

The Incongruity of Chickens and Rodeo

By Loren Hettinger

Dad didn't believe in idle time. In fact, he made it his life's ambition to eliminate it from the farm on the eastern plains of Colorado where my younger brother and I grew up. We, on the other hand, searched for such time and savored it whenever we could among our many chores and jobs that Dad assigned to us. Our assignment for this particular morning was to clean out the chicken barn. This task came up about once every three to four weeks, and that was plenty. My younger brother and I hated cleaning the barn out for several reasons. The old straw was heavy with manure and had a bitingly pungent ammonia odor. We might as well have worked with smelling salts stuck up our nostrils. Occasionally, we would go outside and purge with fresh air. I'm sure this exposure was the reason my brother developed a dislike for chicken, whether fried, stewed, or baked, that lasted into adulthood. Secondly the loads on our forks were heavy and the carrying distance increased as we worked inward from the door.

But there was more to this task than just shoveling out the old straw. After it was pitched outside the barn door, we then had to scrape any scale off the floor and then spray it with a medicinal solution for lice and, by the strong smell of the concoction, any other wandering vermin. Clean straw was then scattered onto the barn floor. We herded the chickens to the outside pen while we worked inside, and then they were shut inside the barn to prevent any escapes while we loaded the pile from the pen onto a small trailer. Later, we would hook a tractor onto the trailer and haul the load into the large livestock corral where the chicken manure-laced straw was unloaded, and would eventually end up, along with the cattle manure, in the fields to become part of whatever crop. Grain crops would end up as chicken feed or straw. It wasn't a good idea to dwell on this endless recycling as we stood leaning on our fork handles, glumly staring at part of this cycle and at the task ahead of us.

But this day was different. Kent, our city cousin, was visiting. Not only did Kent serve as a diversion for us from some of the farm-work drudgery, but also in his education about farming, had shown us that he was innovative and could put a new spin on how we looked at our chores—or life in general. He was willing too take huge risks in defying parental authority. Several days earlier Kent had placed a large M-80 firecracker in the dryer vent on the outside of the house right before supper, perhaps not realizing how the explosion would resonate throughout the house (not to mention blow off the vent door), and what kind of reaction it would cause among the adults—like tight skin around their eyes and thin, white lips. Or did he? Our ventures were weighed more carefully in terms of possible consequences. But, we had been telling Kent about how we occasionally honed our rodeo skills by riding calves, and he had wanted us to show him how. The subject came up again as we slowly pried up the interwoven, lattice-like straw near the barn door and threw it outside.

Riding calves was strictly forbidden, not so much because we might get hurt, but because it might be hard on the animals. We had to keep working for a while just in case Dad came back to check on us, or if he and Mom had forgotten something after they had left for town. We'd been fooled before into thinking they were long gone.

There was one heifer in the herd that was tame enough for us to get a "bull rope" (braided baling twine) around it, yet frisky enough to at least crow-hop. Kent was apprehensive, so I held the heifer's head while my younger brother helped him on and tightened the rope. I gave the announcement, which was an obligatory part of our ritual: "Ladies and Gentlemen, and from Laredo (we had heard about it in a song) now out of chute number one, Kent 'Tex' Flaig on Midnight!" Kent and the calf made it through the small corral together, as he held on with a

death-grip. I suddenly realized that we had forgotten to close the door to a small calf shed and hollered too late, "Bail off!" The door was about a foot taller than "Midnight," and Ken was scraped off as the heifer went inside. He landed on his back, letting out an explosive, "Hooey!"

Either the abrupt contact with the edge of the roof or with the ground had knocked the wind out of him. We tried to apply first-aid by tugging upwards on the front of Ken's pants, while he made terrible facial "O" expressions like a fish out of water. Pulling up on a person's pants or belt was the remedy we had seen applied among the high school football team, and we applied it now. Kent finally filled his lungs with some air, possibly in spite of our first-aid treatment, but had a pasty complexion and then he suddenly threw-up. This surprised us and we started to worry, because part of what he threw up was red. My younger brother voiced our concern by saying a family-censored swear word. Even at this young age we had heard about split spleens, smashed kidneys, punctured lungs. We were wondering what we would tell Kent's and our parents if he died.

Finally, Kent was able to catch a deep breath and his prognosis soon improved. He had a large smear of manure on the back of his t-shirt, and a smaller one in his hair. We hosed him down in the dairy barn, both the manure spots, and what turned out to be spillage from an overdose of raspberry "Kool-Aid" on the front of his shirt and pants. As Kent and his clothes--with their new pastel green and pink tie-dye stains--dried, we hustled to make up time on the chicken barn task, but were still carrying out fork-full after fork-full of the old straw when Mom and Dad drove into the yard. Of course, Dad immediately came over to check on us, and said, "Crimeinently, aren't you guys done yet?"

Even though we had told him he was a natural cowboy, Kent never rode calves with us again, having been cured of becoming a rodeo star by his first ride. He did, however, grow-up to become a veterinarian, but limited his practice to small animals. Maybe his experiences on our farm influenced his decision about this. We, on the other hand, cleaned out the chicken barn many more times, and it became a less daunting, although never pleasant task, as we grew. While working, we often reminisced about our escapades with Kent and wished he was visiting again, so we could think of some new adventures.