

A Story about my Pa, Bloated Heifers and the Setbacks of Life.

I am writing this in early 2009. This is a time of hard financial setbacks for nearly anyone with anything to lose. I was reviewing my diminished financial situation the other evening and it reminded me of the following story about my Pa.

This story took place when I was very young, probably six or seven years old. In those days, dairy farmers like my father had a combination of pastureland and cropland. The cropland was planted in corn or alfalfa. The corn was harvested for grain and the alfalfa was made into hay. Both were fed to the cattle in the winter. Hay could be made from many plants and grasses but the best hay for dairy cows was made from fields of alfalfa. Alfalfa hay is high in protein and the cows needed all the protein they could get to produce milk through the winter. The cattle were not allowed to graze on growing alfalfa because it can be poisonous to them.

Here is why. The bacteria in a ruminant's stomach (all cattle are ruminants) when filled with fresh alfalfa can produce enough nitrogen gas to kill the animal in less than an hour. The condition is called "bloat". All ruminants have multi-compartment stomachs. The first stomach is called the rumen. The rumen when functioning properly is filled with bacteria. These "good" bacteria help to digest the coarse plant material that ruminants normally eat. This multi-compartment stomach and bacteria system is the magic that allows grazing and browsing animals to produce the energy and complex proteins that they require to live and grow. Fast growing, immature alfalfa however, has so much protein that the bacteria bloom and quickly produce gas that can fill the animal's belly like a balloon. That is bloat. The animal can fall down and die within minutes from a combination of internal pressure and toxic gases.

If a bloated animal is discovered early enough it can be saved, even if the animal is already down. The best emergency technique is to puncture the animal's stomach and allow the gas to escape. One simple way to do that is to plunge your pocketknife into the belly of the animal and rotate the blade 90 degrees thereby opening a slot. The excess gas can rush out much like deflating a balloon. It works. I have done it many times. The skin is drum tight and there is virtually no bleeding. Under the circumstances, the wound is not a problem for the animal. In fact, the wound may be hard to find the next day. The animal normally recovers quickly without any further symptoms.

Bloating did not happen often because farmers were well aware of the danger. Good fences were the obvious way to keep the cattle out of the alfalfa field. Accidents do happen, however.

This particular event occurred on a beautiful June night, well after sundown. There was no moon. My general recollection is that our whole family returned late after visiting relatives. I do not remember details of the evening until we got home and discovered the bloated heifers. I do clearly remember the heifers, the night and Pa.

Pa did not talk a lot. He was not given to explanations or detailed instructions. He was especially quiet when he was working or if involved in something serious. I guess it is correct to say he was seldom inclined to conversation in the normal sense.

Pa had incredibly clear values or principles or precepts. I am not sure of the right word, but whatever you call these elements of his personality they were clear, simple and always with him.

He was a powerful teacher but I do not recall him ever teaching with words. He used actions or behavior and then only when that behavior came up spontaneously in life. If he used words at all, they were only to identify the lesson not to teach the lesson.

Maybe that does not make much sense. Let me tell the story. The story might explain it best.

Pa knew the heifers were out as soon as we got home. He had a flash light. We went past the barn, and followed the cow paths around the ponds and up the hill to the alfalfa field. I remember that it was black dark, summer-warm and still. The only sounds I recall are of crickets and frogs as we passed the ponds.

There were two dead heifers lying in the alfalfa field. The flashlight outlined them from a distance. Tall alfalfa with two big bloated bellies rising up through it. Pa checked them closely and there was nothing to do. That had to be a major loss. We probably milked 24 cows at the time. Pa raised eight or ten replacement heifers each year. The loss of two would make a significant difference in income. He had a growing family with five kids.

The rest of the herd had returned to the vicinity of the barn. As we neared the barn, we found another dead heifer. This one had fallen against the back door of the barn.

What a disaster, three beautiful Jersey heifers, all due to calve soon and all dead for nothing.

Pa kept meticulous records of his herd. All the animals were identified by a unique tattoo inside their ear. In the alfalfa field he had used the flashlight to read the tattoos. The tattoos were faint and difficult to read. I helped him read the tattoo of this one at the barn. The dead heifer's head was flipped up and onto her shoulder. That is just the way she fell against the barn door. I was holding the flashlight or holding the ear, I do not exactly recall which.

I was small. To reach the head I leaned on and sort of wrapped myself over the body of the heifer. She was still warm and soft. I was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the calamity. I muttered an oath or some normally forbidden word. Pa was looking intensely into the heifer's ear trying to verify the tattoo. He had not said one word since we got home. Without even looking at me he said, "We should be thankful we had them to lose."

That was it.

The next day he used his tractor to drag the bodies to a place where it would be convenient for the rendering truck to load them and life went on.

This was most of 60 years, well actually, a lifetime ago. My life has had setbacks much like anyone else's. I have lost cattle and crops and things much more valuable than property. I have tried at such times to be thankful that I had something to lose. I doubt I have ever really achieved that. But my Pa could.