

# BEING TOUGH

by Tony Malmberg

I was four years old when I learned what got me respect on the ranch. I'd fallen off my horse during an early morning ride and dozens of burrs stuck through my jeans and into my legs. My dad, silhouetted against the early morning light, looked at me and then looked away. "Are you coming or not?" he asked. I got back on my horse, pretended I wasn't crying, and rode on.

We moved from Nebraska to a ranch near Lander, Wyoming and I began teaching the children around me to hide discomfort to avoid ridicule.

Acting tough became a contest, bordering on meanness. Sometimes, as a grown man, I wonder if I didn't create problems so I could be more tough.

Then a cowboy I deeply respected challenged my views of ranching. As we rode Wyoming's Red Desert, I complained to him about my problems on the ranch. I said I was doing everything just like my grandfather and father, but the environmentalists, the Democrats and consumers new resistance to eating beef made it impossible to make an honest living.

Bill was a great cowboy and rode for the Matador ranch for many of his younger years, so we're talking legend here.

"Quit your belly aching," He told me. "Your father and grandfather survived because they did what they needed to do in the time they lived. If they were alive today they would be doing things differently, because times are different."

I thought about my great-grandfather, who left Sweden and traveled across the ocean in 1886, knowing that he would never return home. I thought about my grandfather, who ran away from home when he was twelve to ride for the Matador ranch. Still a kid, he also rode with the Sioux, and learned their language-- his third after Swedish and English.

Listening to Bill, I realized that blaming other people for my problems was whiny and self-righteous. I felt ashamed.

So what does being tough mean to me, on my landscape? Comprehension came early one morning as I headed to town to drink coffee with the boys and complain about environmentalists, the weather, and stupid consumers. As I drove by the BLM office, it was silhouetted against the early morning sunrise. I thought about my dad 25 years before, and his question, "Are you coming or not."

I turned my truck around and drove up to the BLM office. It felt like that moment before stepping on a known trashy-outlaw horse. It took all the toughness of that four-year-old, shinnying up a horse's leg to grab the door handle and sit down with my BLM range conservationist.

Stopping by the Bureau of Land Management office became easier with practice. We don't always talk about grazing, drought and stepping up turnout dates for cows. Sometimes we just talk about our kids, or politics. Once in awhile we bitch about the ranchers sitting down at the coffee shop.

I've also learned more about my neighbors, thanks to a book discussion group at the local library. As introductions went round the circle, a teacher said, "My husband and I moved here from California and we love it so much we are never going to leave!"

I told myself, "These people are my neighbors and I gotta figure out how to get along with them."

We got to talking after meetings, and finally she asked, "Why should I support ranchers grazing public lands when they are so traditional?"

I responded, "Have you ever known a schoolteacher resistant to change?"

We kept talking, and pretty soon the ranch became an outdoor classroom for her husband's 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade class, while I learned more about our ranch's ecological health.

This couple taught me that when we talk about where we live, we can find common ground.

Most recently, my partners came to me with a plan to take part of the ranch and sell portions in ranchettes and homesites. My cowboy skills were being culled like an open cow. I couldn't afford to buy them out so I set out to keep the working landscape together.

My neighbors pitched in. One thought he could buy my south pasture and lessen my debt. Another offered a long term pasturing agreement. A third couple offered their modest ranch for collateral. Land trusts brought vision and partners. We may not be able to hang on but our old-timer and new-comer neighbors are searching for ways to value conservation more than development. If this landscape escapes developers chopping, it will be because I was tough enough to realize and accept the market shift from strictly cows to cows and conservation. But mostly, it's because I've learned that being tough means being humble. Being tough means asking my community for help.