway like a jet ski towing an inner tube full of kids. Dust filled the air as we roared up the embankment and onto the service road continuing roughly in the same direction as our original course. The trailer was attached. The

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remuda was still upright and, other than slightly more alert to their surroundings, largely unaffected by the sudden turn of events.

Without missing a beat, Todd offered up a philosophical summary of our harrowing brush with disaster — "I bet we just made that fella's day!"

Lesson — Make the best choice possible in a crisis, keep calm and carry on.

The rain had been slow, steady and relentless as we moved 500 pairs of commercial cows from one grazing unit

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to the next on our allotment. On a good day, the move could be accomplished in five to six hours, but on that day, it stretched to nine. As is the job of young buckaroos, my role was riding drag trying to keep a bunch of soaked-to-the-skin calves motivated to stay with the herd.

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Lesson — Don’t get caught up in those things you can’t control, but always take control of your attitude.

4-H club activities provided the hub of the social activities for our ranch community. The volunteer leaders were almost always husband-and-wife teams who owned ranches or ran small businesses. They provided guidance, opportunity and, as needed, a little corrective action to their young charges. We learned community service, fundraising, vocational skills, leadership, teamwork, responsibility, public speaking and problem solving.

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Lesson — Have fun, enjoy the time of being together, but take the time to help clean up. When we all pitch in, the work gets done quickly.

The sun was just beginning to warm the earth, the birds called out their morning songs, and the bull calves sent up small cloud-like wisps into the morning air with each breath. As they left the feedbunk to return to the pasture, they would pause at the gate as Bart scratched them one by one with the showstick ever present in his hands.

As I recall that scene, I wonder who enjoyed those moments the most. The bulls seemed to relish the attention as they sought out the interaction, but I

am also certain that the stockman found a quiet joy and sense of contentment in that ceremony played out each morning.

The walk back up the hill to the log home filled with love was reflective as we talked about cattle, land, history and community. The kitchen would be alive

with the sound of his family and the warmth of that home was palpable. It was fueled by a passion for cattle, ranching, meaningful work, family and building a life shared with his wife, Mary, who was truly his partner in all things. Those mornings have never left me.

Lesson — It is a beautiful world, we are blessed in our role as stewards of God’s creatures, and there is meaning and joy to be found if only we take the time to look.

No kidding, this really did happen!

