



Pulling the late shift

Students aid heifers in labor

By ERIN GIBSON
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At 8:45 on the last Saturday night of spring break, Jason Swanson pulled long, bloodied gloves off his striped shirt sleeves.

"These gloves aren't worth a, aren't worth a damn," he said beneath his worn khaki Pro Rodeo cap.

It wasn't clean, this business of saving lives.

The thin UNL sophomore in thick boots never flinched but stopped to stare at the steaming new life covered in white strings of afterbirth — the life he just pulled from its mother with chains.

With a gentle hand, he petted its head, pulling a few strings of placenta from the blood-caked, curled fur.

"Hello, Junior."

Junior was one of about 300 University of Nebraska-Lincoln calves at the Cow-Calf Management Research facility helped into the world by students each night during the busy spring birthing season between late February and early April.

The seven students' sleepless devotion at the facility about 30 miles from Lincoln saved dozens of calves like Junior from tragic births and helped them through their critical first hours.

In turn, the students received an experience no classroom can mimic — defying death to bring a living, breathing mammal into the world to experience a robust life on the Nebraska plains.

Reaching in

Swanson spent every night of spring break from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. birthing cattle at the facility.

It wasn't unusual for a heifer to have trouble giving birth or for Swanson and the others to use a mechanical calf-puller to yank a babe from warm womb to cold world, Swanson said.

On this Saturday, the calf's moth-

er, a red-colored heifer, didn't moan when the contractions came swift and fierce.

But when they stopped, Swanson had to take action.

He moved her from an outside pasture to an inside, concrete pen rimmed with red fence.

He caught her head in a tall brace to keep her still, but she flailed her hind legs and sucked deep but irregular breaths of cold night air.

"Swush ... swUSH ... swush."

The calf's two white hooves were all that protruded, and the heifer's crazed wide eyes screamed in fear.

"She's a first-year mother," Swanson said.

He dipped his glove-covered arms in a solution of strong-smelling soap and reached into the heifer.

He pulled, yanking along with what could have been a contraction. It wasn't.

The mother's rump writhed from side to side.

The slime of birth flung far and some caught on the brim of Swanson's baseball cap. He used the heifer's tail to wipe his hat clean.

But the calf didn't budge, so Swanson fetched a long metal pole with a brace and a lever that helps pull the calf out. He strapped the brace to the heifer's rump and tied a chain around the calf's protruding legs.

If you attach the chain wrong, you'll break the calf's legs, Swanson said.

He continued to struggle, and the crude device worked after a few minutes. The mother flopped to her right hard and went down onto the pavement.

Immediately, a few tough contractions spewed the young calf out onto the cement.

The calf's eyes were peeled back, wide open but unaware. Steam rose from the animal.

Swanson moved him away from his mother then removed the ungraceful brace from her, breaking a placental balloon of yellow amniotic fluid.

When he released her, she nearly

trampled her babe. She sniffed him. She didn't want him. She would never claim him that night.

Within moments, the calf began shivering in his cold, new world.

Without Swanson, the calf would have shivered and starved through the night into weakness and death.

But Swanson carried the calf into a pen filled with warm straw and his mother. Other calves and their mothers laid inside this closed barn with white walls and a mud floor.

"I hope she claims him," Swanson said. "He's a pretty nice little calf."

"Too bad your mother doesn't like you."

A dying breed

The others there had been born in the pasture during a snow storm.

They got too cold, and the sickness that trailed the storm kept them from growing much, he said.

In warmer climates, a birthing hand like Swanson would check for calving problems among the herd but not worry about calves dying in the damp cold.

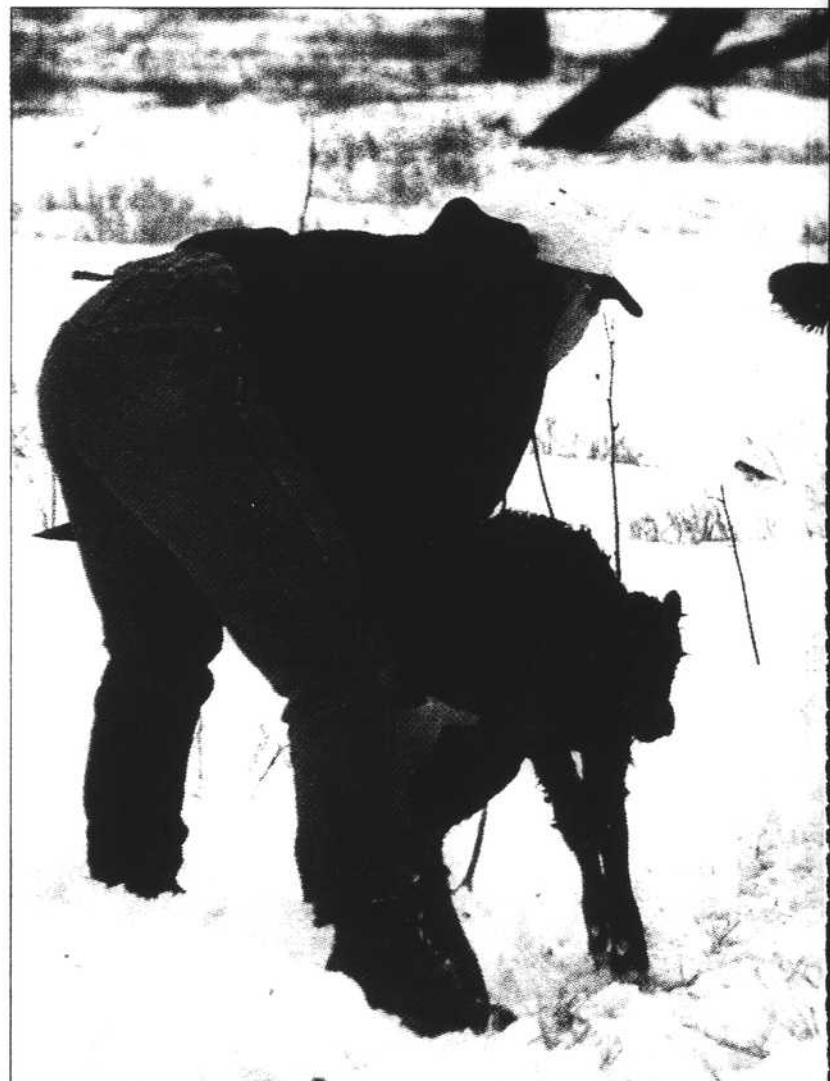
Texas cows might be happier this time of year, Swanson said with a soft chuckle.

But in Nebraska, he said, a snow-storm will kill calves. Their wet births make them more susceptible to the cold, especially cold in the negative teens, like one week this year in March.

"A wet ear doesn't fare very well in a 35 mile-an-hour wind," said James Gosey, an animal science professor who oversees Swanson and the other students. "It gets frozen off."

And when the weather warms and the ground thaws, the calves wallow in mire thicker than cold molasses. That mud kills calves, too, Swanson said, because it's mixed with cow manure and laced with the bacteria that cause scours — a messy, green diarrhea-type illness for cattle.

After an hour, Swanson took the newborn inside a small office in the barn and cleaned and warmed him in a



plywood box scooted up to a wall-mounted room heater.

He rubbed him with a big, white cloth. He heard his first "moo," and left the newborn to sleep by the heater.

Later, the mother escaped from her pen. Swanson and two Daily Nebraskan staffers, who traded cameras and notebooks for flashlights, tramped through chilled, muddy woods following hoof prints.

"I just don't know what to think about her," Swanson said just after the hunt began. "I thought she would have stayed around here. She'll come back. She better."

More than an hour later, his tune changed as he bounced in a Ford truck aged beyond its years.

"She wasn't a good mother anyway," he said, his eyes troubled and

head nodded. "What the hell. She's only worth hamburger price."

"I just don't know how to tell the boss."

He mocked himself: "Well, Mr. Gosey, she wouldn't take her calf, so I turned her loose."

Calming the herd

Not every night was so traumatic. For other students, an entire night could pass without a single birth, let alone a troublesome one.

On those nights, the bulk of the students' time was spent roaming, checking university cattle in several different fields spread miles apart.

One calm but rainy night, senior Chris Ibsen drove the flatbed pickup, which bounced hard around dark pas-