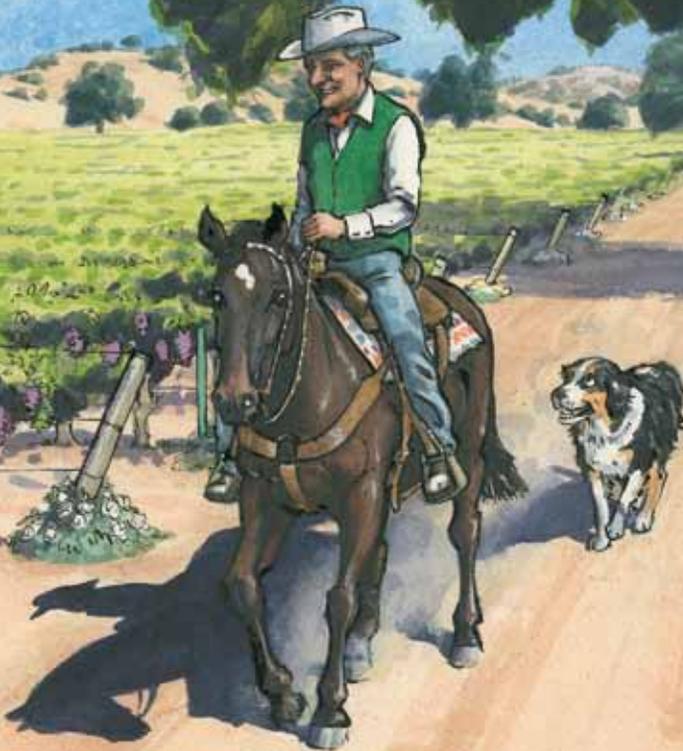
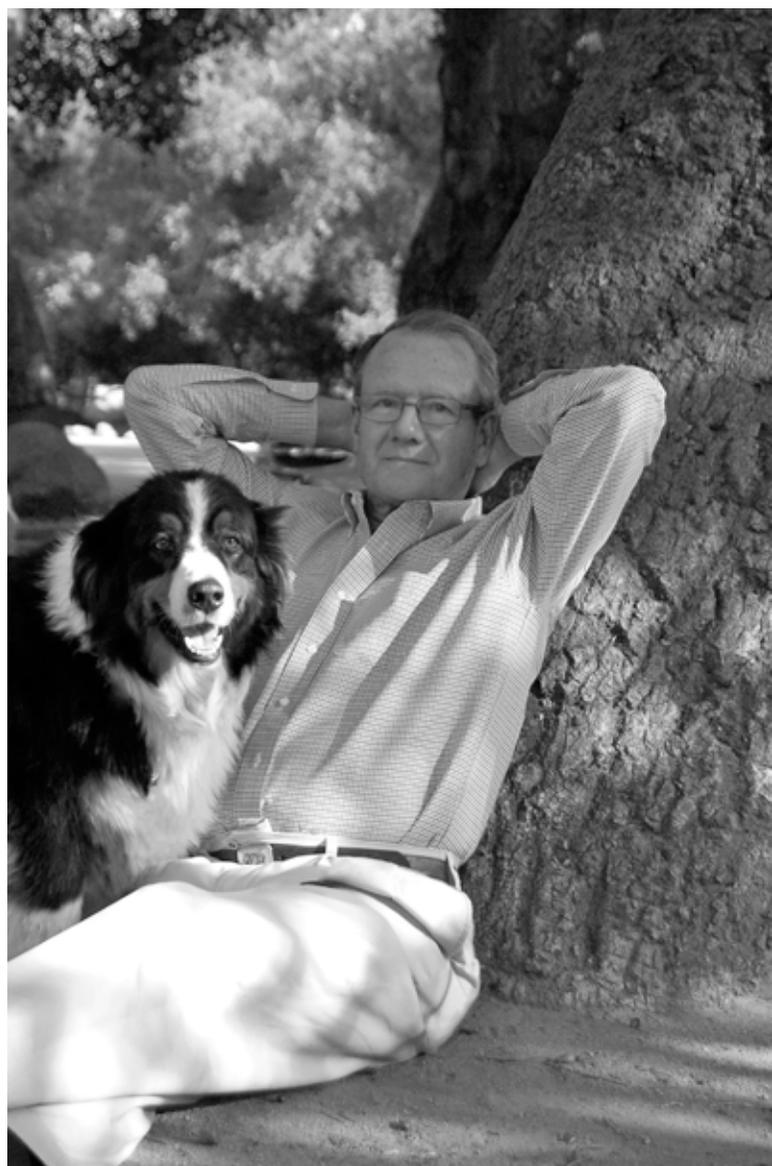


Valley Animals

*True Stories about the
Animals and People of
California's Santa Ynez Valley*



Brooks Firestone



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*True Stories About the Animals and People
of California's Santa Ynez Valley*



Brooks Firestone

Illustrations by
Alasdair Hilleary, a.k.a. Loon

*To my wife, Kate Firestone,
who loves and supports Valley animals
and her husband*

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Part Four

Ranch Work



Levy.

Cattle Realities

DR. JIM Shoup is an accomplished veterinarian who specializes in keeping high-end Thoroughbreds healthy, running, and reproducing. He is a friend and took my distress call on a Sunday afternoon, although like most Valley vets, he would respond to any appeal from an animal with a dire problem. On this day in the early 1980's, we had a calving cow unable to get the job done, and in danger of losing her life in the process. None of the ranching-type vets were available and Jim answered the call. "I haven't done any cattle work lately," he said, "but I will do my best." Jim's best was over-the-top best.

The young cow had been in labor for most of the afternoon when we spotted her lying on a hillside. Something had gone wrong, and the calf was not dropping, or even moving, and her pain and danger were evident. Jim showed up in his vet's truck and maneuvered to the quiet but obviously troubled cow lying on our ranch hillside, fortunately close to the road. A quick examination revealed that the birthing had been going on too long without success, and an operation would be necessary to save the cow and, hopefully, the calf. Ranch foreman Bill Reeds had a rope on the cow, but she was never inclined to get off the ground, and quietly submitted to treatment.

Further examination involved Jim putting on a long glove that covered his entire arm and reaching far into the back end of the cow to discover the full extent of the problem. Jim stood up and said, "Brooks, we'll need to do a Caesarian operation, and since you got me out here, I am designating you as my assistant." I swallowed and put on the operating gloves,

following the lead of the master surgeon, and joined in with an unsteady hand.

Bill held her head while Jim gave the cow an intravenous knockout and proceeded to set up an outdoor operating room, laying out all his instruments on a sterile cloth. The unconscious cow was scrubbed and shaved and her bulging Black Angus side opened in a precise and masterful operation, layer after layer. Soon a large, but unfortunately dead, calf was exposed and removed, which never would have been born under normal circumstances. Jim's every movement was that of a skilled surgeon who had served so well in the Thoroughbred operating room, but now played out on the open range. He sewed the cow back up with great pride and precision, with some amateur help from me. He stepped back proudly to survey his work as the happier cow slowly regained consciousness and stood up. Otherwise, it was a beautiful sunny, Valley day on the green hillside with the cars speeding along 101, oblivious to the country drama playing out nearby on the ranch.

"I haven't done honest ranch work in a number of years," Jim exclaimed. "It feels good to be back in veterinary school! But I don't think this cow will breed again. What will you do with her?"

"I guess she'll move on to the sales yard," said Bill.

Jim reacted with amazement. "Is that all she can do after I saved her?"

"What did you think, Doc? We'd send her back to the racetrack?"

"Yeah," the good vet replied, "I guess I should have known."

Life isn't always easy on a cattle ranch. To Jim's credit, he billed us as a ranch job and returned to his important Thoroughbred practice.

Branding Day

VALLEY CALVES are born into a friendly world and in their early days bloom with amazing health and vigor, thanks to a doting mother cow whose best satisfaction is to turn on the warm, sweet milk taps. Calves gambol and frolic under watchful, broody cow eyes as the mother munches grass. But this bucolic bliss brings growth and entry into the commercial world of ranching.

Cattle management means good health through inoculations and vitamins, the legal requirement of a brand mark, and, for the bull calves, the gelding indignity that turns them into steers. These requirements mean the herd of mother cows and calves must be gathered in from the pastures and in the ranching cycle that is referred to as a branding day. Here is a typical Valley branding, a day in the ranch cycle very important to our ranches.

The branding is planned well in advance, with all the details of medicine and cow management and the crucial question of help. No ranch has enough people to handle the branding day chores on their own, so a number of friends and neighbors are solicited, most of whom have been through the process with the ranch before and most of whom will, in turn, ask for help on their ranches. The process is governed by conventions that are as old as the ranching West.

The day will probably begin well before dawn, with horse trailer rigs arriving at the corrals. Riders will unload the horses, saddle up, and mill around, complaining about the cold morning while the host ranch serves coffee and Danish pastry in the dark. When the important gossip is handled and horses are ready, the assembled company will ride off in the frosty, dark morning. Valley pastures go from two hundred to two thousand acres with hills, trees, brush, arroyos, valleys, and numerous other places for cattle to hide. The number of riders will need to be chosen to match the size of ranch and herd, which in the Valley can go from a token ten or twenty to a few hundred cows and calves. Everyone knows that an experienced cowboy is worth four green hands, but the rancher usu-

ally takes what is available and appropriate to invite, hopes for the best, and all ride out together.

The idea is to surround the herd in the early cool before the rising sun warmth causes cattle to brush up in tree shade. The herd is then gently moved off the pasture into the corrals, leaving none behind. If all goes smoothly in the early stage, the riders will be at the far end of the pasture and ready to fan out and round up by first light. Hopefully there will be no morning fog to hide the herd.

The Valley atmosphere has a special air on these mornings, with smells of grass, sea air, horse, leather, cattle, and a unique and indescribably sweet central California aroma that makes life very worthwhile. The horses are ranch fit and might be frisky in the fresh morning air, but ready for the long trek. They have all been this route before and they know they will win and the cattle will lose but it will be a long day. Most horses seem to take an interest in a roundup, although nobody really knows what horses think.

The sun will rise and the beauty of the dawn and the welcome sun rays will warm and light the riders on their separate ways through the back parts of the ranch. Soon most of the riders are quietly on their own and hopefully not lost, as the cowboy net is cast around the pasture and waking cattle. The riders turn toward the desired gathering direction and seek out the animals for a gentle and thorough sweep of the countryside toward the corrals. The idea is to move the herd steadily and smoothly without excitement and absolutely without losing any in the sweep. Here cow sense is very much required, and the wrong move can send a cow or panicked calf the wrong direction or up an impossible hill. One rider might go an hour without seeing a cow and another might take on the responsibility of driving half the herd. Deer and the odd coyote will dash away, wanting no business with the very suspicious-looking people.

After a sometimes long and lonely trek, riders will hear or see others, moving at about the same pace and drawing toward the desired area. If all goes well the herd will gradually and peacefully assemble and the cattle will filter smoothly

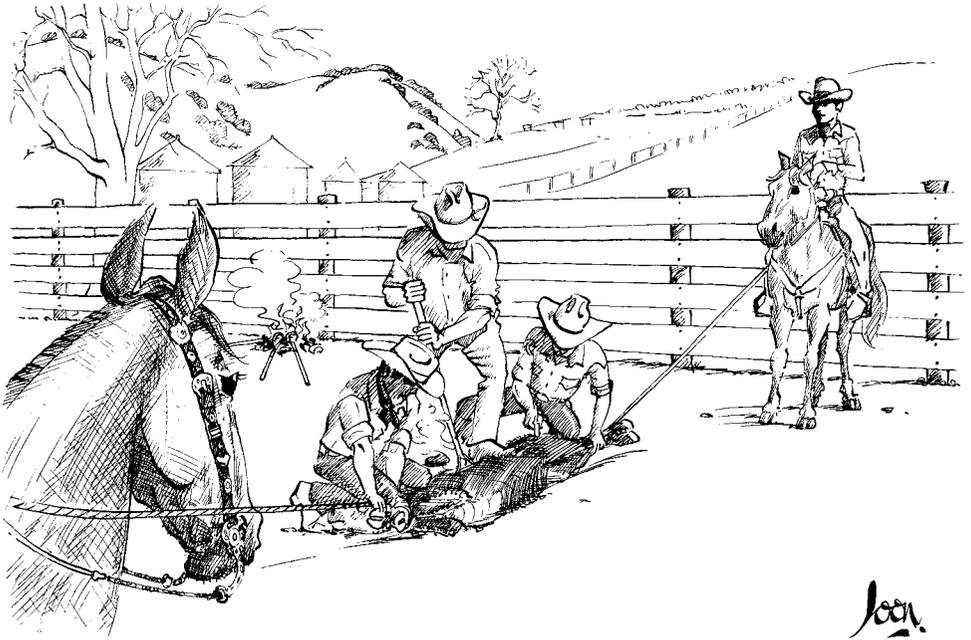
through the gate, into a holding pasture or corral. There will be a few “Yup, Yups” or “Hyahhs,” but very little excitement or rapid movement. Here again, cow sense is at a premium and a wrong move can lose a good part of the herd back to the hills or cause a dashing calf to bolt away from the pack. The form is to exert exactly the right amount of pressure, but not too much, and to continue the momentum, pushing the cows and calves to where they probably do not want to go.

Almost always, the herd ends up in a dusty, milling mass in the corrals with cows and calves mooing and bleating to pair up in the confusion. A relieved cow boss and happy ranch family and friends now tie up their sweaty horses and enjoy a cup of coffee before the work begins again.

Everyone must now know their place for the next round, the cattle sorting. The top hands will do the cutting out to separate cows and calves, the next level of riders will do the herd-holding in the large corral, the next level might work the gates on foot as the cow boss calls where the sorted animals should go. The least experienced or less well-mounted participants and visitors line the fence and watch the action. Soon calves will be separated from the cows and the real work will begin.

One corral will be the branding area, with a fire for branding irons and tables with medicines and instruments laid out. Usually groups of ten calves are brought into this working area where the first teams of designated ropers wait, swinging their loops. A roper will first sling a noose onto the head of a calf and pull the jumping animal into the path of a second roper who will catch the two hind feet. The calves will be held between the header and heeler, ready for treatment.

The ground crew will immediately put the calf on the ground and change the head noose to the two front feet, and the calf will be stretched and ready between the two holding horses. This is a skilled teamwork job coordinating riders, horses, and ground crew and is the pride of the participants, the entertainment of the assembled watchers, and the brief discomfort of the calves who seem to forget the ordeal a moment after release.



Joey.

The fast and hopefully well-coordinated ground crew will give the calf three or four injections, a brand, ear spray, miscellaneous doctoring as needed, and a rapid operation to change the bull calves to steers, all in seconds. Meanwhile, another team of ropers is catching the next calf and so on until all the young crop of calves are branded. Who ropes and who works the ground crew and who watches is orchestrated by custom and the dictates of the cow boss and very much understood by the assembled company. Skill is praised, mistakes are derisively forgiven, and bad behavior unthinkable. The sun is high now, and the work becomes long and often hot, but team spirit and ranch energy must carry the day. What started out as an adventuresome riding event has now become a long morning of hard work.

Finally the herd will be sorted, branded, doctored, and quiet. The last chore is moving the animals back to pasture, where the happier cattle, having forgotten all the indignities and discomfort of the day, make their way back to the hills. The best moment is watching the departing herd, with all mother cows healthy and mooing for their offspring, pairing

up with the gamboling calves, free on the range and at home on the ranch.

Back at the corrals, the horses will be watered, unsaddled, and tied to the trailers, munching on a pack of hay. Their day is over, and the fun has just begun for the assembled company. Form requires a good feed and drink for the volunteer help, and in the Valley, that is always forthcoming. The usual is a tri-tip steak barbecue with beans, bread, and salad. In the old days, beer and the hard stuff supplied the bar, but since the seventies, some excellent Valley wine usually graces the branding day tables. Form calls for invitees to bring a dessert, so the main course will be followed by heaps of prideful sweets.

Cowboys, friends, and neighbors, tired and happy from a long morning job, will join invited spectator guests for a hearty meal at trestle tables. The morning's good and bad moments will be rehashed and enhanced to the joy or sorrow of the participants. Finally goodbyes will be said as the trucks and trailers go down the road. With luck, the host ranch has had a good count of a healthy calf crop and, and if the prices hold, will enjoy some ranching prosperity. As the calves and cows meander back to their Valley hills in a happy, bucolic cattle way, the worn out host ranch will take satisfaction in another annual branding. This routine has been with the West for generations and hopefully will continue in the Valley for generations.



Outwitting Chickens

THERE IS something about chickens that provides good vibrations. I never met anyone who did not like chickens, except possibly the person who cleans out the cages or is awakened by a rooster at dawn. Chickens strut around making comfortable clucking sounds and scratching and pecking the dirt in a benign and reassuring way. Hens lay eggs that are as appealing as a marble statue or new-fallen snow. There