

Rockwood Brown's memories

Two years at the Billings Public Stockyards-1943-44

I got a job at the Billings Public Stockyards, starting the summer of 1943. Dale Wilder, the Manager, was a rawboned, weathered, bow-legged man, who in his earlier days trailed horse herds from Texas to the Chapple ranch near Miles City. Always the gentleman, which in my experience typified the real cow man, Dale had everybody's respect.

I used a motor scooter to go to and from work. It was a home-made machine with a Maytag one-cylinder two-cycle engine that connected to the rear wheel by a chain. The chain would often break during the trip and I had to do field repairs. A problem with the chain and sprocket was that it was not the usual type of chain that was used on bicycles, but was one of a kind that I couldn't replace. I had some spare links, pliers and a hammer that I carried on the scooter for such emergencies.

I'd work five full days a week during the summer, and in the fall, I'd go there after school and work until about 7:30 in the evening. I don't think I worked there in the winter, as the scooter wouldn't have made it in the snow---although I remember throwing bales of hay into the pen mangers which had ice in them and weighed over 100 lbs or so. Also I remember being in the chute house when the wood stove was cherry red hot---so, I must have spent some time at the yards during the winter.

My jobs during the summer included cleaning out pens with a pitch fork and loading the manure/straw waste in into a horse drawn cart. (this was during World War II and as there were no tractors, horses did the job the old fashioned way) The wetter, the heavier. They had a rail siding at the yards and we would load the animals in the box cars for their trip to slaughter houses or further feed. I didn't have to work with pigs very much, except to load them into box cars, and I established a strong dislike of pigs, especially a load of boars, with their stink and squealing (I guess I'd squeal too if I knew where they were shipping me). A lot of my work was at the truck loading chutes or docks, where the livestock were unloaded from trucks.

This type of stockyard operation was different than the present day auction yards, in that the rancher would bring in his cattle, sheep, pigs or horses and be put on display in separate pens. Order buyers from different "houses", such as Central, McGovern, etc. would act as agents to buy and sell the livestock, taking a

the animals, and what would affect the price. They could look at a steer and come close to what it weighed and how the animal would “dress out”, i.e. what percentage of the total weight would be saleable meat.

At that time, the accepted standard for a good cow was what it looked like, versus today the emphasis is more on the ability of a cow to throw a calf that will gain weight rapidly. I remember pictures of prize bulls that had straw piled up around its legs so as to look blocky and low to the ground, which then was the ideal. At that time cows were ready for slaughter at weights less than 1,000 lbs. Herefords, which were the dominant breed, had to have white on top of their necks, to the withers, and no more. A “line-back” Hereford, with the white extending too far back, was docked in price, notwithstanding the fact that when slaughtered, with the hide removed, they all looked alike and the meat tasted the same. These phoney characteristics were kept alive by the order buyers to “dock” the price when they could. Later they introduced so called “exotic” breeds from Europe such as Charolais, Simmental, etc which were huge animals that they used for cross breeding with the Hereford and Angus cattle. After awhile they found that cows, especially first-calf heifers, were experiencing problems with the calves being too big, so as to cause birthing deaths. They then genetically selected exotics with a characteristic of throwing calves weighing under 100 lbs which would nevertheless put on big gains when growing up. Today the standard breeds of Hereford and Angus have resumed their place again, only larger and rangier than in my stockyard days.

I earned 25 cents an hour during those two years. In May of 1943 I turned 15, and started flying lessons. As I recall, I had to pay around \$4.00 an hour for dual (with instructor) and so that was 16 hours of pay. The next year, 1944, I wanted to solo, but the regulations said you had to be 16 to do so; however, I talked my instructor into letting me solo a few weeks before my 16th birthday. That's where my money went. I don't think they withheld anything from my paycheck, such as Social Security, taxes, etc at that time and I must have received a monthly check of around \$50.00. I would take my checks to be cashed at the Stockman's Bar on Montana Avenue (across the street from what is now the Western Heritage Center). On one check cashing trip to the Stockman, I looked at my cash awhile after I left and discovered that a \$20 bill must have dropped out of my pocket. Someone bought himself a lot of beers with my hard earned money (80 hours of work) and the episode still comes back to me (post-traumatic syndrome)

The Bent Brothers and John Feaster. When I was at the loading chutes I worked with Fred Bent and John Bent, and John Feaster. They all wore large black hats that stuck up like a stove pipes. Fred was about five foot tall and his hat took up most of his image. They were former working cowboys, as were many of the employees at the yards, and their infirmities and age led them to jobs that were not so tough on their bodies. They were the salt of the earth and as honest as the day was long. Fred had a little place in the Lockwood area and ran a few calves.

Henry Kamhoot. Henry had narcolepsy or something similar, where he would fall asleep all of the time. When I worked after school and it was cold outside, between truck unloadings, we sat in the Chute house with a coal space-heater glowing cherry red. The heat would get to Henry and he fell asleep uncontrollably while you were carrying on a conversation with him. Like so many of these men, he had attributes that he never told you about, but I had to learn from others who knew him earlier. Henry was expert at breaking horses. He used a hackamore on his horses. A hackamore is like a bridle but instead of a metal bit the fit in the horse's mouth, there was a woven leather loop like an upside down tear drop, a bosel, that fit over the front head of the horse, with the reins tied to the bottom. When you pull back on the reins, the bosel of the hackamore would squeeze on the jaws, which the horse didn't like, and then respond. Henry's hackamore was different than any I had seen in that he had a steel rod inside of the woven bosel, and before long the horse's jaws were sore and sometimes with the skin worn off. Henry would use something like twine string for reins and ride the pony along a fence, turning it into the fence to reverse direction. In rapid time, he could get the toughest horse to neck rein on a dime. Some might object to this method, but the pain from the bosel rubbing on the jaw shortened the training process. I heard a story from someone else at the yards that had known Henry when they were working on a ranch. A mean horse will want to take advantage of you and buck when you are traveling down hill, because you are not so stable in that condition. The story is that Henry was riding a bronc, heading down a steep hill, when he fell asleep at the same time the horse started bucking. Henry rode the horse all the way down the hill while it was bucking and woke up at the bottom still on top of the horse. That's good riding.

Hubert McCoullogh. Hubert was a very tall man with hands like dinner plates. There was not one ounce of fat on his body—he was all bone, muscle and sinew. Hubert seemed to work at the yards as sort of a fill-in between his wild horse gathering. At that time Eastern Montana was full of feral horses—probably domestic at one time and then they ran off. Unlike the wild mustangs that the

BLM manages in the Pryor Mountains, which are pretty good looking, smaller horses, the wild horses in Eastern Montana, had a lot of draft horse blood in them, such as Percheron, and Belgian. Hubert would mount a horse and be in absolute control. I do believe that if a horse acted up with him he could step off the horse and throw it to the ground. A couple of times a year Hubert would take some of his cowboy friends and head to the largely open and unfenced area around the Missouri Breaks, which is the rough gumbo country in North East Montana that over the millennia that had eroded and washed into deep ravens and high bluffs. Henry and his friends would gather as many of the wild horses they could, load them into trucks and take them to market. As I recall at time, the only ones who would eat horse meat at that time were Frenchmen, and so that's where the meat went.

Bus Farnum. Bus was a cattle order buyer for Central Agency. He had fair skin and his face was always florid red. He chewed tobacco, as most there did, and always had a toothpick in his mouth. He was spare with his words and smart about cows. I liked Bus because he was always friendly to this green 15 year old. I hadn't seen Bus for probably over twenty years when I got on the elevator at the Court House, heading to Court, and there he was with a lot of other people crowding around. I recognized him right away, and he me, and I effusively greeted him and remarked about how long it had been since I saw him last. He was slow in responding and then, with a grin on his face, said "You've gotten a little gobby haven't you". A gobby cow was one that had been brought to market in an over-fed condition, where their hips rolled with excess fat. I took it in the spirit intended, especially since I was then a little gobby, and that's the last I saw of Bus.

Ralph Brown. (I think his name was Ralph, but that's the best that I can recollect.) Ralph, if that's his name, appeared to be in his late sixties when I worked with. I helped him at the squeeze chute where we did branding, doctoring and de-horning of cattle. At that time most of the cattle had horns (the Angus, which were "polled" i.e. hornless, were not very prevalent then). It was sometimes necessary to de-horn cattle that had large horns so they would ship better when packed closely in rail cars and trucks. Dehorning was done the old fashion way, with a carpenter saw. The base of the skull where you sawed off the horn would spurt blood (pulsating from an artery with each heart beat) and at the end of the day you would be striped all over your face and clothes with blood spray. We would dab a creosote products called KRS on the wounds to slow down the flow of blood until it clotted and keep the flies away. He reminds me today of

Stewart Able from Custer, as he was small, light weight, had a craggy face, and a real cowboy. You take away so much from being around people like those two.

I never like pigs or sheep, but of the two, pigs were the worst. I still have memories of loading a bunch of very large boars onto a rail car, and how they squealed and stunk to high heaven. I know that they taste good and when young are sometimes cute, but I don't like them nevertheless. Sheep have a very peculiar mind. They will do just the opposite of what you want, and in some circumstances, stampede. I tried awful hard to like them as my Dad really loved sheep, but didn't succeed. One skill I picked up at the yards was counting the sheep as they were let out the gate into the alley. You have to do it in bunches, such as threes, and really concentrate.