



Modern Cowboy Maintains Many Traditions

By Candy Moulton

It is cold in Wyoming and the first snow blankets the ground white, even though it is only mid-September. This is the time of year Duane Wood likes best, when he moves cattle to pastures near the ranch so they will be easier to find and feed when the real storms of winter arrive.

As the days grow shorter, Wood's pace slows ever so slightly. Before long, he and other ranch workers will be pushing cattle into corrals, sorting them and separating the calves.

As summer quickly wanes, Wood is getting ready for winter. Slim, with a quiet manner and neat mustache, he repairs fences and corrals and positions the hay for easier winter feeding. He also cuts and hauls firewood to heat his family's home.

DRIVING THE CATTLE

It is tough to define "cowboy" today. Once thought of as a man on horseback in the American West, today's cowboy still values his horse but also may use an all-terrain vehicle or pickup truck.

In the 1800s, most cowboys were young men who helped gather cattle on southern ranges, mainly in Texas, and moved them on cattle drives so they could roam, eat, and grow fat to be eventually sold.

The early image of the cowboy might be a young man driving



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hundreds or thousands of head of cattle over the land, crossing rivers, eventually selling the herd and then spending his pay in rail towns like Dodge City or Abilene in Kansas, or Ogallala, Nebraska.

Over time, more people moved into the range areas. Some of the range was fenced, and while the size of many ranching operations diminished, others have remained large enough for thousands of head of cattle. On those ranches, cowboys maintain the tradition of moving the cattle to be certain they have plenty to eat and caring for the herds.

The ranch where Wood works also conducts research to improve the cattle breed, and he spends part of his time tracking cattle statistics such as birth and weaning weights. The office work punctuates the physical labor of ranching.

Wood has not always lived and worked cattle on the Wyoming ranch that employs him now. Like many cowboys he has moved around to seek new or better opportunities. In the past, he worked on a ranch in New Mexico.

MAN, HORSE AND DOG

No matter where a cowboy works, two of his most important tools are his horse and his dog. The horse provides transportation to gather the cattle, especially where the country is rough and rugged; the dog helps with the work.

In the late days of summer, Wood moves hay closer to the ranch, where the cattle can find it in Wyoming's snowy winter. *Candy Moulton*



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Wood's dog, Rosie, is an assistant and a companion when he works alone, as often is the case. Wood trains his own horses. "My relationship with my horse is not unlike my relationship with my wife," Wood said. "We depend on each other. He takes care of me; I take care of him."

A cowboy's work changes with the seasons. In the fall, Wood gathers the cows and calves, then separates them (weaning the calves from their mothers) so the calves can be shipped and sold to feeders, who will raise them for another year until they are sold.

Most ranches keep some of the heifer (female) calves for breeding to replenish the herd. Others, like the ranch where Wood works, keep young bull calves to raise and sell in the spring when other ranchers need them for breeding in their own herds.

During the winter, Wood keeps the cattle close to the home ranch so it is easier to feed them hay as snow piles up. Regardless of the weather, the cattle must be fed every day, and that is the main work on a ranch until calving begins in the late winter or early spring.

When Wood sets out on a winter day or night to check cattle as a Wyoming snowstorm blows across the mountain country, he wears several layers of clothes: insulated underwear, heavy wool shirt, wool vest,



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heavy overcoat, jeans and wool socks inside his insulated boots. His gloves are warm, usually waterproof. If he needs to clear the ice from a water tank, he can put his hand in, remove the ice and never get his fingers wet.

If a blizzard is howling outside, Wood knows his job; he must head into the bitter cold to feed the herd or handle some other task. “We just do it. We may dread going out the door, but we just do it.”

GROWING THE HERD

Spring work involves calving, branding the calves to establish ownership, fixing fences and preparing to move cattle out to the summer range. For calving, Wood moves the cows to a pasture that has trees and other natural protection not far from ranch headquarters.

This part of the yearly work is hard. Using a vehicle or a horse, Wood moves through the herd, day and night, checking on the calves, doctoring any that are sick with a shot of medicine, and making sure new ones are paired with their mothers. Sleep comes in short snatches, as the herd must be evaluated every few hours.

“Ultimately, we are in animal husbandry,” Wood says. “They depend on us, and we’ve got to be there to help them.” That can mean moving the animals from an area where water or grass no longer is available or assisting a cow giving birth. A cowboy is always aware of the livestock.

During the summer, the cattle are on ranges farther from ranch headquarters, eating the natural grass and forage. This time of year, Wood becomes a hayfield worker, cutting, baling then stacking the hay where it will be available as winter feed.

On some ranches, cowboys might spend summer days riding from dawn until nearly dark, moving cattle to different pastures, checking for illness and caring for the herd.

The image of a cowboy decked out in cowboy hat and chaps (leather leggings they place over their pants for protection against weather or brush), wearing boots and spurs that jingle when they walk, is accurate to a

degree; all cowboys wear that outfit some of the time, and Wood does too.

But today’s cowboys are just as likely to wear a short-billed baseball cap (usually advertising a type of livestock feed, ropes or perhaps fertilizer) and jeans without chaps. In winter, they often wear insulated overalls and a wool “scotch” cap with warm ear flaps.

COWBOY FAMILIES

Cowboys come in all shapes and sizes, and they are male and female. Ranch women who work with cattle often are also called cowboys. They might be 18 or 38,

Ranch hands come in all sizes: Wood’s 8-year-old daughter, Cora, regularly helps out her dad. *Candy Moulton*





Professional cowboy Duane Wood's responsibilities include driving cattle on the ranch and running statistics in the office. *Candy Moulton*

or in some cases 8, as is Wood's daughter, Cora, who has been riding and helping her dad move cattle since she was 3.

As a tot she rode Chester, a Shetland pony, and Wood used a long lead to guide the pony as they rode. Eventually Cora took the reins herself, and now she rides a quarter horse just like her dad. Chester has become the mount of her little brother, Bonner, 5, and like Cora, he began riding alone at age 3.

Sometimes Wood's wife, Laurie, helps move cattle. As is usually the case on ranches, Laurie and the children may do the work of cowboys, but they don't receive a paycheck.

Though she is small, Cora is a cowboy kid who knows how to saddle and unsaddle her own horse, how to clean his feet, where to ride as they move the cattle, how to open the gate — and then how to get out of the way so the cattle can move through it. Ranch kids are strong, self-reliant, usually dependable, and they are hard workers because they learn early to take part in the work, Wood says.

"What keeps me in this life is the outdoors and the cattle," Wood said. The opportunity to "get my kids on horseback once in a while" also is attractive because he wants to pass on cowboy traditions. He

enjoys the satisfaction of riding his horse across good rangeland, where the grass is abundant and nutritious, or through a swiftly flowing creek or river, knowing it provides good water for the animals.

"I don't do the same thing every day," Wood says. "My association with other people is very limited. Most of the time I'm not around a lot of people, and I don't mind that. Matter of fact, I get along a lot better with animals than people."

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