

Measuring Up

COMMENTARY BY ERIC GRANT

PERHAPS IT WAS THE MYSTERY

of the pitch black, the chill of subzero or the absolute silence of dead winter that drew us into the December night.

I still don't know.

But there we stood, my cousin Bert and I, a mile from home, atop the Salt Creek lane, holding the lead ropes of our sleds in anticipation of the long ride to the bottom of the hill.

We probably weren't outfitted the best for such a night. We had grabbed what we could off the front porch of Grandpa's house before we left — mismatched gloves that smelled of hay and manure. Worn-out work boots. Tattered Levi® jackets. Select Sires winter caps, with the flaps pulled over our ears.

We rubbed off the ice that had accumulated on the runners, wiped our noses, hopped a few times in the air to get the blood back in our toes, and carefully laid the ropes lengthwise along the backs of the sleds.

Preparations made, it was time.

So we clasped our hands on the wooden steering bars and sprinted ahead with chins pulled tightly against our chests. Then, in a single, graceful moment, we slipped belly-first onto the backs of our sleds, being careful not to drag a toe or knee, and flew into the night.

I still remember the bite of cold on my face as we zipped past fence posts and box elder trees. I still remember how the stars twinkled above us and how the Milky Way spread across the sky.

And I still remember the absolute happiness, the giggles of cousins whose boyhood days were numbered.

Planning the future

We talked a lot as we walked back up the lane between runs. We spoke of family and friends, about school and neighbors. Sometimes we even dove into the future, speculating as kids often do about whom we'd be in the years to come.

So it went.

Neither of us really had a clear idea. We knew we loved cows and ranching, but we saw limitations in those things, too. We had seen firsthand the pain and trauma of lingering financial crisis. We knew of the pitfalls of making a living on the market's shaky ground. And we knew of the uncertainty of building a livelihood that was subject to the whims of those anonymous, fickle people called *consumers*.

We also had lingering doubts about how we would measure up if we were to become cattlemen ourselves, even under the best of circumstances.

This was something we never shared with each other, but I'm fairly certain each of us felt it deep down. I wondered constantly if I possessed the physical stamina, the inner strength, the skills or the business savvy to make a go of it.

As cousins, we handled some of this anxiety by teasing each other relentlessly. When one of us would show up with a cowboy hat, we needled him until he put it away. A hat was something you earned, not just something you wore. When we screwed up, and we often did, everybody knew about it. The worst was when nobody said anything.

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Anxiety

I think growing up is something all kids say they've got under control, but when you look under the hood, there's chaos. I think the anxiety of the unknown, of growing older, is something you never overcome completely. It all boils down to how you're equipped for change and whether you use your energy to build things up, tear things down, or just sit there and let it ride.

My grandpa gave me several things that I've since brought into adulthood. The first was a sense of entrepreneurship. He traded me a heifer calf in 1977 for a summer's worth of work. A year later, he paid me \$150 for three months of irrigating, putting up hay and fixing fence.

It seemed like a lot of money, and I was flattered to accept it. It was acknowledgment that what I had done was worth something to someone, that I was gaining ground in my pursuit of maturity and that I finally had something to show for it.

But I'm not sure I was worth the investment. That summer, I tore up a baler a couple of times. My negligence resulted in a ditch's washing out during a cloud burst. And my day-to-day focus probably wasn't as sharp as it should have been.

Still, Grandpa stuck with it. In time I became a fair hand, aware of my strengths and deficiencies. I never liked roping or fixing fence. I was — and still am — the worst mechanic west of the Mississippi.

Common ground

But I liked to irrigate and to work cows. And on these two things, Grandpa and I found common ground. In the evenings we'd turn on the television. Grandma would work on her crossword puzzle, pausing on occasion to see who shot J.R. And Grandpa and I would take turns paging through the *The Record Stockman* and *Hereford Journal*, talking the evening away about cows and bulls and pedigrees and breeders and breeding programs — you name it.

Looking back, I think Grandpa and I

gave each other a sense of comfort about our futures. He demonstrated to me how individuals could define and make possible whatever future they sought to make reality. His productive lands, which he cleared and leveled a half-century earlier, are a testament to this.

On the other hand, I gave him acknowledgment that his life, even though he was growing older, still had relevance, that his labor was something of deep meaning and great value for all of us who followed in his footsteps.

Perhaps the greatest gift he gave me, however, and to all of his grandkids, were five simple words that he repeated often — and still does today: “Know what to do next.”

Only a forward-thinking person who has learned to embrace the future and to define it in his own terms is capable of speaking or even thinking such words.

But it was more than just knowing for Grandpa; it was doing. And it is in the act of doing, not just in the saying that you will, that you find the cornerstone of defining what you want your future to be.

Winter always has been a difficult time for Grandpa. The short days and long nights keep him in the house more hours than he spends in the field. But it's also provided

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him with time to plan, to think about what tasks he'd take on once the snow began to melt and the grass began to surge. It is the time to define what can be, then lay the groundwork to make it possible.

Still a mystery

For Bert and me, the winter's night finally had gotten the best of us. We wondered how much longer we could stand the cold to keep sledding. So at the bottom of the hill, we lay

flat on our backs on top of our sleds, looking up at the stars.

“What do you s'pose is out there?” Bert said.

“Huh?” I responded.

“I mean, what do you suppose is on the other side?”

“On the other side? Of what?”

“The stars. What do you s'pose is out there, on the other side?”

“I dunno.”

“I dunno either. But I wonder about it. I wonder if we'll ever know ...”

“Does it matter?”

“Yeah ... Yeah, I think it does.”

Then, as if there was nothing left to say, our conversation fell silent. Somewhere toward Red Mountain, a coyote tilted back its head and howled into the sky, its chorus joined by several others. To the east, we could hear the night wind pushing down the mountain and into the valley.

It was getting too cold to stay out, and our feet felt as if they were frozen solid. So we stood up, dragged our sleds down the road and headed toward the warmth of home.

Above us, the stars twinkled in the darkness, the mystery of their existence still intact.

