

Winter Ranching - in knee deep snow

Feeding the only way in Wyoming's Winter - by Horse-drawn Hay Sleigh



How do horses and cattle get fed on the Hoback River Basin in the deep snow with temperatures that get down as low as 46 degrees below zero? At Bondurant's Dell Fork Ranch (between Pinedale and Jackson in Western Wyoming), the cowboy traditions of the western frontier are still alive; no tractors, just big, gentle work horses to do the heavy pulling.

Though fairly small in size, the land is

dedicated to cattle and haying. It is run almost entirely frontier style. Whether summer or winter, no tractors are used. The cattle and hay operations run on "HORSEPOWER."

The Dell Fork Ranch, overseen by ranch foreman Lennie Campbell, is home to the Campbell Cattle Company. Lennie proudly utilizes, and has for years, a back-to-basics approach to ranching. Campbell runs approximately 240 head of cattle and 40 head of horses, using the remaining land for pasture and hay.

Hay is harvested in July and August using teams of horses to pull plows, swathers, and to stack the hay. Most of it is stacked until winter in giant haystacks or bents, which Campbell believes keeps the organic hay in better condition than modern baled hay. It is one of the few ranches left, that still stack "loose" Hay.



The ranch sits at the base of the majestic Gros Ventre Mountain Range, and at 8,000 feet elevation experiences some of the coldest, harshest, snowiest winters in the state. Usually after Thanksgiving, the grass on the meadows is covered deeply with snow, making it impossible for Campbell's cattle to graze. With two or three feet of snow on the ground Lennie faces the challenge of getting food to his herd every day. His

herd's survival, and the ranch's survival, depends on this every day.

Campbell hitches his team of draft horses to a low slung hay sleigh, and goes about the daily chore of feeding over 240 cattle and 40 horses, in a 1,000 foot "cow chow line." Every morning, he rides his snowmobile, (the one modernized luxury he allows himself) out to the corral, and then hitches his team of horses to this "hay sleigh." As Lennie drives his two or four horse team (depending on the depth of the snow) out into the meadow, the modest herd begins to gather in a circle, knowing the sleigh's arrival means it's "chow time." As the horse-drawn feed sleigh reaches its' destination, Lennie climbs in back and begins to fork the loose hay to the herd gathering in the quarter mile long line. The horses continue to pull the sleigh slowly along the circled path, clearly understand their daily routine even without Campbell's steady hands at the reins.

The daily winter feeding usually takes about two hours, depending on the depth of the snow. Then, it's back

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to the haystack to reload for the next morning. The Campbell Cattle Company's "Unstoppable Hay Rack" is equipped to cope with every possible contingency, and comes complete with shovel, harness and fencing tools, pitchfork and a king-sized ice pick, used to break the ice over waterholes so the cattle and horses can drink. Fencing pliers and stretching tools allow him to mend the fence when the occasional moose breaks into the haystack.

In other words, Lennie has equipped his horse-drawn diner with everything needed to ensure his cattle and horses are fed every day, whether the snow is hip deep, the temperature is -40 degrees, or more often than not; both. The most important tool Campbell has and uses every day, is perseverance.



Ranch Foreman Lennie Campbell, in -40 below weather and three feet of snow, loads the hay sleigh for the morning's chores. Photo © Barbara Ellwood.

This way of life might seem like making it tougher on yourself than you need to. That's just fine with Lennie, who knows that necessity means getting the job done

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no matter what, and is most content driving his team of horses rather than a tractor or a farm truck. Campbell makes the most of his ranching experience, and understands what it takes to get to his herd and back every day, safely. ■

If you feel like experiencing this way of life from afar, there is a webcam, operated by landowner Paul Ellwood, located on the Dell Fork Ranch in Bondurant, Wyoming. A new camera was installed in late March, 2006, which has pan, tilt and zoom capabilities. The zoom and picture position may change periodically to highlight different things within the camera's view, giving you the viewer, a good idea of what life is like here. The camera picture updates approximately every 5 minutes and can be viewed by visiting:

www.pinedaleonline.com/webcam/bondurantwebcam.php

Special thanks to Paul Elwood, Barbara Elwwod and Dawn Ballou, Editor for Pinedale Online for the content of this wonderful article, which enables the world to see a different and yet simpler way of life.

Article Paul Ellwood/Mike Velasquez



Lennie Campbell readies the hay rack for another load. Photo © Barbara Ellwood

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