

## **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 everyone 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 cattle were not allowed to graze on growing alfalfa because it can be toxic to them.

The bacteria in a bovine's stomach, when filled with fresh alfalfa can produce enough nitrogen gas to kill the animal in less than an hour.

The condition is called "bloat".

Fast growing, immature alfalfa 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 a pocketknife into the belly of the animal and rotate the blade 90 degrees thereby creating a hole.

The excess gas will rush out much like deflating a balloon.

It works that simply.

I have done it many times.

There is virtually no bleeding.

The wound is not a problem for the animal.

In fact, the wound may be hard to find the next day.

The animal 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 accident happened on a warm June night, well after sundown.

There was no moon.

Our whole family returned late after visiting relatives.

Pa knew when we got that the heifers were out.

Maybe he saw tracks, maybe he got a phone call.

Pa did not talk a lot.

He did not explanations or detailed instructions.

He was especially quiet when he was working on 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 he never taught with words.

He used actions or behavior.

Then only when the behavior came up spontaneously in life.

If he used words at all, his words 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 flashlight.

We went quickly past the barn, followed  
the cow path around the ponds, past the  
big gully, then 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.

We milked 24 cows at the time.

Pa raised ten to twelve 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 shining the flashlight into the ear, so that Pa could read the tattoo.

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 a 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 convenient for the rendering truck.

Life went on.

This was 60 years, well, 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.

Tom 2/26/2009

