

When in Rome, Wear Overalls

Participating in rural life can be an adventure...

There's an old saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do... unless of course it's immoral, illegal or just icky." So, since I moved from downtown Toronto to Lucky Lake, Saskatchewan about a year ago to serve as a United Church of Canada minister, I've been eager to participate in all the events and rituals of rural life. Naturally, I was delighted when local rancher, Sandra Slater, asked if I'd like to help with a branding.

Sandra: You can manage the calves. When we're done, I'll cook up some Prairie Oysters.

Wonderful. A day of real life, frontier-style adventure, plus a seafood lunch.

Days before the event, I decided to get some idea of what branding was all about. I headed to the ranch of Doug and Linda Jones.

Doug explained that branding has come a long way since the "grab 'em by the hooves" hair-searing days of the Old West. With only two helpers, Doug can now process dozens of calves in an hour without touching a single hide.

I watched as calves calmly filed through a railed chute ending at a 'tipping table'. Two metal shields hold the calf securely in place, tip it on its side and the men efficiently vaccinate, ear-chip and apply a quick, electric brand. "What about castrating?" I ask. I had Wikipedia'd 'cow care'. "We stick on an elastic band and eventually the thing just falls off," Doug explained. "No fuss, no bother." I had to think the cow might not see it that way. Still, I left Doug's place confident that I would be entirely able to "manage" a calf down that little chute without so much as smudging my designer cowboy shirt.

Early Saturday morning, I arrive at Willowdale Farm, the ranch owned by Sandra and her husband, Lyle. Light snow speckles the hills surrounding their small, remote farmhouse. Two horses are saddled and standing in the yard. "To provide a little local colour," I think. A surprisingly large group of neighbours begin arriving. Someone asks if I want to borrow overalls. Smiling, I decline.

We head for the corral where some sixty cows and calves, deeply disgruntled about having been rounded up from the pasture, eye us suspiciously and snort in the cold morning air. I ask Sandra where the tipping table and the metal chute are. "Oh, we don't have those," she says, "We brand the old-fashioned way."

I experience a sudden tightening in my stomach. Like I know how those calves with the testicle bands feel.

Allan Allinson, a cowboy with some fifty years of branding experience, swings himself onto a horse and they wade into the herd. A whirl of Allan's lasso, a high-pitched shriek and they emerge dragging a calf by the hind legs. Sandra and Lyle's adult sons, Bryan and Brant, expertly grab the calf by the flank, flip it on its side and begin shouting at me to come hold it down. The calf battles and bawls. The boys instruct me to position my left knee on its neck and my right on its curled front legs. I kneel on the calf and hold on for all I'm worth. A young woman jabs in a vaccination needle. The calf bellows and twists. Sandra swiftly applies a metal wand, red hot from the fire. A flash of flame and smoke, the stench of seared hair. I begin thanking God that it's all over, just as cowboy Trevor Tuplin wanders over, lops off the cap of skin and hair over the calf's testicles, applies one clean snip and plops them into a bucket.

The calf and I share a sudden, harmonious moment of human/animal sympathy. We both go into shock.

Hours later, in Sandra's farmhouse kitchen, I dab off my filthy, wilted shirt. Sandra serves up homemade bread and savoury slow-cooked beef with all the fixings. Then, the traditional delicacy of branding-time, Prairie Oysters; calf testicles, floured, seasoned and fried in as much butter as the pan will hold. The taste and texture are gummy. Normally, I would not say that "gummy" is an adjective that can be used to describe a taste but, in this case, it absolutely does.

Through a picture window I watch cows plodding back up into the hills, the calves already frolicking and sparing with their friends, the trauma of the morning forgotten. I muse for a moment on what I learned today. That sometimes, real life and adventure are not for the faint of heart. And, "When in Rome, wear overalls."

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