

“Musings of a Central Nevada Cowboy”

by Sam Lossing

I must confess that I volunteered to write this article for selfish reasons—you see, in the past seven years of cowboying I have learned many things, mostly what *not* to do, but on rare occasions I have learned a few things that really worked well, so I thought this article would be a good opportunity to think through the things that I have learned and maybe share a few of them with you. One thing to make clear right here in the beginning is that I don't pretend to have it all figured out!! It seems to me that I learn best when I attempt to explain to others what I have learned and in the process of articulating my thoughts things become clearer in my own mind. I don't want to come off as preachy, I just want to share a few points that have worked well for me and if they are of benefit to you then we both win. To quote a good friend, “this is worth exactly what you are paying for it, so take it for what it is worth.”

One thing I have found to be consistent on each ranch that I have worked on from Fallon to Eureka is that there is so much variation. Variation in terrain, water availability, location of water, breeds of cows, the size/scale of the ranch, slope and aspect of individual allotments and so many other things. Each one of these factors contributes to how cows use an allotment and the options available to solve riparian issues. Through the varied experiences of dealing with each ranch's unique obstacles I have learned a few techniques that have helped in training cows to come in, get a drink, and leave. I have found that there is no silver bullet to management situations, BUT the keys to solving most riparian grazing issues comes down to: 1) riding riparian areas must be a consistent priority, 2) cows must be properly settled once the uplands are reached, and 3) the need to make the wrong thing difficult and the right thing easy for repeat offenders.

Most of my ideas about how to deal with cows and riparian issues are really not mine; I have simply applied some of the concepts that many of us use with our horses. Take the idea that riparian riding must be given priority; this is nothing new. Most of the good cowboys I have ridden with will spend hours and hours fine tuning their horse, they will consistently make time to spend working them even if there are other things they could be doing. It is the same with our cows; only it seems that we easily let other things take priority over spending the necessary time to fine tune a cow. When we first start to work with our cows it will take hours and hours, but by consistently giving them priority they will improve until after awhile it doesn't take much time at all to put them where you want them and that is where they stay.

I think a big part of the reason that we don't give riparian riding priority is that some days we find there aren't many cows in the riparian areas. When this happens it seems like there are other more important things that we should be doing. I have to remind myself that big problems usually start small – cows act like magnets and there may only be a few today but it won't take long and they will draw their buddies into the riparian areas as well. It is especially hard to

prioritize riding riparian when there are no cows in riparian areas but I have learned stopping here is like leaving the fight just when you have the upper hand, if we stop here it doesn't take long and we are back to square-one. If we meet the cows in the riparian area right after they get there then this just reinforces their thinking that they need to get a drink and head for a nice cool draw somewhere for the afternoon. It does help to have salt in the upland to add incentive but this incentive must be accompanied by the knowledge that you will be riding the riparian.

Once we make riding riparian priority it is so easy to get our cows where they need to be and say, "Well, they are not in the riparian area—job accomplished!" but here again if I leave the job half done I will really pay for it later. This brings me to my second point—once the uplands are reached cows must be settled properly or they will be back in the riparian area before you know it. This is something that I try to continually impress upon myself and those whom I have helped to teach. A quick word about who rides riparian, in my experience anyone can ride riparian if they are trained properly, but is essential that a person knows how to drive a cow and settle her in a way that she will stay where she is put—in my experience if a cow is forced somewhere she doesn't want to be she will be right back where things were more comfortable for her. It is all about pressure and release—I try to apply the least pressure possible in order to get the response I want. The problem is that it is counterintuitive that I might have to apply a lot of pressure today so that I can apply minimal pressure tomorrow. It is so hard for many people to understand this, as humans we get in a habit of applying the same amount of pressure all the time and we wonder why the cow gets desensitized. As a cowboy I don't have a problem continually training my horse to make him softer and more responsive but for some reason I don't take as much pride in making my cows more responsive. When I do take pride in getting my cows tuned up and responsive it is really gratifying; like my horses it becomes a challenge to see how light and responsive I can get them. If we do a good job of driving our cows and spend the time it takes to settle them properly these things coupled with coming back consistently will eventually leave more time to do all the things that need to be done at home.

The frustrating thing is that even when we do all these things right there are still a few cows who just don't want to give up on living in the riparian area. The key with these repeat offenders is to make the right thing easy and the wrong thing more difficult. This is just like what I do with my horses; I apply as little pressure as possible to get the desired result. Sometimes it takes a lot of pressure sometimes much less but for me it is a continual game to see how little pressure it takes to get the job done. But something that has taken me a long time to learn is that occasionally there are colts and cows that are really not worth continuing to keep. After you have given them many opportunities and they still don't seem to be getting with the program it is better to just send them down the road and let someone else deal with the problem. Often in the long run it better to just ship them because then they aren't a bad influence on the others and you don't have to deal with the headache any longer.

The thing that I have learned about training cows is that it takes time, lots and lots of time, consistency, and riding. They will improve—slowly but surely. Something to remember is that

once you have your cows trained this job doesn't go away (this is just job security for cowboys like me). The reason this job doesn't go away is because of the young heifers and bulls added to the herd each year, as well as the few old bats that have short memories. Even though the job doesn't go away it becomes much easier because of the reduced numbers of cows that come back as well as the fact that the repeat offenders either learn to line out and go somewhere or they go down the road and become someone else's problem.

Thanks for your time and the opportunity to think through these things with you, I hope that something I said may have helped you. Please feel free to sort through these thoughts and ideas and glean out the things that are useful.