

A Story about my Pa, Heifers in Alfalfa 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 quite young, probably six or seven years old. In those days, dairy farmers like my father had a combination of pastureland and crop land. The crop land was corn or alfalfa. The corn was harvested for grain and the alfalfa was made into hay. Both were winter feed for the cattle herd. Hay can 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 make milk through the winter. The cattle were not allowed to graze on green alfalfa in the summertime. The high nitrogen content of growing alfalfa would poison the cattle and they could quickly die. If the cattle got into the corn, they could wreck a lot of corn but if the cows got into the alfalfa they could kill themselves. 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 that when working properly are filled with the bacteria. These "good" bacteria help to digest the coarse plant material which ruminants normally eat. This multi-compartment 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. Green, living alfalfa however, has so much protein that the bacteria quickly produce so much gas that the animal's belly will fill like a balloon. The animal will fall down and die within minutes.

If you visualize this it may conjure up a cartoon-like image. It would look and seem funny if it were not so quickly fatal.

The time window between breaking through that fence and death could be short, but if a bloated animal was discovered quickly it could be saved, even if the animal were already down. The best technique is to puncture the animal's stomach and allow the gas to escape. The simple way to do that is to plunge your pocket knife into the belly of the animal and rotate the blade 90 degrees. That allowed the gas to rush out much like deflating a balloon. It works. I've done it many times. The skin is so tight that there is virtually no bleeding. Normally the animal won't notice the incision and in fact the stab wound is hard to find the next day. The animal normally recovers quickly without any further symptoms.

Bloating didn't happen too 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 warm June night, well after sundown. There was no moon. My general sense is that our whole family returned late that summer evening after visiting relatives. I don't really have a clear recollection of what went before this event. I do clearly remember the heifers, the night and Pa.

As I think about this story I am reminded that my recollections often differ greatly from what others remember. For example I don't recall if any of my siblings were with Pa and me. They certainly may have been and if so their perspective will be very different.

I am only able to write what I remember. I cannot remember for others. Keep that in mind for this and all my stories.

Pa didn't talk a lot. He was not inclined to verbal explanations or detailed instructions. He was especially quiet when working and he worked a lot, or if something serious was happening. He was seldom given to conversation in the normal sense.

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

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

Maybe that doesn't make much sense. Let me tell the story. The story might explain it.

As I mentioned above, it was a very dark night but Pa knew the heifers were out when we came home. He had a flash light. We went behind the barn, past the ponds and up the hill to the alfalfa field. I remember that it was warm and still except that the crickets and frogs were noisy.

There were two dead heifers lying in the alfalfa field. The flashlight picked them up from a distance. I remember 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 for the next year or more. He had a growing family with five kids. In those years a few dollars made a lot of difference in life the next winter.

The rest of the herd seemed to have returned to the vicinity of the barn. Pa wanted to check them all to see if there were any that needed help. As we neared the barn, we spotted another dead heifer. This one was ballooned 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 was good dairyman and he kept meticulous records of his herd. All the animals were identified by a unique tattoo inside the ear. In the field he had used the flash light to read the tattoos. The tattoos were sometimes faint and difficult to read. I was helping him read this one at the barn. The dead heifer's head was flipped up and onto her own shoulder. That is just the way she fell against the barn door. I was holding the flash light or holding the ear, I don't exactly recall which.

I was small. To reach the head I leaned on and sort of wrapped myself around the side 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 the tractor to drag the bodies to a place where it would be convenient for the rendering truck to load them and haul them away for disposal.

I'm sure we repaired the fences but otherwise the incident was over and life went on.

My life has been much like anyone else's. I have lost cattle and crops and things much more valuable than property. At such times I have tried to be thankful I had something to lose. I doubt I have ever really achieved that. But my Pa could.