

AMERICA'S
HORSE

COWBOY



ETIQUETTE

Mind your manners when it comes to roping, branding, working cattle and herding cattle.

By John L. Moore

Illustrations by Justin Wells

From the America's Horse library

ETIQUETTE –

1. conventional requirements as to proper social behavior;

2. a prescribed or accepted code of usage in matters of ceremony;

3. the code of ethical behavior among the members of a profession.

THE MODERN REVOLUTION IN NATURAL HORSEMANSHIP HAS produced a slew of clinics and clinicians, and undoubtedly has made for better horses and horsemen, but it might be questionable that it has produced better cowboys.

“One thing they don’t teach in these clinics is cowboy manners,” an older rancher whispered to me at a branding last year. He was watching a young cowboy drag a calf to the fire caught high above one hock and at the end of 40 feet of rope. “They teach ‘em that everything is about the horse and doin’ right by the horse,” he added. “They don’t teach them how to work with a crew.”

The manners he was referring to could be called “Cowboy Etiquette” or proper range conduct when working livestock, with an emphasis on respect and safety.

“I’d teach a clinic on etiquette,” my friend said, moving toward the branding irons, “only my wife would show up and protest that I don’t know the subject.”

His comments got me to thinking. During the morning gather, I noticed two riders were never near cattle. They were always a half-mile behind the herd, schooling their colts.

With the ranching population aging and the rural young moving to cities, many ranchers must find help from horse enthusiasts who were not raised under a strict code of cowboy conduct.

Some habits and standards can be relaxed, but others are written in stone. Here are the ones I’d suggest as being carved in granite:

- Never tell the cattle owner how to work cattle. He has the right to work his cows the way he wants. He knows the cattle and the facilities. If his attitude or methods are intolerable, you don’t have to return.

- Don’t give orders to the crew. Again, this is the boss’ job.
- Never assume a position. The “cowboy way” is to say: “I’ll do any job that needs doing.” Be willing to do the job that needs to be done, but don’t take on a task you’re not qualified for. When moving cattle, ride drag – that’s located at the back of the herd. Don’t promote yourself to wing or lead.
- Leave your dog at home. If you have a well-trained dog, the boss will hear about it and might ask you to bring it, but never assume the branding or roundup is the place to train your new cow dog.
- If you’re riding a colt and can’t do a regular hand’s work, let the boss know beforehand. This is truer today than 30 years ago. In the past, you “made yourself a hand” no matter what you rode. With today’s slower, gentler methods, colts are seldom asked to do more than they’re ready for.
- Don’t ride ahead of the boss. Don’t cut him off. Don’t get between the boss and the cattle. Basically, let the boss take the lead in all things. When I was young, the code was stricter. You didn’t mount until the boss was mounted. You didn’t dismount until the boss dismounted. And, if using the same tack room, you never led your horse in first. You let the boss unsaddle first. These rules might sound authoritarian, but they were based on respect.
- When cattle are being sorted outside, hold the herd together in a group. Don’t start sorting without being asked.
- Don’t criticize a man’s horses, cattle or dog.

- Don't invite friends without permission. If you bring others, be responsible for their conduct. Ranchers appreciate help, but they need to know how many people are coming, and their wives often need to plan meals.
- Handle cattle slowly and quietly when possible.
- But don't insist on handling cattle too slowly. That mossy-horned, high-headed dry cow in the lead never went to a livestock-handling clinic. Let the boss choose the pace.
- Arrive a little early and never late. When the boss says, "Be here at 7," he imagines the crew saddled, mounted and lined-out at that time, not a host of folk still brushing and saddling their mounts or waiting idly for the last of the crew.

Ropers have special rules.

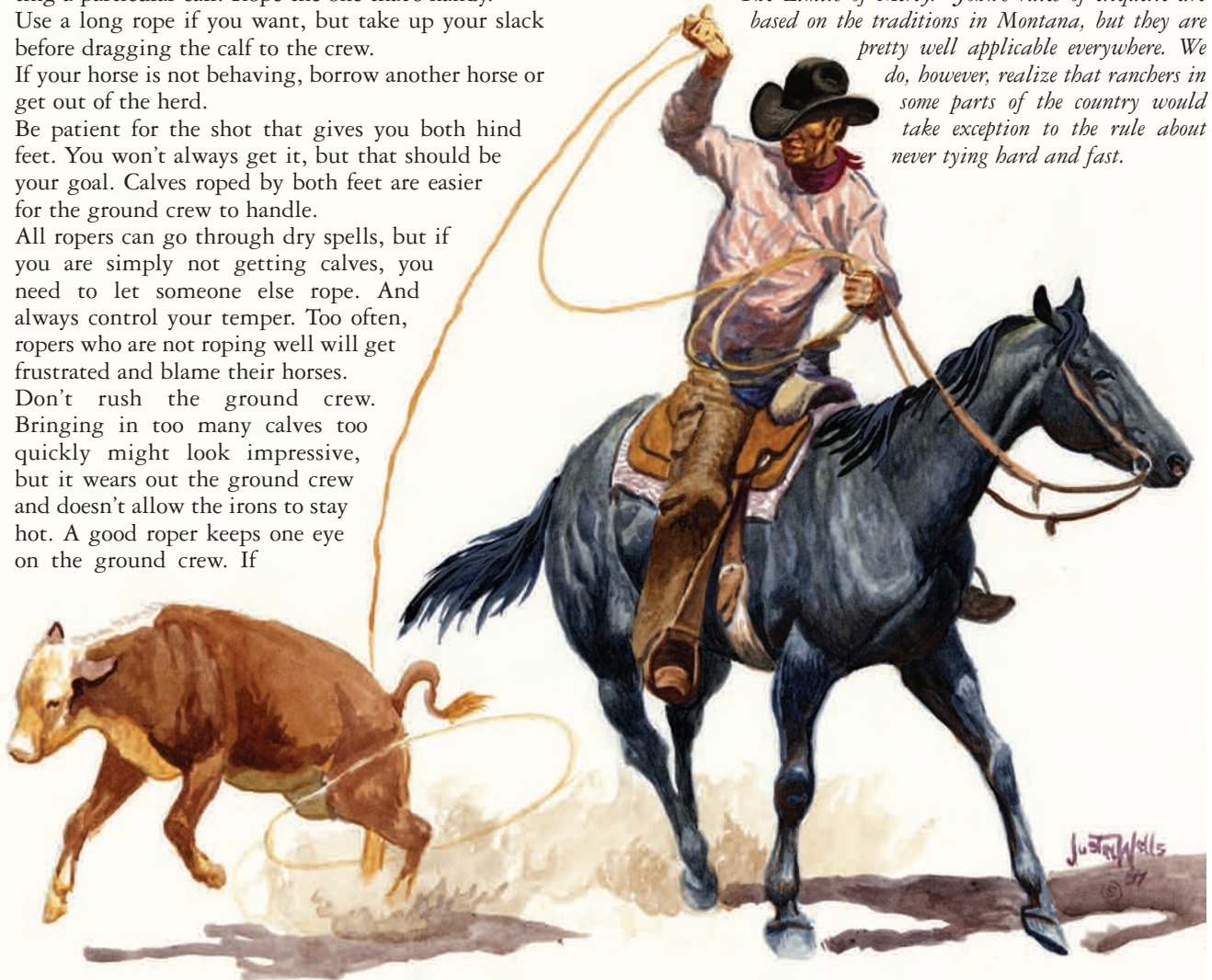
There are many methods and styles used in the branding pen – heading-and-heeling, heading only, heeled and dragged to a stake, and heeled and dragged to wrestlers. We use the latter and, because experienced wrestlers are hard to find, we stress safety. These rules for ropers aren't written in stone, but they make for good guidelines.

- Cooperate with the other ropers. Don't compete.
- Keep the herd quiet. Don't get stubborn about getting a particular calf. Rope the one that's handy.
- Use a long rope if you want, but take up your slack before dragging the calf to the crew.
- If your horse is not behaving, borrow another horse or get out of the herd.
- Be patient for the shot that gives you both hind feet. You won't always get it, but that should be your goal. Calves roped by both feet are easier for the ground crew to handle.
- All ropers can go through dry spells, but if you are simply not getting calves, you need to let someone else rope. And always control your temper. Too often, ropers who are not roping well will get frustrated and blame their horses.
- Don't rush the ground crew. Bringing in too many calves too quickly might look impressive, but it wears out the ground crew and doesn't allow the irons to stay hot. A good roper keeps one eye on the ground crew. If

you rope a calf but there are no wrestlers free to handle it, don't drag it in.

- After you've dragged a calf in and someone has released your rope, move quietly back to the herd, coiling your rope as you go. Don't sit on your horse in the middle of the ground crew coiling your lariat.
- Cooperate with the ground crew. Getting the calf to them is not the end of the job. If problems arise, the mounted roper still has the most control.
- When it's possible and can be done safely, drag the calf close to the fire. The people running the irons will appreciate it.
- Don't tie "hard and fast." There may be exceptions to this, but they'd be rare. Also, take time to keep your cinches snug, and don't overwork your horse. Horses that become overtired or sore can be unsafe. Remember, the emphasis is on safety.
- And last but not least: Enjoy yourself. This rule is for everyone, including the boss. Working outdoors with good people, good horses and good cattle is a blessing. ◼

John L. Moore is a rancher, a lay minister, freelance writer and author from Miles City, Montana. His books include the Ezra Riley Trilogy – "The Breaking of Ezra Riley," "Leaving the Land" and "The Limits of Mercy." John's rules of etiquette are based on the traditions in Montana, but they are pretty well applicable everywhere. We do, however, realize that ranchers in some parts of the country would take exception to the rule about never tying hard and fast.



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