

# Grafting Calves the Easy Way

by Heather Smith Thomas

**W**hen a cow loses a calf at birth, a year of her life is wasted; it's as though you've run her a year for nothing.

If she's a good cow, you hate to sell her. The usual solution is to try to put another calf on her— an orphan perhaps, or a **calf** from a first-calf heifer that didn't want to claim it.

But it's not always easy to convince the cow to take a calf that's not hers. Ranchers have tried a lot of different tricks to fool a cow. One is to rub her afterbirth over the substitute **calf**- to try to make it smell like hers. Various powders are also available that make the calf smell good to the cow so she'll try to lick it.

I've also heard of people putting "Vicks VapoRub" on a cow's nose to confuse her sense of smell. In another case, the rancher put talcum powder all over the cow's nose and the calf. It worked; she accepted the strange calf

**Occasionally some** of these tricks work, but they usually work best if

the cow is a motherly individual who really wants her calf — any calf. A few cows will take almost any calf, especially if it is newborn or very young, even without your tricking them.

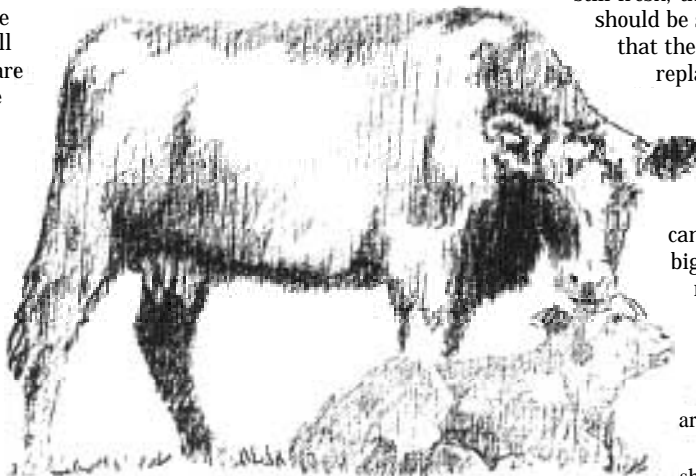
Other cows, however, are more fussy and they are not easily fooled. They'll mother only their own calf. Present them with a strange one, and they'll kick or bunt it and not let it nurse.

The oldest trick for fooling a cow — the one that works best on our ranch — is to skin the cow's dead **calf** quite soon after it dies and put the hide onto the calf to be adopted. This works best with a newborn or stillborn calf. The cow's maternal instincts and desire to mother a baby are strongest right after she calves. It's harder to trick her if her own calf is already a week or two old when it dies.

**The cow smells and licks** her newborn baby, then locks that memory into her brain. From then on, she can pick her **calf** out of the herd by its smell. She might get temporarily confused by another calf running by, or even by another calf's distressed bawl. When a **calf** gives out a bellow of pain or fright, many cows in the herd will come running. **But if she**

gets a smell of the calf, she knows instantly whether it is hers or not. Smell is the final word.

Sometime in the past, an early stockman took note of this. He used this "smell recognition" characteristic to make a cow take another calf in place of her own dead one— by putting her own calf's hide over the other calf. Stockmen have been using this practice ever since.



**The dead calf should be skinned** while still fresh, the sooner the better. The legs should be skinned out in such a way that the hide can be put over the live replacement calf like a jacket, with the live calf's legs going through the leg holes of the dead skin.

This will hold the "jacket" in place and it can't slip off. If the dead calf is bigger than the live replacement, some of the edges of the hide may have to be trimmed so that the hide is not too heavy for the replacement calf to carry around.

The tail of the dead calf should be left attached to the skin. The cow licks and smells

a calf's hind end more than anywhere else, as when it is nursing, and it had better smell like hers. A few sniffs of the jacket-bearing newcomer and most cows are convinced that this is her own baby.

**Once the calf has nursed** a few times and the cow's own milk has come on through, the cow will usually be satisfied that it's her own calf. It's then safe to take off the dead skin.

By that time, the dead skin may be starting to smell a little strong anyway. It won't be needed any longer, for the new pair will be well bonded. The cow will mother and protect that substitute baby as diligently as if it were the one she gave birth to.

Taking a few minutes to skin out the dead calf and put the hide on the "graft" calf saves days of fighting with your cow to make her take a calf she doesn't want.

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