

Cattle Handling Made Simple

by Joel Ham*

Basically, livestock handling is pretty simple. When you break it down, it's creating movement, directing movement, and stopping movement. That's it, whether you're working livestock out in a 10,000 acre pasture or in a feedlot pen. Anytime you're working with stock you need to be able to do those three things, and if you can, you can do anything you want with them. Now the "how to" is where it gets a little more complicated, but understanding those three things will help simplify it.

It's like basketball. Basketball is dribbling, passing and shooting, and if you work on those, pretty soon you'll be a good basketball player. It doesn't matter if you know all the fancy plays if you don't perfect your dribbling, passing and shooting skills. So, learning to create, direct and stop movement is like learning to dribble, pass and shoot. When you develop those basic skills, then things automatically start working better. It all goes back to the basics.

These basics are all based on a few fundamental principles.

PRINCIPLES

To effectively work cattle the way Bud Williams did we must first understand some principles that he used to do that.

1. They like to see you.
2. They like to follow other animals.
3. They like to go in the direction they are headed.
4. They don't like to be pushed from behind.
5. They like to feel like they are doing what they want.

If we feel pressure from something, we're going to want to see it, right? The same is true with livestock, especially since they are prey

animals. Therefore, we should always try to position ourselves so they can see us. This is one reason why it's often a good idea to work the leaders. If they are worked properly, the others will want to follow them.

We've all seen how one animal will get up to go some place and all the rest will get up and follow it. It's like they don't want to miss the boat. We can use this natural behavior to our advantage to help establish good movement and to not do anything to interfere with it.

It's also quite clear that cattle like to go in the the direction that they are already headed. When we see cattle lined out in a pasture going someplace, they not only follow each other but they go straight.

Cows don't like to be pushed from behind, our fourth principle. We need to look at this carefully because that's exactly what most cowboys do. Bud always said that animals don't want to be pressured from behind, but there's been a lot of misunderstanding about that. It even got to be, at least for a while, where people thought that you couldn't get behind cattle. In fact, I had people get mad at me at a few places I went where they said, "Bud Williams says that you don't ever get behind cattle." I said, "No, Bud never said that. He said that you don't *pressure* them from behind. He gets behind cattle a lot because I worked with him and I saw him do it." So what he meant was don't put pressure any time that you can't see one eye or the other of the cow. That's how I simplify it for people. If you can't see one eye or the other and you pressure, you're going to change that animal's direction because of the first principle, they like to see you, and principle number three,

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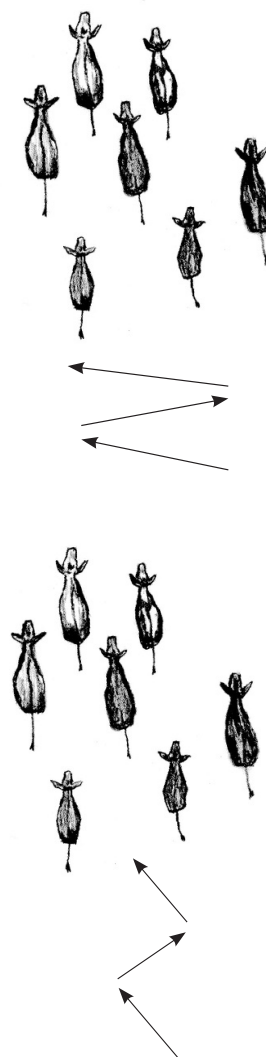
they like to go the direction they're facing. So I get behind cattle a lot; I just don't put pressure when I'm directly behind in their blind spot. You can intentionally do that if you want to change their direction; that's a good way to do that. But if you don't want them to change direction then you can't do that.

Cattle also like to feel like they're doing what they want to do, our sixth principle. The way I try to explain that is that if an animal takes a step and I don't take the pressure off, then I'm pushing, and the animal isn't doing what it wants to do. So, sooner or later you're going to have problems, especially if I have a bunch of cattle. In order for an animal to feel like its doing what it wants to do, pressure has to be removed quickly once it takes a step, or even commits to taking a step. Then, it feels like it's in control. In other words, the animal is thinking, "All I have to do to get that guy to leave me alone is to take a step forward." And you build on that by being consistent. As long as the animal feels like it wants to do it, then it's at ease and in a normal frame of mind, which is important. It's like a horse going into a trailer. If it goes in because it wants to then it's going to ride calm. But if you force it in, it's not going to be calm; it's going to be nervous. And that goes back to not being *allowed* to go in, but *being* forced in. It's the same with loading a chute. If they want to go up the chute, then they're not going to try to back out.

DRIVING CATTLE

I work a lot alone, so I often drive cattle from the rear as I saw Bud do. (That isn't to say that I don't ever work the sides, because I do.) In order to not pressure directly behind animals, we need to move across in a zigzag pattern and in straight lines. Animals prefer us to move in straight lines instead of curved lines. Bud said that the arc or "windshield wiper" pattern that you see being promoted will "kill movement or spread 'em out." Also, it's a curved and not straight line and animals don't like it.

To drive cattle ahead, zigzag back and forth across behind them at a forward angle. This applies pressure into their sides, and we're constantly switching eyes so they know where we are and they can remain calm and go straight. It also keeps us from falling in directly behind cattle. If the cattle are sensitive, the angle shouldn't be too steep. If they are dull, the angle needs to be steeper, or sharper, which applies much more pressure. Diagrammatically, it looks like this:

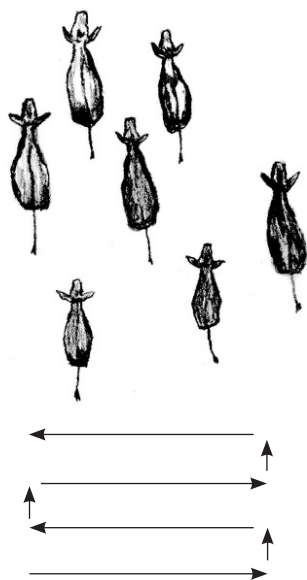


When keeping a fairly flat angle with sensitive cattle, you can go clear across without running into the cattle. As a consequence, people

tend to go too far—which I did for years—but when you do that you tend to turn animals crossways that you pass and turn the lead. The way to determine how far to go across is to observe your animals and the effect you’re having. You’re movement is supposed to be driving them ahead, but if you’re turning some crossways or turning the lead, that tells you that you’ve gone too far. So, you need to turn back before that happens.

With the sharper zigzag with gentle cattle, your angle is such that if they don’t move they’re going to get run over, and that’s the attitude or presence you should have. The cattle will know by your angle of your approach and your energy that you intend to run into them, so they better move.

Bud also talked about the following flat angle approach and driving pattern—that is depicted in Steve Cote’s book—that he used with the totally wild reindeer in Alaska.



PRESSURE AND RELEASE

If you want to initiate good movement you have to apply pressure at the right angle, at the right speed, and with the right amount of energy or presence. Equally important is taking the pressure off at the right time, but this is one

of the least understood things as far as getting good movement out in the open. You’ll never really get good movement until you learn to take the pressure off quickly. Most people apply pressure and then continue applying it, at least for a while. With Bud, when a cow took one step, he released pressure by changing direction or stopping to give a release or reward. Optimally, it would be when the cow thinks of stepping and before she even takes that step. Most people are late in the release and they let the cow take three or four steps and they’re still applying pressure and that has a negative effect in the cow’s mind, and that’s how we train our animals to be sluggish.

Here’s my country boy analysis. If we apply pressure to a cow and she starts moving away, and we just keep coming for three, four or five steps before stopping or changing direction, in that cow’s mind we’re pushing. It responded to our pressure by moving away but we kept coming. Consequently, it will start to build some resistance—especially if she’s a little gentle anyway—because now its mind is focused on us, and she mentally starts to build up a little bit of resistance. So when we finally move away its focus is on us and it thinks, “Thank goodness, he’s gone, now I can stop.” And you’ll eventually build that mentality in the cow. It doesn’t happen all at once, but you’ll eventually build that mentality in *all* of your cows. They start to think that, “If I’ll just take a few steps he’ll leave and I can go about my business,” and they’ll start grazing.

So, I get people to always look back over their shoulder to see the results of what they did, which is difficult to do because our focus is on where to go next, but we need to look back to see what that animal did that we just pressured. Sometimes we’ll look back and that animal took a few steps but stopped, so we have to turn and pressure into them again to get them to going. Most people have a lack of patience to build that slow movement. If you’ve got sluggish cattle it will take a while to build the movement, but

it will pay off later on. You just have to spend more time getting these few to walking. But if we're in a hurry we go get as many as we can and we think that we're going to build some motion faster. That goes back to the principle of cows liking to feel like what they're doing is what they want to do; if we keep coming after the move, then it's not their idea anymore, it's ours. We're pushing instead of creating movement. When we're pushing and we quit, they relax and stop, and pretty soon we'll have the whole bunch stopped and grazing.

I was helping a lady and we had a really nice flat, open area to work about 30-40 head of gentle, easy-to-handle steers. We'd get everyone of them moving perfectly and then I'd drop back and let her work them and pretty soon she'd have most of them stopped. She kept losing her motion and I kept telling her that she was pressuring too long, that she wasn't taking her pressure off quick enough. She insisted that she was. There was one white steer in the bunch—all the rest were reds and blacks—and we had them all moving and that white steer stopped. I said, "Okay, put some pressure on that white steer and as soon as he takes a step, turn. Well, she took four or five steps into him after he first moved, and then she turned and walked away. I told her to look back over her shoulder and he had stopped. He was the only one in the herd that stopped; everything else kept going. That was because she kept that pressure on too long. It wasn't too long to her, but it was way too long for the steer. Then after she started looking back over her shoulder she finally realized that she was the one stopping them. So the light bulb went on, but she got mad at me at first because she insisted that she was taking pressure off quick enough. I really wish I had someone in a helicopter taking video of that because it would've been a great teaching tool.

Similarly, at Bud's stockmanship schools, he could go start a bunch of cattle and get them to walking good, then back off and let the students take over, and they'd have them stopped or going the wrong direction in five minutes.

SHRINKING AND EXPANDING THE FLIGHT ZONE

It's interesting that the same thing is used for wild cattle or gentle cattle. In flighty cattle my job is to make their flight zone smaller so we can get close enough to work them, because when we get to the corrals, if we haven't made their flight zone smaller then we're way too close when we get inside the corrals. But if we've done our job well, by the time we get to the corrals they can take pressure. So what we're actually doing is teaching them to take pressure by taking the pressure off quickly. But, once we've taken the pressure off, Bud said that it's important to come right back in but a little closer, then release and come right back in, and keep doing this. In this way we'll shrink their flight zone and teach them to take more pressure.

On the other hand, with really sluggish cattle, we might have to pick up our energy, but we still have to take the pressure off quickly to make their flight zone bigger. In other words, we're rewarding them for that little response and if our timing is correct and they get that reward, that release from pressure, they're going to get more sensitive to our pressure. In this way, as we build their sensitivity we shouldn't have to come back in as far.

Also, with flightier animals we enter their flight zone slower, whereas with the gentle or sluggish animals we enter their flight zone faster and with more energy. However, the basics are the same: We take the pressure off quickly to make their flight zone smaller and we take the pressure off quickly to make their flight zone bigger. Eventually, even with gentle cattle, we want to get them to where all we have to do is look at them or lean in their direction and have them move. We're training them to be sensitive and responsive, just like we would a horse. The quicker we release pressure the more responsive they become. It's not the pressure but the release of pressure that teaches.

THE PROBLEM WITH “LOW STRESS”

When people hear the term “low stress” they immediately get the wrong impression. If you did a survey of 100 people, and asked them what “low stress” means, 98 of them would probably tell you that it means that you do things slower, quieter, and with less force. So, people who don’t understand what Bud taught will read an article and decide that they need to stop yelling and waving their arms, then they’re low-stress. But there’s a whole lot more to it than that, so that’s why I don’t like the term because everybody thinks they’re doing it. Some of the “low stress” stuff that people are doing is not what Bud taught. It is slower, and it might look good in a demonstration in a controlled situation, but in an actual working situation you’re in trouble; it’s not going to work. The cattle aren’t being trained and aren’t getting any more responsive, so I try not to use the term “low stress” because it paints the wrong picture. When people ask if I do that low-stress stuff I say, “No, I try to do better or proper stockmanship.”

A lot of people don’t like low-stress livestock handling because they tried it and they ended up with very slow, sluggish cattle that are hard to work and to get to move, and that makes for a long, frustrating day. Everywhere I’ve been on consulting deals—with the exception of places that were getting in stocker cattle—the cattle are extremely dull and miserable to work. And with any fresh ones that were coming in, it was just a matter of time before they would be just like the old ones. Without realizing it, the people were training the cattle to be slow, sluggish, and dull because of their misinterpretation of “low stress.”

They have a little bit of information but no training and don’t understand the basic principles of what Bud taught. What people don’t realize is that Bud put a lot of pressure on cattle; he didn’t mess around with them. But he pressured in the right place. The way he described that was pressuring where they wanted. That

always confused me. He’d say, “I pressure where they want it.” And I’d ask, “How do I know where they want it?” I finally figured it out; it’s in the right place to get the desired result, and then take the pressure off really quick. And you can see that in Bud’s videos. Bud’s never just poking along if he’s moving cattle outside in the open. He’s always going at a brisk walk to create some motion, then he might slow down or lower his energy a little once he got some movement going. The majority of people now who are into the low-stress thing think that if you don’t yell and wave your arms you’re doing low-stress livestock handling. I think that’s set it back a little.

DEVELOPING “FEEL”

As Ray Hunt said about horsemanship, it’s all about feel. The same is true with handling livestock. Lets say you’re approaching cattle that you’ve never seen before and you don’t know what’s been done to them. You have to develop a feel for their attitude towards you. You look for signs, like heads or ears coming up, the animal’s expression, and you develop a feel for where their flight zone is before you ever get there. Then you have to develop a feel for whether they are all at the same place, or are there some gentle ones and others who can’t take much pressure. You have to scan and start picking those little things up. Whereas before, all my life, I approached cattle in a lacadazical manner. We never thought about looking ahead to look at the cows.

I worked in a feedlot one year when I was in high school. I’d get through riding my pen and my riding partner would see a sick one that I missed. He wouldn’t tell me a lot because he wanted me to figure it out on my own, so I asked him, “How do you see all those cattle?” He said, “Well, you’re looking for the sick ones while you’re in the pen with ‘em, but it’s too late then. I see the sick ones when I’m in the next pen before I get in there and disturb ‘em, and I just remember ‘em, because once you get in

there and they're not very sick and they perk up, then you won't see them." He pulled a lot of cattle that didn't look sick to me, but he saw them before I ever got in there. He was looking for them because he knew that I didn't know what I was doing. So that's kind of a feel; he was looking ahead, he wasn't just lacadazically riding his horse.

By the time you get to a bunch of cattle you can have a pretty good feel for what type of relationship they had with people, and whether you're gonna want to enter their flight zone fast or slow and how much pressure it's going to take to move them. Once you develop that you build on it from there, even if they're your own cattle. On a different day they may have a different attitude, so you still need to be looking ahead for little signs that you may be at the wrong angle or position, or coming too slow or too fast. That's what I mean by "feel." Actually, you do a lot of this by instinct after you practice it. It takes awareness and practice.

I don't think I actually count the steps of cattle or my steps while I'm working; when that cow moves I immediately stop or change direction. You just develop a feel by working at it and being aware of the principles and conscious of the cattle's attitudes, the direction their heads are pointed, etc. Most people that I see are just driving cattle along, talking or swinging their rope, and they never see the cattle even though they are right in front of them. They see the cattle but they don't see the cattle. I used to be that way so I can understand that, but now I see a completely different thing. I have a feel for the cattle and I can see that something is about to go wrong, like a few animals starting to stop, so I know that I'm going to lose my movement if I don't do something about it. So I'm already moving in ahead of time. It's hard to learn because it's boring at first because you don't know what you're looking for, but after a while it gets interesting to try to develop the feel to get you in the right place at the right time. As you develop your feel—and your timing—you

get better and better.

Applying pressure properly is all about developing feel. You just have to be observant and watch what the cow does when you pressure at a certain angle. You'll eventually learn that cattle respond consistently when pressured in a certain way. In other words, whatever the cattle do is in response to what you do, and you have to develop a feel for that. That's why you can't have somebody take you out and show you in one day and now you're a Bud Williams stock handler. You have to develop the feel for how you to pressure and what effect it has on animals, and when they don't respond like you thought they should, that's when you have to ask yourself, "Okay, what did I do to cause that?" You figure it out and correct it and over time you finally develop a feel for the proper angle to pressure and to quickly take it off. It's like how do you know how far to throw a rope? Do you drop one coil, two coils, or three coils? But once you've roped enough and you're racing across the pasture you just know how far to throw the rope. But Bud was good enough and smooth enough that you couldn't see what he was doing a lot of times. It all blended together.

I'm not saying that I have it all down because I have trouble sometimes. I don't mind admitting that there are days when I have trouble and I don't know what I'm doing, but I do know that it's because of something I'm doing and I'll eventually figure it out. But I do have my cattle calm enough that I don't lose them while I'm trying to figure out what to do next. It doesn't matter how good I'm doing if someone else is doing something wrong, it can still kill the movement or change the direction. Everybody has to be on the same page to get the best results.

MOVING PAIRS

A lot of people have trouble moving pairs, especially with real young calves. A lot of times they think that these babies are too young and that we'll have to leave them behind. That's

very seldom the case. I have found that if a cow wants her calf to come, even a day-old calf can go a long ways. But, if we start putting too much pressure on her, then she doesn't want it to. I've moved a lot of cows and calves on my own and I've noticed that if a cow wants her calf to go it will, but if she doesn't, the calf will lay down. If you keep messing with them, if you get frustrated and start fighting them and trying to force them, pretty soon that calf will be laying down. I've even picked them up and they won't even drop their legs, so I leave, ride on, and then look over my shoulder and the cow's trotting and the calf's loping along behind her to catch up. I don't know how they do it, but when a cow gets under too much pressure, there's a high percentage of them that will somehow tell their calf to lay down and stay put. But if we fix it up so the cow wants to go somewhere the calf can go a long ways. I've had some that I thought were too young, that were still wet, and I tried to leave them. But because I had the cattle trained to stay together and to follow one another, and had good movement, I actually couldn't leave the ones that I wanted to leave. They'd just come along anyways with their babies and follow the herd. I've had them follow me a mile when they were still wet! But, the cow wanted the calf to go pretty bad.

In regards to moving pairs, Bud always said that when he went through the gate, if every cow wasn't mated up with her calf, then he felt like he did a poor job. I used to think that he was just saying that, but I realized later that he was completely sincere about it.

If you don't move cows and properly, you can really cause some problems. For example, this rancher and I went to work some cattle. When we unloaded our horses we heard cattle bawling. I thought maybe somebody had a receiving yard or something where they had stocker cattle because it was really loud. We gathered this pasture for about an hour and topped out over this hill and it was all open and there was a tank at the bottom. The cattle I was hearing

were all cows and calves and they were gathered around that tank, just standing there bawling. When we got our other cattle up there the cows were clearly not mated up. I guess they'd been laying down until they heard us coming, then they stood up, but they didn't mate up and they were still bawling. We gathered them up and worked for a couple of hours and moved the herd only a quarter of a mile or so. I'd never seen anything like that before. I realized that what happened is that these were already gentle cattle, and the guys just rode along and pushed them, and whenever the cattle slowed down they'd push a little harder. But as they pushed them they separated the cows from their calves because cows are more sensitive to pressure. The cowboys kept doing this until the cows just gave up trying to come back for their calves. I could see that they were conditioned to separate from their calves and they'd bawl about it and you could see which calf belonged to which cow, but they wouldn't come together. I knew how they worked their cattle and I saw that that continual pressure discouraged those cows from coming to the back to get their calves and that's why they ended up with a wad of calves at the back. Those cows accepted in their minds that when the riders show up they have to be separate from their calves. They didn't like it, that's why they bawl, but they didn't even try to get back with them. I was really perplexed and didn't know what to do, but I did know enough to think we probably just ought to leave them alone. I remembered that Bud taught when you're working a fresh set of calves to work them about 20 minutes, and if you don't have them like you'd like, quit anyway and come back a little later. So, that's what we did. It was getting hot and we were tired anyway.

We came back the next day and those cattle were so much better; it was like a different herd. We moved them and we got a high percentage of the cattle through the gate paired up. It wasn't perfect but it was a whole lot better than it had been. That's when I realized that you can

actually condition cattle to separate from their calves in a herd and that's the way they'll travel. There'd be big wads of calves here and there and guys riding along slapping their leg. I learned that even though those cattle weren't wild and the cowboys weren't chousing them, there was as much stress on those cattle as if they were roping and dragging them. It was "slow stress" instead of "wild stress."

Then we went over to the other side of the ranch where they had bigger pastures and they didn't move the cattle as often. The first bunch weren't in very good shape, even though it was spring and green, and the calves were a little pot-bellied and their hair was long and rough. I didn't think much about it until I saw the other cattle that were mostly slicked off and the calves, of the same age, were quite a bit heavier and bloomy looking. It should've been the opposite because the others that were being moved more often were getting the higher nutrition. The cowboys weren't wild, they weren't whoopin' and hollerin', but it was the slow, constant pressure that made the difference. With 600 head of cattle that's a lot of pounds and a lot of dollars. I'd estimate that the second bunch of calves were 25 to 50 pounds heavier, plus they were healthier looking. I asked the owner why these cattle looked so much better than the other ones and he replied, "Because we don't move these as often. We only move these about once a month." So, he knew that it was due to handling and, to his credit, that's why he had me there, to try and figure it out and they eventually learned.

GOOD MOVEMENT

Bud always said that good movement will draw other animals to it and forced movement will repel other animals. Animals can see how other animals are traveling and if it's good they want to be with them, but if those animals are stressed, the others somehow know it and they don't want to be a part of it. Also, if you have bad movement in the main group, that's when

they start stopping in the brush and peeling off. It all has to do with the way we approach the animals and get the initial movement.

About 15 years ago I went to help with branding on a large ranch. I was riding up on a high ridge. The drive was coming together and I could see the other riders scattered out across for a mile or more. They were coming up a big wide, brushy draw and I could see the cattle moving in front of them. There was one guy who had a really loud, coarse, irritating voice, and every little bit he would yell. I'm pretty sure he couldn't see the cattle in front of him because they were far enough ahead of him. I was just riding along the ridge enjoying the view and every time he'd holler, one or two pairs would peel off the right side. He couldn't see them so he didn't know it. That really taught me a lesson—that how you create and maintain movement is very important to whether or not cattle will want to stay in the herd.

I've learned through the years when I work real brushy areas, I don't have to work the whole area. If I can just get some good movement, the other cattle will come to it because they don't want to be left behind. I've actually tried to leave cattle behind when I went through a gate—maybe some that I wanted to cut out to sell—and I've had them go down the fence and jump it, jump cattle guards, or squirt through the gate before I could get it shut to get back with the other cattle. Whereas, a few years ago, if I cut one out it was gone! So cattle really like to go to good movement and that comes down to how you create it.

Just as cattle really like to go to good movement, they really like to get away from bad movement, which is caused by us violating principle number six and the cattle aren't wanting to go where we want, which often ends up in the cowboys resorting to force. Consequently, the cattle are unhappy and stressed, which other cattle sense, and they don't want any part of it.

Again, here's my country boy analysis. The way I see it is that cattle function by instinct

or learned behavior, that's it. But there's two kinds of instinct. There's an instinct to move away from our pressure, then there's the survival instinct. We need to figure out how to get animals to move away from us without them feeling like they have to survive so they can remain calm. If they feel like they have to survive, which is often the result of using force, then they can't respond in a calm manner. The principles we talked about earlier are true, but if you get your cattle feeling like they have to survive, then none of this other stuff counts. For example, they won't necessarily want to follow other animals; they may lose their minds and run anywhere for safety.

MOVEMENT AND DIRECTION

Don't try to get movement and direction at the same time. A lot of times you can, but it's most important to get movement first, then you can always get direction, but so many people are busy trying to get direction first that they foul the movement up.

That's one way how Bud taught people to empty a feedlot pen. He'd have some riders go create some movement, and he'd have one guy at the gate to direct the cattle out the gate. Sometimes it's really difficult to get cattle out of some feedlot pens. I haven't had much experience in feedlots but I've been to some on consulting deals.

I was at this one feedlot where they had a couple of pens where they really had a hard time getting cattle out. They would actually go get all the help they could; they'd get the feed truck drivers, the secretary, everybody. In one really difficult pen—it was odd shaped—we just opened the gate and while we were standing nearby talking, one curious steer walked over to the gate and another one was looking at him. So I just sent him out the gate and fed the other one to him and here the rest came; it was like pulling the plug on the bathtub. We didn't do anything! I had to tell the crew that it's not always going to work this way, but you have

to work with what you've got. The cattle might all be at the back of the pen, in which case you need to create some movement and see where you need to be to feed that movement and don't worry about the ones that aren't coming. Get the front ones going and they'll pull the back ones. But they didn't understand that all you have to do is create movement and then direct it, so they were trying too hard. So simple in concept but so hard to do.

PLACING CATTLE

Alan Savory hates fences and considers them a necessary evil. Personally, I've decided that I'm not going to build any more fence. Instead, I want to make a serious study of placing cattle and do planned grazing without additional fence. The main idea is that it has to be the cows' idea. If it's not, they're not going to stay. The problem is that we slip back into forcing mode, and may not even realize it, and they don't like it, so they're going to want to go to where they were last comfortable.

That it's possible to place cattle should be good news for cowboys. Herding and placing cattle would be a cowboys dream job and help the industry and lifestyle stay alive, but they reject the notion. It's unfortunate, and I don't really understand it, but Holistic Management and Bud Williams' stockmanship could save the cowboy way of life, but they reject it.

CONCLUSION

The Lasater philosophy maintains that ranching is simple; the problem is keeping it simple. The same can be said about livestock handling. It should be simple but people tend to make it too complex and more difficult than it should be. However, with a basic understanding of a few principles and techniques, creating movement, directing movement, and stopping movement can be simple.