



Low-Stress Handling

How Bud Williams changed cattle handling.

by Heather Smith Thomas

Occasionally, someone with an idea changes an industry. Bud Williams' unique methods of handling livestock are being adapted by a growing number of folks in the cattle industry. His way of handling stock is not only easier — and safer — on the animals and the people handling them but also profitable. By reducing handling stress, animal illness and injury, overall health improves.

Bud was born in 1932 on a farm in southern Oregon. He met his wife, Eunice, at a country square dance, and they were married in 1952.

"We worked on cattle and sheep ranches in northern California," she recalls. "On our first job at a big ranch in the mountains, Bud was horrified at the way they handled the stock. He told me there was no way that he was going to work stock that way."

He began finding better ways to work with livestock.

"What enabled him to perfect his methods were his great powers of observation and pure stubbornness," Eunice says. He was able to rotationally graze pastures without fences, taking any type of livestock (including weaned calves) onto unfenced ranges, and teach them to stay together as a herd.

"After our daughters grew up, Bud and I started traveling, taking jobs that were difficult and interesting. We had excellent results working beef and dairy cattle, sheep, goats, elk, fallow deer, reindeer, bison and hogs. We gathered reindeer above the Arctic Circle in Alaska and wild cattle in Mexico and the Aleutian

Islands, and our way of handling cows resulted in remarkable increases in production in dairy herds," Eunice explains. In 1989, after urging from people he'd helped, Bud began teaching his methods.

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— Dawn Hnatow, rancher and low-stress handling teacher and consultant

Bud died in 2012, but his family continues to host schools and clinics to teach his stockmanship principles, and their students continue to spread the word. Many folks who attend

these presentations are inspired to teach others.

Dawn Hnatow was one of his students. She grew up in Alberta on a mixed cattle and grain operation.

"I was working at Vee Tee Feeders in Lloydminster when I first met Bud," Hnatow says. "He came to work there. I spent about 10 years working with him, learning about his way of handling livestock and saw how much better it was for the livestock and for the people."

Hnatow moved to Texas to serve as a livestock manager on a ranch Bud and Eunice lived on for a decade. Currently, she leases two ranches and does consulting and teaching.

"I feel I need to share what I was blessed to be able to learn. Not many people had the access to Bud that we did, at Vee Tee Feeders and after. Now that he's gone, several of us are committed to preserving his legacy and his knowledge to the

best of our ability. It's a very important message for anyone who handles livestock."

Stockmanship clinics

"I think there is a misconception about low-stress livestock handling. People tend to think it is all very slow and quiet — which it is — but it's also very efficient," Hnatow says.

Hnatow and Whit Hibbard (another former student of Bud's) often host clinics together.

"We lay out the basic concepts and techniques that Bud developed over the years and explain to the participants how and why we want to handle cattle this way. It's such a big paradigm shift when you switch from making animals do things rather than letting them do something. This revolution came first in the horse industry with Tom Dorrance and Ray Hunt."

Those horsemen paved the way for the adoption of safe livestock handling practices.

"There's a lot of similarity between that way of thinking and the way Bud taught — make the correct thing easy and the wrong response harder, so the animals choose the correct response, and it becomes their idea," Hnatow explains. "With cattle you are dealing with multiple animals rather than training a horse, but the concept is the same."

Many people still don't understand, however, that cattle are just as trainable as horses and some of those same methods prompt the proper response from cattle.

"All of us, as ranchers, if we have horses, we train them first, before we go out and expect to do a job with them, and the same with a stock dog," Hnatow says. "But not many people actually consider working with their livestock to prepare them for what we need them to do. This is what was so revolutionary about what Bud did."

Prior to Bud, most people who handled cattle did it with a "cowboy" mentality, pitting themselves against the animal, rather than realizing that the cow is an individual (like a horse) with a personality and can be influenced by how you handle her.

"This is something Whit and I have talked about because he comes from a fifth-generation ranching family — and they are still ranching and doing a good

job," Hnatow says. "We've talked about the notion that somehow low-stress stockmanship threatens our ranching and cowboy culture and history. Some people may feel that way, but good cowboys want a good job done."

The older cowboys with a lot of experience have often learned patience and how to handle cattle in ways that work better, whereas many of the younger ones still want to whoop and holler and show off their rodeo skills.

"That's not a good way to handle cattle, however, if you are shipping that day. You don't want all that shrink, running them around," Hnatow explains. "When you show people on paper what that costs and think about the quality of life for the animals and for the people who care for them, it's exponentially better doing it the low-stress way."

Low-stress handling removes pressure from animal rights groups, environmentalists and others looking for a bone to pick with livestock producers.

"Anything we can do to mitigate the negative image those folks are trying to portray about us, is a good thing," Hnatow says.

If the cattle industry steps up to address any animal handling issues and corrects the problem, cattlemen will have a better image.

"There are some really good stock handlers who are doing great things with their animals, and this opens people's eyes when they can see this," Hnatow says. "I got to see Bud handle cattle every day and it didn't take long to figure out that this guy was not just really lucky; he was doing something quite remarkable. He had a very different way of thinking and different way of doing things, and it should be the

benchmark for how things are done with livestock."

Bud's steadfast mission to find a better way to handle livestock left a lasting legacy.

"Anyone who knew Bud will tell you that he was a contrarian," Hnatow says. "He was extremely observant and had a photographic memory. He could recount, in great detail, everything he ever saw. He was also very persistent. He was totally focused and constantly challenging the status quo — not just in the livestock world but in everything. If you told Bud that something couldn't be done, he would find a way to do it." **HW**

Basic stockmanship

Bud's method of working livestock consists of learning to "read" what the animal is telling you and changing your position, so it chooses to go where it should. It is important that the animals do not consider you a threat. If you want cattle to move away from you, the worst place you can be is right behind them. That's their blind spot; they want to turn around and keep an eye on you.

Pressure should be put on cattle coming from the side, at an angle, rather than from behind.

"You take an angle that makes the cow realize that if she doesn't move up you will be bumping into her, and she will hurry to get past you," Eunice Williams, Bud Williams' wife, says. "The only thing that makes stockmanship difficult is that our instincts are wrong for the proper way to handle cattle."

We have to keep reminding ourselves to be patient and apply pressure without forcing the cattle to do something.

"Bud put more pressure on cattle than just about anybody, but he applied pressure in the right place. That makes all the difference," Eunice says. "He expected cattle to move right out; he didn't baby them. But if you are in the wrong place, this is very counterproductive, and the cattle don't trust you."

Trust and confidence are huge.

"If you truly believe that the cattle are doing exactly what you are telling them to do (and you are projecting that feeling to them and in the right place) it will work. If you are in the wrong spot, however, you are telling them the wrong thing — like wanting someone to turn right but telling them to go left, and then getting mad at them for going left."

The customary way is forcing the animal do what you want, but Bud's way is allowing the animal to do what you want. Rather than blaming the cow for going the wrong way, we must ask ourselves what we did to cause her to react that way.

If you are in the proper position, the animals will want to move in the desired direction, but excessive pressure will cause them to panic. As pressure is applied to move the animals, some of it must be released when the animal moves. Constant or excessive pressure panics animals.

"There is always a correct position, and this spot moves as the animal moves," Eunice says. "The angle you move — in relation to the animal — determines if you will maintain proper position. The speed you move is important, but not as important as the angle." **HW**

