

Impressions from a Montana Roundup

Daniel J. Miller

THE SUN WASN'T UP YET, although we had trotted out of camp half an hour ago. The morning stillness was broken by the steady beat of horses hooves, the ringing of large rowelled spurs, and the creaking of saddle leather. In the distance a pack of coyotes were beginning to sing. The smell of crushed sagebrush mixed with the warm scent of horse sweat filled the air like some exotic incense. As we loped up onto the grassy divide where the wagon boss would scatter the cowboys for the morning circle, the Big Horn Mountains, glowing with the first rays of the morning sun, came into view. If you like cattle, rangelands, and horses an eastern Montana roundup in June is paradise.

Getting up at 4 AM, every day for six weeks, to saddle a horse and ride across the prairie is not many people's idea of a good time. You have to either be a cowboy or a rangeman. I like to think that I'm a little of both. Rangemen are interested in grasses. Cowboys like horses. Being on horseback every day for six weeks during roundup is a good way to see a lot of grass.

EVERY YEAR FOR THE LAST FIVE YEARS I've been going out on roundups on Tullock Creek in eastern Montana. Roundups that last for a month and a half and brand over three thousand calves. These are big roundups. Some of the

pastures I've gathered cows in are over 25,000 acres in size. It's Big Sky Country.

Tullock Creek, a major creek in the watershed to the east of the Big Horn River, gets its name from an early fur trader, Samuel Tullock. Tullock Creek is a historic creek that flows into the Big Horn River less than a mile from where the Big Horn empties into the Yellowstone River.

THE FIRST FORT IN MONTANA was built in 1808 on the Yellowstone River, near the mouth of the Big Horn River, by Lisa Manuel with the help of John Colter and George Drouillard. Colter hunted much of the lower part of Tullock Creek. Drouillard, who had also been on the Lewis and Clark Expedition, was probably the first white man to explore the upper reaches of Tullock Creek in the spring of 1809. In the 1820's and 30's mountain men trapped on Tullock Creek and explored the surrounding country. In 1876 Custer was given written orders to examine the upper reaches of Tullock Creek. He forgot about those orders along with some important other ones on his final dash to the Little Big Horn.

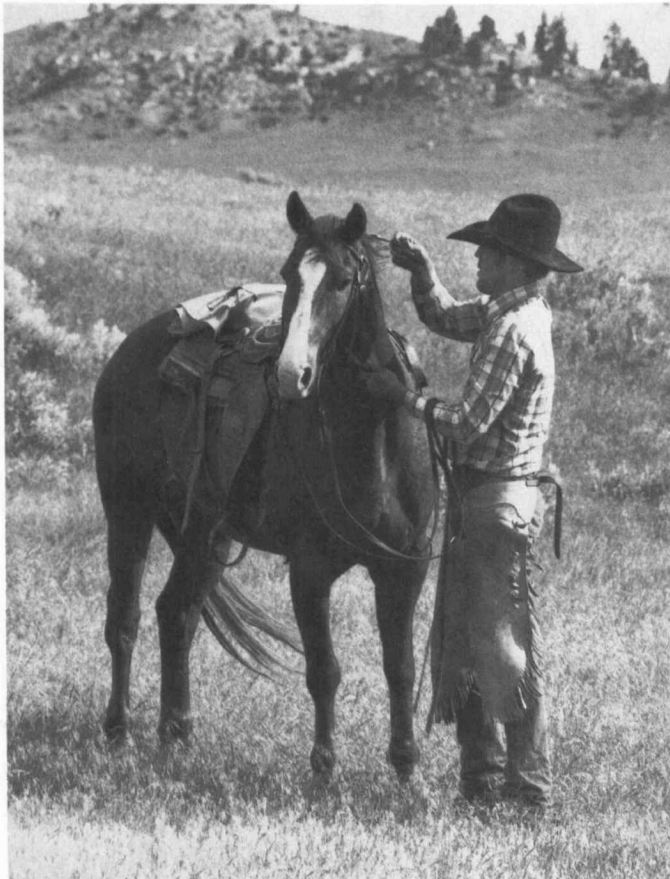
Currently, a large portion of the upper reaches of Tullock Creek is within the boundaries of the Crow Indian Reservation. It's been cattle country for a hundred years with grazing rights on much of the reservation leased to big cow outfits. In



A roundup crew will have a herd of about 60 horses. Each cowboy requires four or five horses.

many ways some of the cattle operations today are not much different than a century ago.

SOME OF THE LARGE CATTLE OUTFITS on Tullock Creek these days still pull horse drawn chuckwagons and bedwagons. The wagons pull out in late May and stay out until the branding is finished in July. On these range operations, with thousands of cows, a roundup crew will consist of twelve cowboys. Every cowboy gets four or five horses to



A cowboy getting ready to put hobbles on his horse.

ride. Sometimes you go through two horses a day. The ranches supply the horses but cowboys are required to have their own saddles and necessary tack. They are the tools of the trade. These days a good saddle costs \$1,000 and it's hard to find a good pair of riding boots for less than \$150. Cowboy wages are about \$550 a month including room and board. On roundup, "room" is just a tent to throw your bedroll in and "board" is chuckwagon grub. You'll never get rich cowboying, but you can sure have a good time.

Cowboys unroll their big, comfortable bedrolls on the ground in large canvas tents. Some cowboys pitch their own tipi tents. Meals are prepared by a cook in another tent. You are camping out but it's no picnic. During the six-week branding period you might get a few days off if you're lucky when it rains. However, when the average annual precipitation is less than fourteen inches it doesn't rain that often. The rest of the time you're out there with the cows. . . . cowboying. Ridin', ropin' 'n rasslin' calves. You see enough cows to quickly



The bedwagon and bed tent set up for the cowboys. This is home for cowboys on roundup. Some things have not changed much in a hundred years.

learn which end of a cow gets up first!

BLUEBUNCH WHEATGRASS, THE STATE GRASS of Montana, is one of the most important forage plants throughout the Big Sky Country. One of the first grasses to flower in eastern Montana is Sandberg bluegrass followed by prairie junegrass. Needle-and-thread is a beautiful grass with its long awns shimmering in the early morning sunlight.

In late May the higher elevation slopes near the headwaters of Tullock Creek will be splashed with the bright yellow flowers of arrowleaf balsamroot and the blue blossoms of lupine. Large stands of Idaho fescue are common where it is a bit cooler and more snow accumulates. Chokecherries and skunkbush sumac can also be found in bloom in May along with wild roses. Sego lilies and yucca are also commonly found.

Western wheatgrass is easily identified from horseback because of its distinctive blue-green color. In sandy or rocky areas Indian ricegrass, with its large spreading panicle of big seeds, is common. Sand bluestem, a tall, warm-season grass that doesn't flower until later in the summer, is found on a number of sites on Tullock Creek. Stands of little bluestem are readily noticed on the range because of the copper color of the previous year's growth that contrasts with the green of the cool-season grasses in May and June. Prairie sandreed grass with its tall stems is also common on sandy sites. Sideoats grama, an important forage, is found over much of the country as is blue grama with its delicate panicles. There is also some red three awn on certain sites and cheatgrass where the rangeland has been disturbed or subjected to heavy grazing for years. There is a lot of sagebrush on some parts of Tullock Creek. In some dry creek bottoms you will even find greasewood. Rabbitbrush and broom snakeweed are also common where grazing has been heavy.

MANY OF THE RANGE SITES close to water have been subjected to heavy grazing in the past. Like other parts of Montana this region was hard hit by the drought of the 30's. Wild fires the summer of '84 burned over 20,000 acres on Tullock Creek and actually improved the range conditions of the sagebrush areas.

It takes about five acres to graze a cow for a month in these grasslands. A rancher has to figure on about 40 acres or more to run a cow for a summer. The ranges could support more cattle if there was more water. Some of the creeks in the upper part of Tullock like Dipping Vat Creek, Blue Creek, and Willow Creek have nice reservoirs and beaver ponds. Many

of the reservoirs in other places always seem to be dry. Tullock Creek was opened up for homesteading in 1910 and many acres of rangeland were plowed and put into grain until many of these homesteaders went broke in the 30's. Land is still being farmed and it would be nice to see that land planted back to grass before the next dry spell hits. Many of these areas, reseeded to crested wheat grass or wild rye, could be used for early spring grazing to rest the native grasslands.

COWS USUALLY HAVE TO BE FED hay for about a hundred days. Ranchers in the area feed about a ton of hay a winter to a cow. In a good open winter you can get by with much less, and occasionally without feeding any, but it's risky if you're not prepared. Many operations got by for years with not feeding hay in the winter. It works fine as long as you don't get a hard winter. Cows can do pretty good on just grass as long as they get a little supplement to go with it. Grass is cheaper than hay. Once you start feeding hay to cows they will be on the feed grounds waiting for their ration of twenty pounds of good clean alfalfa hay.

In the early 1900's there was a lot of sheep grazing on Tullock Creek. A person could do all right running a band of sheep with a fairly open winter and if there is some snow for them to get water. Even cows can get by for a couple of days without water in the winter if they are just grazing on grass. Horses can get by on snow also and are a lot more fun to run than sheep. Cowboys define fun as anything than means spending a lot of time on a horse.

Huffman, the noted photographer, tells of running wild horses on Tullock Creek in the early 1900's. The Crow Indians probably grazed many of their ponies on Tullock Creek during the winter in the early 1800's. Their name for Tullock Creek is the Place Where the Colts Died, suggesting they lost many horses during a tough winter. The last big wild horse roundups took place in the early 1950's just before some of the first fences were put in. Until then you could ride from Busby to Hardin and never cross a fence. There are not many fences today and some of the gates can be opened from horseback. A person can still ride a long ways and never get off his horse.

GETTING AS MANY POUNDS OF MEAT or wool from the range a year is what ranching is all about. To do that you have to take care of the grass. Ranching is really just using cows or sheep or horses to harvest grass. One of the best ways to find out what is happening out on the rangelands is to be out there looking at it. Riding a horse means that you don't have to be looking at your feet all the time. On a horse you don't have to watch where you are going, the horses take care of that, leaving you free to look around. A horse can go where pickups can't. You can also cover a lot of country in a day.

A good way to learn more about the rangelands is to go on a spring roundup in eastern Montana. It's an opportunity to get paid to ride a horse across some of the best rangelands in the world.



3717 Vera Cruz Ave.
Minneapolis, MN 55422
Phone 612 537-6639

**Native
Grass Drill**

ACCURATELY PLANTS
ALL TYPES OF SEED

- Fluffy native grasses
- Tiny legumes
- Medium sized wheat grasses

Specialists In Quality

Native Grasses

**Wheatgrasses - Bluestems - Gramas
Switchgrasses - Lovegrasses - Buffalo
and Many Others**

We Grow, Harvest, Process These Seeds

NATIVE GRASSES HARVESTED
IN TEN STATES

~~~~~

## Sharp Bros. Seed Co.

PHONE 398-2231                      HEALY, KANSAS

*"Your Inquiries Appreciated"*