

Cowboy Daddy

It wasn't just cows which were going to experience the miracle of birth.

By Marci Whitehurst

Perhaps it's the bawl of a new calf. Maybe it's heifers that always seem to calve at night. Invariably, when calving season hits, I remember impending parenthood. Roughly eight years ago, my husband and I found out it wasn't just the cows which were going to experience the miracle of birth.

"Are you sure?" The brim of my husband's hat dropped with his jaw.

"I had a blood test."

"That sure, huh?"

We were pretty young. I had been told my chances of having children were slim to none, so we were simultaneously shocked and overjoyed.

The news of our pregnancy came on the eve of calving season. My cowboy found himself in "baby mode." He quickly whipped out his cattle gestation calendar and reported my due date. ("What do you mean there's a gestation difference?") He flailed his arms and spouted phrases like "just before weaning time," "not during haying season," and "maybe during a storm or full moon." He quipped that he would know just what to do because he'd helped many animals in "my condition." It never occurred to him that I might not like being compared to a cow. I gently reminded him I was not some heifer. That's when he put away his weight-expectancy chart.

Pregnancy does funny things to a woman. Those hay slivers that I continually brushed out of our bed began to irritate me. Anything but hamburgers made me gag. And cow manure on clothing—a fact of life—was not allowed within 50 feet of the house. "Don't even think about kissing me until you've hosed off and stripped in the yard," I found myself hollering.

Pregnancy also changes a man. It certainly changes the size of his wallet. All the things that are needed for a child add up: the four-door pickup, the tractor with the enclosed, air-conditioned cab, and the tack. And that's just the beginning.

With tack catalogs strewn across the

kitchen table, my hubby could hardly contain his excitement. "What kind of kid's saddle should I get?"

"Well, the baby's the size of a bean right now, so I'd go with something small. Let's not get carried away."

At our initial doctor's appointment, my husband came with spurs on and his head cocked like a rooster. An early ultrasound was included, so my cowboy told me what to expect because he'd done ultrasounds for preg checking.

As the doctor performed the ultrasound, he asked, "Are you feeling okay?"

My husband replied, "I'm a little tired."

Intuition told me the doctor was thoroughly impressed with my man, especially when the ultrasound procedure also included a complimentary bovine narrative. My cowboy actually went into a minilecture on the similarities of my reproductive system and a cow's. Maybe we could've saved money at Trans-Ova, the local cattle embryonic center.

Once my belly began to bulge, so did my man's ego. Why read baby books when he'd seen a million bovine births? It wouldn't be that different...would it?

One "difference" came when the baby began kicking. My husband put his hand on my belly expecting to feel a small tap and was blown away when the baby actually moved his hand with a forceful little blow. This was the first time I heard him scream like a girl.

The second scream occurred in Lamaze class. It was not the videos that made him holler. No, it was another forceful blow—this time by another expectant mother who didn't tolerate bovine comparisons very well. Needless to say, we didn't make any lifelong friends there. The calf-pulling conversation didn't help.

When labor did begin, I was in denial. It was early. My husband convinced me to go to the hospital because I was "walking around like a cow with my tail up." I promised to go, if he promised not to say that in the delivery room. When we arrived at the hospital and labor was confirmed, my husband obliged,

and explained he knew what was happening because he had "seen it in his field."

When our daughter arrived, cowboy instincts let loose and he nearly fainted. The man can castrate a steer, pull a calf, and inspect afterbirth...but a human umbilical cord made him woozy! All his jitters passed away, though, when our beautiful girl was placed in his arms.

Pride has been taken to a whole new level. Stories of tagging, penning, and roping will always make a cowboy beam, but a child is like all these tales and then some. Put some cowboy daddies together and they can talk!

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DADDY BILLY AND LEVI © LORA DAVIES

"Why just last week my six-year-old daughter drove the truck while I forked off hay."

"Oh yeah, well my five-year-old won first prize at the mutton busting."

"That's nothing. My two-year-old roped a steer on his first try, blindfolded."

Even with their stories, cowboys do make great fathers. They help their kids learn about life via the ranch. They teach them to make hay forts. They encourage them to open gates. The only thing that continues to puzzle me is this: How can a cowboy be immune to the stench of manure and stick his hands in the tightest of places, but changing a diaper induces tears or vomiting? ■

Marci Whitehurst is a freelance writer, rancher's wife and the mother of three children—all of whom, according to their father, can tag a calf with their eyes closed! She lives in Belgrade, Mont.