



Left “It’s really something to see,” says Chris about Frank and Frankie managing the herd on horseback. “You can’t teach this kind of riding, at least not like how they do it.” **Top right** Nearly dead when found, a days-old calf recuperates in the Sloans’ shop. **Bottom right** Frankie, Chris and Frank take a break from the cold.

its course,” Chris says, then adds, “In our bigger pastures we try to rotational graze and save grass for next year. You never know what next year is going to bring. It might be dry and that grass might be a savior.”

Considering the size of their operation, not to mention the era in which they work, it’s a bit of a surprise for folks not familiar with the area that the Sloans still rely extensively on horses to herd cattle. “We run cows mostly in bush pastures,” says Frank, “and you have to have a horse in the bush pastures. A quad will not work in the trees.”

Frank explains that they also use horses to sort each cow/calf pair in spring. He says the horses and cows work well together in this process—better than humans alone or on machines. “It’s way easier sorting your pairs with horses than it is with a quad.”

GOOD TIMES

Having weathered a difficult drought in the mid-2000s, as well as a scare in 2003 involving BSE, aka mad cow disease, much of the Alberta cattle industry has rebounded. “Grains are lower [priced],” Chris says. “Supplies are tight on beef; our [Canadian] dollar, as we’re talking to you, is below 80 cents.” (That figure was from last February. As of October, it was even lower at 77 cents against the U.S. dollar.)

Even the price of local labor, which has experienced historically high demand in recent decades due to the strength of the local oil industry, has decreased in the past year due to the falling price of crude. In Alberta alone, which includes the overwhelming majority of Canada’s oil reserves, energy sector jobs are expected to be reduced by about 38% in 2015.

“Right now,” says Chris, “I would think that the way

everything is going for the cow/calf guy, especially in Canada, is almost like the perfect storm, in a good way.” Perhaps the outlook is even better for the Sloans, who positioned themselves well in the aftermath of a downturn several years ago. Beginning in 2009, says Chris, “bred cows were very inexpensive here because of a drought, so we started buying cows then. We had enough feed and we’ve just kept expanding.”

As for what’s ahead, drought remains a frequent problem. This summer the area near St. Paul and the Sloan ranch received about 20% less rainfall than average. As a result, Chris says the price of feed has increased and the pastures, even with the Sloans’ rotational grazing practices, were running low in late September, which is about a month shy of a normal year.

Still, says Chris, “The cattle industry really seems optimistic now. I think we’re hitting a high part of the cycle, but I think we’re going to be OK for two or three years. It’s going to take a long time to build the numbers back in Canada and the U.S. to make our herds where they might get overpopulated and have low [prices] again.”

WHEN IS BIG TOO BIG?

In the meantime, Frank, Chris and Frankie, who recently began working his own separate cattle operation in addition to the family’s, contemplate their future and how they plan to approach it. All concede that growth has changed how they operate, especially Chris, who spends more time managing and less time in the field. “As much as I hate to admit it,” says Chris, “the business ... may be getting too big. It wasn’t that many years ago ... it was just Dad and one hired guy who [worked the ranch]. Now we seem to have six hired guys going.