

Howdy Duty in the Country

Lin Sutherland

Onion Creek Ranch

I live at the southern edge of town, just past the encroachment of new developments, traffic and noisy neighbors. It is still the country here on my little ranch on the creek, a place I first moved to when I was about 13. I remember well that then, as now, the old country residents in this little valley always give the two-fingered howdy.

The complex language of pick-up culture ought to be in required reading in the Owner's Manual of every new pick-up. It is a dying art in these modern urban times.

I feel I should chronicle the folklore of Howdy Duty in the country.

Every week I drive the four miles down the old two-lane road to the feed store to get Horse and Mule Feed for my horses. It's a wonderful drive that I enjoy because it is representative of Austin: only two miles from the city limits and you're deep in the country of the Lone Star State. Trundling down the two-lane road in my truck, I pass little farms with their multiple dinner rolls of hay, a place that sells bantam chickens and geese, Mr. Dittmar's farm with his black stallion standing in the green alfalfa field, over the creek, past the old graveyard, up the hill and down the dale. My three ranch poodles hang out the window, ears flapping in the wind, sucking in every cow and rabbit smell that zips past their noses.

But the most enjoyable part of the trip is when I see someone approaching me. As we get within viewing distance, each driver, the old farmer and me, raises two fingers off the steering wheel: The two-fingered howdy. Timing is important here. You don't want to do it too soon or you seem like an idiot frozen for five minutes with two fingers in the air, and you don't want to do it too late, or he won't see it and think you're a rude Yan-

kee just moved here from Detroit or some such Purgatory.

Now, there are some nuances to this. If you know the fellow, like I see it's Mr. Dittmar in his big dually, it's important that you *slightly raise* the hand off the steering wheel, lift *three fingers and nod*. This is the three-fingered howdy for our country acquaintances. He will do the same.

But say I see Mr. Dittmar is *driving a new truck, and his wife is with him*. This is a big event (the former, not the latter). This entails a lifting of the entire hand, *a wave, a nod and a big smile*, with the message, "Yeah, way to go, Mr. Ditt, on the new truck!"

There are further levels to this tradition. If, as I'm going to the feed store, I pass Mr. Dittmar's place and see him baling in the fields, I wave easily and casually to him, but pretty big so he sees it. He looks up, identifies me, and waves back. But if I've done that, and now I'm coming *back from the feed store*, I don't wave again; I've done my Howdy Duty. If I waved again, he would look up and say "Who's that idiot making me quit work twice?"

So you can see this is a complicated thing, this Howdy Duty.

I add one more nuance to it. If I see coming towards me the man who breeds cowedogs and has about 20 in the back of his pick-up, I wait till he's really close, then lift the paw of my ranch poodle and wave it at him. I like to see his mouth open as he whizzes past.

I figure this tradition should not only be honored, but advanced to the next species.

About the Author

Lin Sutherland teaches horsemanship and riding at Onion Creek Ranch in Austin, Texas. She rides and writes where the west wind takes her.