

# RANCHING NOW *A Year in*



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Story by  
*Judith Wright*

Photos by  
*Judy Gunter*

# *the Life*

*The “Old West” has changed over the past century, and ranching has changed with it. Herding with quads, calf tables for branding, and camera surveillance at calving time are a few of the innovations that are part of the “New West.”*



Duane Hanson and his family raise purebred Black Angus and Herefords near Val Marie, It's January, and the calving season has just begun. On a wintery afternoon, Duane and his daughter Jayne are in a maternity pen that's equipped with a surveillance camera. Week-old calves frisk in the minus 15 degrees weather while the younger ones, only a day or two old, stay warm inside the calving barn, where a second surveillance camera is located.

The cameras are time-savers, and sometimes lifesavers. The arrival of each new purebred calf is carefully observed. Most of the cows were impregnated by AI—artificial insemination. Duane has also had considerable success planting fertilized embryos. The herd metrics—including each cow's bred date and due date—are on Duane's phone, and several times daily he walks through the yard to check for cows ready to calve. Depending on the weather, he'll either herd them into the calving barn or an outdoor calving pen.

The closed-circuit cameras send images to his phone and laptop, allowing the Hansons to monitor the cows in shifts. Only occasionally will one of the Hansons need to

intervene to help deliver a calf. "Normally," says Jayne, "you wake up every two hours and if nobody is calving you just go back to bed." Over the four-month calving season, she will do her monitoring shifts from Kelowna, where she is a nursing student. Her brother Arlis does his shifts from Saskatoon where he's studying animal science, and her parents do theirs from the comfort of their living room.

If trouble occurs, Duane will "pull the calf," an age-old procedure to help deliver the calf. "We don't intervene unless we have to," Duane explains. "It's better to leave them to get on with it."

The camera also comes in handy when an orphan calf requires adoption, a tricky process not improved by the presence of humans. Another example of the camera's usefulness is to settle a dispute when two cows claim a single calf. Rewinding the video of the birth puts an end to the guesswork.

April is branding time, and time for gathering the calves. The Gunters have been ranching in the Hillandale hills since 1913. Jack Gunter is the third of five generations of ranchers, a confirmed horseman and no

▲ Jody Larson draws a calf to the branding fire at a traditional spring branding.

➤ (Left) Jim Commodore, a true old school cowboy, is flanked by an up-and-coming young cowboy of the next generation.

➤ (Right) Drew Hayes and Lucas Bertram operate the calf-table, an alternative for branding that requires fewer hands.



fan of rounding up cattle with quads. The six or eight saddle horses on the ranch are part of his legacy. At 88, he still helps trail cattle by horseback and will occasionally work with a colt in the corral.

“Horses and cows and quads don’t fit together very well,” says Jack. “There are people who can use a quad quietly, but when you go aggressively at a cow, she doesn’t have time to think and you are going to see her bad side. We’re all like that if you push us.”

For the past fifty years the Gunter Ranch has hosted a traditional spring branding where neighbours gathered to help. Horses worked in the corrals, calves were drawn to the branding fire, and the hardy young men and women wrestled calves down while two or three men did the branding, castration, and immunization. But this year, Jack’s son Steven has a calf table and a much smaller crew: two neighbours, his grandson and his wife Judy. The calves are put through a chute to the calf table, a smart-

looking apparatus that rotates on its side for easy access to shoulder, testicles, neck and ears. Each calf spends about a minute in the squeeze before being released.

The primary reason calf tables have been so widely adopted is labour shortage—it’s not easy to find enough young people for wrestling calves. And while traditional brandings are still much enjoyed as social events, hosting one commits the rancher to an exchange of labour. Using a calf table generally means the rancher can complete a hundred calves in an afternoon. The tables give the rancher a bit more control over where they put their hours.

By mid-May, ranchers are ready to trail cattle to summer pastures. Community pastures (formerly PFRA or Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration pastures) have been converted to private grazing corporations, owned by their patron users. Stan Day is the manager of the Masefield Grazing Corporation,

covering some 16,000 hectares, almost 13,000 of which are native grasses. Most of his patrons trail their cattle by horse or quad from no farther than five miles away, and the rest are trucked in by cattle-liner.

A grazing plan helps keep track of the location of every cow, every day. Masefield is Crown land leased from the provincial government, and, as such, requires submission of grazing reports. Animal Unit Months (AUMs) calculate stocking rates and carrying capacity for the pastures—so many animals per hectare. “The old-time managers watched what the conditions were,” says Stan—which is what he continues to do. “Now it’s all in a computer.”

For Stan, one of the most important technologies in ranching has been water development. “There’s lots more cross-pumping, and smaller fields, to manage the grass. We pump water in a pipeline from a deep well with thirteen troughs out. There’s twenty-one kilometres of pipe in the Masefield pasture,

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eighteen inches deep.”

Pumping water can be labour-intensive. Much of the work done in the community pasture is manual. “We want guys on horseback,” says Stan. “Cows and horses are a good fit. Horses are better for checking cows. I like it when it’s quiet, because if you have a cow or calf with respiratory ailments, lots of times it’s your ears that tell you something is wrong.”

He uses the quad only to check fences and gather the horses. Stan admits that more can be done with some of the new technology, but he still feeds the Masefield pasture’s bulls by horse-team—with two magnificent Belgians. “Feeding with the teams is slower and takes longer, but I’ve fed with horses for forty years, and it’s one thing I really like doing. It’s also the cheapest way to feed.” He estimates the horses will eat about thirty pounds of hay a day and “a dab of oats.” “That’s way cheaper than with tractors,” he says. “I can’t imagine what some of these bigger places are burning for fuel.”

June to August are the haying months. The importance of putting up enough feed for the winter can’t be underemphasized. When Jack Gunter bought the ranch from his father in 1960, he welcomed time-savers—including several iterations of haying equipment. First there was the hay-loader for moving loose hay onto a rack, then the square baler, then the 14T John Deer baler. Jack got his first baler after he noticed his neighbours finished haying chores long before he did. After acquiring a square baler, he, his wife and son baled 3,000 bales in a single day. “Then one night it rained seven inches and flooded the strips, just soaked our bales. The neighbours’ round bales were fine. We had to turn our square bales over and try to dry them, and 50 per cent of the hay was ruined.” That incident pushed him on to the round baler.





◀ (Top) Jayne Hanson, nursing student, does her surveillance shift using hi-tech from home during the calving season.

◀ (Bottom) Duane Hanson, of Lazy H Hanson Angus, feeds his purebred Black Angus cattle north of Val Marie.

▲ A good crop of hay in ranch country near Newton Lake.

Jack's son, Steven, and grandson, Harlan Gunter, use a combination of old school and new school methods. To move cattle they use horses, or the dogs and the side-by-side. "As far as treating calves and checking cattle, I like a horse," says Steven, "but if it's down to where if you're only one person, you've got to get the work done." For him, the technology that has improved ranching the most is the front wheel loader and assist, and the round baler.

Steven remembers his grandfather, "Curly" Gunter, spinning ropes and breaking horses. "Dad was always that way, too," Steven says, "He'd be out in the corral." His dad, grandfather and great grandfather had next to no means when they started ranching. "Dad didn't even have a horse trailer in 1950."

His father, Jack, is the first to admit that, even though he'd like to hang on to the old ways, "they don't make sense in the long view." To keep the ranch viable, Steven has had to manage his time and make upgrades—like welded steel corrals that require less maintenance, Texas gates for quick access, and welded bale sleds that handle several days' worth of feed at a time.

The ranchers of the past had almost no resources. Jack Gunter quotes an old friend and neighbour, Jim Commodore: "Poor boys have poor ways." Jim certainly knows how to "make do." He pretty much grew up on a horse and is one of the last cowboys who rode for the big ranches in Saskatchewan, Alberta and Montana. He and his partner, Carol Masacar, keep horses near Newton Lake.

Jim recalls when, back in the 1960s, ranchers started importing European breeds of cattle, such as Charolais and Limousin. "Ranchers ended up with bigger cattle, to the point of 1600- to 1700-pound cows. It takes a lot to feed them," Jim says. "Now we're working back to where the average is 1250 or 1350 pounds."

Jim says the use of horses in ranching today is mostly a matter of personal preference. "I can get a better look at a cow if I'm above her so I can see her top line. If she makes a quick turn, well, a horse can make a quick turn, too. I can't do that on a four-wheeler because I'll be looking for holes and rocks. When I'm on horseback I don't pay no attention to that. That's the horse's job," he laughs.

The job of "breaking" horses was done



differently in the past because horses were raised differently. “Horses ran out, all year long. You gathered the colts and weaned them, halter broke them—all you did was just get them to lead. Didn’t touch them again until they were three or four years old. Now, pretty much everyone starts two-year-olds. In those days, for the distances you rode, a two-year-old wouldn’t make it.”

One of the biggest changes to ranches in the 21st century is the availability of farm credit. It was almost impossible to get a bank loan back in Jack and Jim’s day. “For a good many years,” says Jack, “you could have a debt and the interest wasn’t too much. But if you double that interest—well, you might come out of it and you might not.”

The role of off-ranch income has become critical today. Many ranchers in this area take on jobs with Parks Canada or the rural municipality. They work at mechanics, back-hoeing, and irrigation. And ranch wives work, too. In town, in the field, running households, raising children, feeding families and crews. There is no time off.

At the end of October, when cattle are trailed home from summer pastures, the challenge of winter feeding begins. Come winter, besides feeding, there will be equipment to repair, grain to roll and a hundred other catch-up chores. The



◀ (Top) Stan Day, manager of the Masfield Pasture, prefers feeding the bulls by Belgian horse-team.

◀ (Bottom) Lucas Bertram, horse trainer near Climax, double-tasks with the old and the new tech.

▲ A group of youngsters hang out near the horse trailer on a spring day before cattle are gathered for branding.

cost of feed, fuel and interest rates these days keeps many ranchers awake at night. The margins in ranching have always been narrow, especially in the southwest where dry rangeland means a relatively low carrying capacity for grazing.

The inputs and the ecological footprint of ranching here are smaller than in agriculture, but there is no bail-out like crop insurance for ranchers if the drought results in less hay being harvested. Nor can ranchers hang onto their main harvest—calves—until the right price comes along. “Those calves are eating your grass and costing you,” says Steven Gunter, “so they have to go, and you have to take what is offered.”

Fewer chemical inputs turn out to be good news for conservation, but as Steven points out, “Environmentalists put a lot of pressure on us, yet I don’t think there’s any other profession where you could come back in a hundred years and find everything in the same place—all the tipi rings, every crossing, everything that ever was, is still there.”

Ranchers are the original conservationists because good land management has always

been key to successful ranching. Adapting to the uncertainties of a world market is a bigger challenge. As Duane Hanson says, “You’re doing all this to have a good sale. That’s a big hit for us.”

Most major cattle and horse sales are now done online. Ranchers videotape their stock in advance of the sale. Not having to travel to a sale is better for the stock and more convenient for buyers and sellers. Most stock information is stored on computer these days, and is available to prospective buyers at a keystroke.

While technology has transformed many tasks for the rancher, ranching remains a lifestyle as much as a livelihood. As Stan Day says, “There is no better place to raise a family.” Another great perk is being your own boss, and seeing what nature has to offer every day of the year.

As Jim Commodore says, “When you top the hill and look down, there’s a bunch of cattle scattered around, a few calves laying down, and everything is sitting there happy—you stop and you sit there. You do it every time and it’s still good.”

