

I Shot the Bull in the Nose (But Pa Hung On)

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We were all set to slaughter a Jersey bull. I was the shooter. My Pa and my older brother John each had a rope on the bull. Pa was on the right and John was on the left. This was 50 years ago more or less. I was about twelve years old. We had walked the bull out of the barn to shoot him. That way, when he went down we could get to him with a tractor and loader to lift the carcass for butchering.



Now it might seem strange to you that I, the youngest, was the killer but that particular task, killing that is, had fallen to me years before. Pa would do whatever he had to; I'd seen him kill a bull much bigger than this one with a single axe blow between the eyes. He swung the axe with his right arm while holding the bull by a rope in the other. Pa was a powerful man. He drove the axe head right down to the handle. That animal never felt a thing. He didn't like killing though and looked for one of his sons to take that job over. John had done a little killing but he shared Pa's discomfort with it. I didn't really mind, so I got the job.

Killing isn't necessarily a bad thing in case that is what you are thinking. If you are a farmer everything you grow must eventually be harvested. If you are a meat eater somebody is doing your killing for you. If you have pets, eventually the time will come when your pet's life is best ended. Even if you never kill an animal, someone is doing your share of killing for you.

Taking a life is a serious thing and the act carries some serious obligations. It is important to do it quickly and to do it with as little trauma as possible.

That's not exactly how it went on this particular day. This was more of a learning day for me.

The normal procedure was to shoot the animal in the brain rendering it senseless and then to quickly slit the major blood vessels of the neck to get a good bleed. I was armed with a 22 rifle. In case you don't know much about guns, a 22 is a very low caliber rifle. We probably didn't own anything better or bigger at the time and a 22 was a common tool for farm slaughter. The times were poor and a 22 bullet cost only a penny.

The upper half of a bull's skull hasn't got much in it. By that I mean the brain itself is small, maybe the size of a fist, the area from the nose to the horns is mostly empty sinus cavities. It is basically a structure to support horns. A bullet in that sinus area probably doesn't even give the animal a head ache, at least right away. It is likely to irritate him though.

Bulls are not naturally inclined to stand still and wait for things and this one didn't. The bull tossed his head just as I pulled the trigger. The bullet entered about where I intended but at such an angle as to skedaddle somewhere around in his sinuses. He was mad and not at all incapacitated. I was focusing on the bull so I don't know when Brother John lost the rope he was holding, but he did. Pa smoked a pipe in those days and even if the pipe wasn't lit it was between his teeth. Pa lost that pipe pretty early on. He lost his hat and he lost his footing but he didn't lose his grip.

Pa was a short man, but heavily muscled from a lifetime of hard work. I suppose the bull weighed 1,000 pounds or more, Pa weighed something over 200. It wasn't a fair contest but Pa hung on. He was trying to dig his boots in as the bull dragged him around the barnyard and then back. The two of them fought from side to side and end to end of that barnyard a number of times before the bull tired. Until the bull settled down, there was no chance for a second shot. This is the point where it gets a little dangerous. Well, I suppose this whole event is dangerous from the bull's perspective but I mean dangerous for the butchers.

The animal was no longer going to be a good target nor was he going to go down easily even if well hit. Too much adrenaline in the equation now.

The trick now was to kill the animal without accidentally shooting a human. I knew it would take more time and more care and it might take a lot more ammunition. I think I had to put four more rounds into this poor critter to bring him down. Thank goodness I had that many bullets in my pocket.

Once the bull was down things went as intended.

Pa was always a man of few or no words. There were many times in my growing-up years when I wished he would have said more but this was not one of those times. We went about our butchering and he never said a word about the shooting. Pa was always an incredibly powerful teacher. His silence made the lessons sink in deep. This story occurred long ago and I have killed hundreds of large animals since. I take great care to do it well.