

The Cowboy and the Escaped Buffalo

I had lunch with Moritz one January day in Rapid City.

Moritz is the foreman of the 777.

The 777 is a bison ranch just east of the Black Hills, between the Black Hills and the Badlands.

You have probably seen some of the bison and the terrain of the 777.

The ranch was the site of the bison scenes for the movie *Dances with Wolves*.

It is a big spread.

Moritz describes himself as “just a cowboy”.

He is a big man, young, physical, outgoing and likable.

Moritz said that one evening, at about ten p.m. the owners of the 777 came home with a trailer load of bison cows.

They had just purchased the cows at a time when the price was high.

He suggested that the animals should be unloaded into a secure holding pen until morning.

They should have been.

That is standard practice when releasing bison into an unknown pasture.

The owners overruled him.

He was told to release them into a pasture with the main herd.

The owners believed the animals would be more comfortable there.

About 2 a.m., Moritz got a call from the Sheriff of Custer County.

The sheriff said there was a bison traveling south on the four-lane highway.

I asked Moritz why they knew to call him since there are other bison ranches in the area.

He said, “The deputy probably had my number in speed dial for other reasons”.

We did not go into that.

Moritz called his employers to update them.

He asked the owner if he needed to bring her home alive.

Dead was a lot simpler.

His orders were to bring her home alive if at all possible.

There was no point in trying to locate a runaway bison in the dark.

Moritz set his alarm to wake him with enough time to get things ready before daylight.

When he woke, he loaded his four-wheeler, binoculars, fence mending tools, a rifle and other equipment onto his pick-up and went searching for the bison cow.

Not long after sun-up, he spotted her through binoculars on the far side of a large pasture, six miles south of the 777.

This is western South Dakota; ranch pastures out there are large.

Bison can be savvy prey animals.

Just as Moritz located the cow in his binoculars, she spotted him.

She turned away and headed at a run toward the next fence-line.

She cleared it without losing stride. Bison are fine jumpers.

Unlike domestic cattle, bison cannot be easily herded or driven.

They are too obstinate.

Normally they can be made to go in a particular direction by positioning yourself on the side you want them to run away from.

Moritz used this technique to work the cow north, toward the 777.

She jumped several fence-lines and Moritz kept up on his four-wheeler using gates.

Eventually they came to an area that was developed into ranchettes.



These particular homesteads ranged in size from five to forty acres each. Moritz said he and the buffalo caused quite a stir as they passed through. Sometimes the running cow followed the roads, taking nice rights and lefts. Other times she just ran through the yards leaping over picket fences. People were yelling at kids and dogs or slamming on brakes all around. The last ranchette had a large pasture with a huge herd of horses.

Moritz claimed there were fifty.

In any case, the tired and distressed cow jumped the fence and ran straight for them.

She must have hoped they were bison, or at least some critters she could relate to better than screaming homesteaders.

The horses stampeded into a corral near their barn.

The cow followed at a run.

As soon as the cow entered the corral, the horses crashed through the gate on the far side and scattered for the hills. The disillusioned cow was left standing alone in the corral.

Moritz made a command decision to shoot her there.

He crept into range and took aim from about 100 yards.

He had to shoot the bullet between the planks of the corral.

The bullet hit a plank.

The cow, uninjured, smashed down a second section of corral fence on the far side.

Moritz says he had been hearing a woman's screams for quite some time.

He had ignored her while he took his shot.

She tried to run him down as he sped after the bison in his four-wheeler.

It is hard to imagine what was going through the poor woman's mind.

The cow was reenergized.

When Moritz caught up with her, she was trying to outrun a northbound semi on the four-lane. Moritz said he waved wildly at the trucker to get his attention.

The trucker returned with a friendly wave.

The trucker never saw the cow.

She couldn't keep up with the truck anyway and crossed to the south traveling lane without incident.

The southbound lane was the lane she knew from the night before.

She had given up and was just backtracking.

The good part was that the cow was headed in the right direction toward the 777.

The bad news was the cow was traveling against the traffic.

Moritz stayed behind her in the median.

He did all he could to alert drivers, and the good drivers of Custer County avoided a collision.

The cow reached total exhaustion and the gate of the 777 at about the same time.

She walked to the far side of the pasture and lay down in a ravine.

Moritz told me, next time he intends to argue longer about putting new bison in a holding corral.

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