



What Is a Rancher?

You will have to look close to tell. By Casey Murph

My family ranches in Arizona. It's a pretty good-sized place, but it's Arizona. That doesn't mean lots of cows. The pastures are big, there's a good amount of brush and the cattle get pretty scattered out. You can spend all day riding and only come across a few of them. We put a lot of miles on horses, and so I am always on the lookout for a good deal on a fresh horse we can use.

There was a ranch horse auction a while back, so I took a couple of my kids and their friends from town to see. They had some nice horses there and before the sale started they were roping steers off them and showing them off. I had my eye on a sorrel and was watching for it to go through the sale ring. I was out of the bidding pretty quick, and by the time it was done that sorrel sold for the value of 30 good steers. One of the kids wanted to know why I quit bidding on him and I said that as nice as the horse was, the numbers didn't add up. I told him a ranch can't afford to spend that kind of money on horses.

This kid had plenty of follow-up questions and at the end of the sale he looked at the guy who had bought the horse—he was loading it in his aluminum trailer with the big living quarters on the front end—and asked, "How can that guy afford him then?"

I said, "Well, that fella isn't a rancher."

The kid says, "He has a ranch sticker on the door of his truck."

My smart reply to that was, "A rancher is somebody who raises livestock and hopes someday he will break even."

My answer was supposed to get a laugh out of the kids and it did. But on the drive home I thought about it. If someone who had no clue asked me that question, how would I describe what a rancher is? Of course a rancher is someone engaged in the livestock industry, grazing the animals on rangelands. But, to me anyway, there's just a little more to it than that.

The gentleman who bought the sorrel had recently owned a big private-land ranch near Phoenix. He drives new dually trucks and has an arena at his house in Scottsdale. He is very successful as a land developer and he figured his ranch, bought just recently, would be prime for development one day. It wasn't the first ranch he had owned. In the meantime, he wanted to take advantage of the agricultural tax laws and save on property taxes, so he continued to keep cattle on the place, hiring a few people to look after them while he worked to get investors interested in the site. He rarely visited the ranch except to show it to his land-development partners, and when the property did reach its potential value, the cattle and hands were gone in a month, and

Jim Melin has ranched cattle in Montana's Paradise Valley in the shadow of the Absaroka Range his entire life. Here he sorts cattle on a cool spring day. OPPOSITE: Clinton Pankratz tries to stay warm as sleet makes a cold blustery morning even worse. He is tending to a herd of Black Angus on the Hofeldt Ranch near Lloyd, Mont.

within a year there were 450 cloned homes on the land where the ranch headquarters and horse trap had been. He never looked back.

Now you could have called this fella a rancher and technically you would be right, but I think I can come up with some better examples.

I think instead of an old man I knew. He lived on a place in Colorado his dad had started back in the 1800s. His wife had passed on and their children, a son and a daughter, had no interest in spending their lives there. The rancher had managed to send them to college, and when they made it to the city they found their homes.

The son became an investment banker and the daughter was a successful trial attorney. Both had seven-figure portfolios. They would occasionally visit the old man with some of their friends from New York. They would dress up in the latest western fashion and ride around a bit, but the real work was done by the old man and his hired hands, a man-and-wife team. This couple worked for the old man for 10 years and lived in a one-bedroom cinder-block house with no air conditioning and only a woodstove for heat on the other side of the ranch.

When the old man grew frail, his kids began inviting developers to look at the property. The place was only a few hours from Denver and being surrounded by mountains they anticipated they would make millions having it subdivided into ranchettes. But when the old man died, everyone was in for a surprise. The old man figured his kids were plenty successful on their own, so he left the ranch to the couple who ran it for him. It won't have huge log homes all over the pastures; it will continue to be a place where livestock, cow dogs, deer, elk and ranch kids get raised. This old man saw the value that ranching provides the world. He wanted his place to continue to provide that. To me, that's a rancher.

There is a family that runs cattle in New Mexico on land leased from the state and from the Bureau of Land Management. They live in a 45-year-old double-wide and drive trucks with 200,000 miles on them because every extra penny earned off the

ranch is going into a pipeline that's being built so when the kids take over they won't have to worry so much if there isn't enough rain to fill stock tanks. And every water trough along the pipeline is being equipped with an escape ramp so rabbits and pack rats don't drown while trying to get a drink. These are ranchers.

There is another family from California who ranched along the Merced River. They had been ranching there since the 1860s. The state of California has become increasingly hostile to ranching. There was one obscure endangered creature after another discovered on their place that somehow couldn't live alongside cattle, and finally the state took the

could have written her off and left her to her thirst and coyotes and that might have made better business sense, but it's more than just business to him. That's a rancher.

When I was 12, I was given a horse to ride that Granddad bought from a friend on the Navajo reservation. I was dumb and didn't know it, and I didn't think this horse stopped fast enough, or turned fast enough. Being a boy, I tried to strong-arm it as if it was an old tractor. That evening we had red chili stew, and Granddad told me he wanted to show me a trick. He asked me to put my spoon in my mouth and hold it between my teeth. When I did, he rapped the end of the spoon handle with his fingertip, just hard enough to jam the end of that spoon against the roof of my mouth.

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"The trick I just showed you is how your horse feels when you're riding him," he said. He didn't have to say anything else. When I rode next my hands were a lot lighter, and funny how this pony started handling better. I discovered that my horse wasn't machinery. My horse was a partner and could be of great help to me with a little patience



property on the river from them. It became impossible to run cattle there so they were left with no choice but to face the heartbreak and let the ranch go. The land was worth so much that everyone could have invested the money and lived a comfortable and easy life in any city, but they went to Nebraska instead and bought a cattle ranch. They wanted to pass the life down to their kids and keep their family legacy alive. These are ranchers.

The cowman who finds a cow bogged in the mud, far from any road, manages to get her pulled out of the bog, but she won't get up. So he leads a packhorse with him loaded with hay and water, and every day feeds her and waters her and tries to get her up. In a situation like this, sometimes the cow regains her strength and gets up; sometimes she doesn't and finally has to be put down. Either way, that cowman has more invested in helping her than she was ever worth in dollars. He

and understanding. Granddad was a rancher.

Anyone who has been on a gather on a big outfit can spot the best cowpunchers. Ranchers can be cowboys and cowboys can become ranchers, but they aren't always interchangeable. Often, when cattle are bunched up at a gate, you see fellas get their ropes down and little by little start crowding the cattle just a little too much until suddenly a calf breaks and runs. This is much to the delight of the cowboys who eagerly build to them, lay ropes on them, and bust them. These fellas might be handy, but they probably aren't ranchers.

These cattle are a rancher's life investment, and their value goes down quickly when they are being chased and roped for fun. Look for the gent who is just a little quieter with the cattle and doesn't tend to crowd them. He knows the rope on his saddle is like the revolver in his chap pocket. These are tools and there will be times when they are needed,

but more often there is a less drastic way to handle things. This is the man who will back off at the gate so calves have time to see the exit. Maybe this guy is the foreman. Likely, he is a rancher.

There is a lady who manages the feed store in town. She works 60 hours a week. When work is done each day, she drives miles of gravel road to her house to find a baby calf her husband brought home. He found the calf's mother dead. This lady will stay up with the calf way into the night teaching it how to nurse off a bottle and finally end up with just an hour or two of sleep. In the morning she will feed the calf again and then head back to work because between the drought and the market the ranch is struggling to make ends meet. They need the paycheck she brings in from her job. She will work in town all day and work on the ranch most of the night. Her vacation time is spent branding or shipping. She has friends in town with much easier lives than she has, who go on cruises every year and spend a lot of time at the spa, yet she is never jealous or resentful. She actually feels a little sorry for them for what they miss. That's a rancher.

The way I see it, a rancher is not just someone who is engaged in the business of livestock on pasture. Critics say ranchers are exploiting the land for profits. Truth is, ranching is one of the least profitable and highest risk investments anyone can make. Ranching is an ancient profession that is inextricably connected to nature and nature's plan. Ranching follows the philosophy that man was tasked by God to steward his creation. There is a huge responsibility with that.

The person who embraces that responsibility is the rancher. ■



Murph's family has been ranching in Arizona since 1904. This is Casey with his oldest son, Wyatt, about 10 years ago. Now his ranch and range are threatened by a solar farm with a cry for "eminent domain." Check "Stealing for Solar?" in RANGE, Summer 2022.