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LF profile: The Brand and the Bond

Forty-seven calves bunch together in the holding pen, nervous and jittery, their hides brushing slick against each other. Two handlers move into the back, clapping, their boots kicking up dust, shouting over the noise, “Hey! Hup hup, move along!” The calves bawl and shuffle, slowly pressing forward toward the mouth of the alley.

Ten minutes down Airport Road off I-93, the ranch stretches out over 20 acres of heaven, a patch of green pinned against the base of the Mission Range. A breeze kicks off the ridge, carrying the dusty smell of cattle down into the town of Saint Ignatius.

At the front one of the handlers wedges herself in, pulling the calves one by one toward the chute. Calf 708, lovingly known as Harvey, tagged and wide-eyed, lets out a rough low as he’s pushed into the steel alleyway. Just wide enough for a single calf to move through, its walls tall and solid, blocking any view of escape. The only way is forward.

The two-story house, freshly redone but still wearing its history, stands over it all. Boots, crusted and cracked, pile up at the doorway, scuffed leather, cracked rubber, new soles and old. Evidence of the many who call this place home, if only for a day.

The metal walls rattle with every step he takes, each hoof strike setting off a clanging echo that bounces down the alley and into the air, sharp and high. The handler stays tight behind, keeping him moving.

Inside, the walls tell the ranch's story: photographs of beloved cows, lifelong achievements and loved ones adorn the walls, each one a small monument to the life Carol and Brice Heimark have worked so tirelessly to build.

At the end of the chute, the calf table waits, heavy, battered, the old red paint peeling off in ragged patches. Its years of use clear, memories and hard work etched in every curve. With a final nudge, the team pulls Harvey into position. The table slams shut around him with a thud that rings out over the field.

The ranch's history stretches beyond the five years of Heimark ownership, though their chapter is written in stubborn devotion. Before them, Dave Pope owned the 910 acres that made up the land for decades before subdividing and selling. Placing a legacy into the mountain itself.

Grey Heimark told Pope's story of dedication explaining that as a final gift to the place he loved, Pope planted a stand of larch trees in the shape of a "P", a living signature visible from miles away. A reminder that, no matter who tends the fields, the land never forgets.

As soon as the table locks, the crew springs into motion. Brice's son Grey steps in first, grabbing Harvey's left leg and pulling it taut so the calf can't squirm. He braces the other leg under his boot, steady and practiced.

This year's branding crew numbers 10, all family, in one way or another. For if ranching is anything, it is a family business. Blood ties aren't the only ones that matter. Loyalty, laughter and shared years matter just as much.

The crew remains nearly unchanged after the years: the Heimarks — Tom Frisk, Carol, Brice, Grey and Nichelle Marmon, and the Lean family — Mike, Danny and Jo. The same faces, same hands year after year.

The branding iron, its tip glowing red-hot, hisses through the air in Mike Lean's hand. He leans in and presses it to the calf's side. A few seconds pass the air filling with smoke that smells of burning hair, the sizzle loud and final. Harvey jerks but can't move, eyes wide and wild. Then it's done. Mike pulls the iron back and Grey lets go.

They flip the table upright. Harvey stumbles, dazed, and the handlers coax him forward. After a brief pause, he takes off in a clumsy run, back through the gate, bawling until he finds his mother.

Carol Heimark begins lunch preparations the moment the first trucks rattle up the driveway. She steeps the iced tea in a giant glass jug, the liquid darkening and warming slowly under the mountain sun, growing stronger hour by hour. In a few hours, the tea will be ready, a small but wonderful reward after a morning spent branding under the Montana sky.

"We've got 47 this year," Brice had said earlier, pulling on his gloves. "Not a lot, but just enough to be a pain in the ass."

He watches from the side now, arms crossed, scanning for the next calf. His voice cuts over the racket. "Alright, girls, get a move on!" The calves press forward, hooves clattering against the metal, driven by instinct and handlers.

From the edge of the pen, Carol hears Brice's tone, raises an eyebrow, and steps forward. "Do *you* need the dewormer?" she calls before leaning back on the fence.

“Grey, would you pay attention?” Mike barks when the gate almost slips. Grey mutters an apology and tightens his grip.

Earlier in the week, snow dusted the ranch, coating the backs of the cows and turning the pastures slick. “I’ve had to doctor the calves a lot these last couple days with the weather changing,” Brice said, stretching his back. “It was snowing here earlier this week.”

But today, the sky holds clear. The snow’s gone, and all that remains is the slow churn of work, one calf at a time. The table clanks shut again.

By mid-afternoon, the dirt hangs low over the pens, and the last calf bolts free. The crew leans back against fence posts and tailgates, wiping away sweat, boots coated in grime and satisfaction.

“Mike has all his teeth, no one got hurt, and my back is still intact,” Brice jokes between pulls of his water bottle. “That salad stuff? Good. The meat? Good. So, it’s a win-win day for me.”

This work, steady and seasonal, runs deeper than the scorch of a brand or the clang of a gate. It’s written into the soil, the trees and the shape of the mountain ridge. As long as hands return each spring to wrangle the calves, work the iron and pass the tea, the story will go on.

In hoofbeats, in laughter and in names like Harvey, pressed into memory.