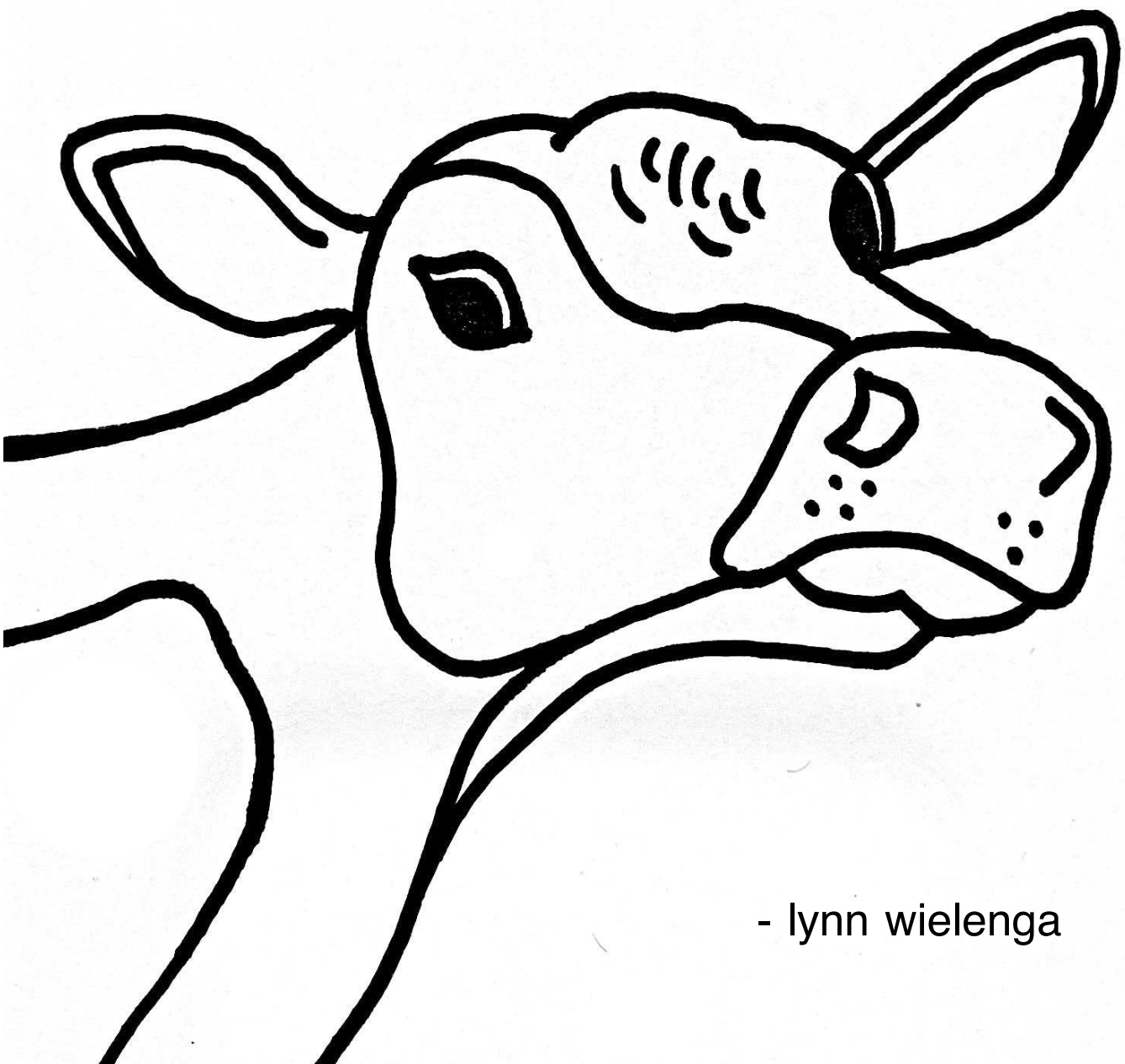


For the

Love

of Cows



- lynn wielenga

dedication

I dedicate this book to all the amazing women who are involved in agriculture, including my grandmothers and aunts (who have gone before me), as well as my sister-in-law and daughter-in-love. Your lives are both exemplary and inspiring. You work hard to nurture livestock and take care of the land. You understand how precious our natural resources are and you try to develop them wisely. You work alongside your husband, family members, and/or neighbors to feed the world. Thank you for your service and stewardship. We all depend on you! May the work of your hands and hearts be blessed even as you bless others.

introduction

What's NOT to like about cows?

Cows are magnetic. They attract us with those big dark eyes and long eyelashes. They have appealing faces that seem downright friendly as they gaze back at us with curious interest. They appear perfectly docile while at rest, calmly and methodically chewing their cud. We enjoy the sight of cows grazing in a pasture, calves frolicking together, or cattle feeding in a barnyard. It all paints an idyllic rural scene.

Children, big and small, enjoy cool glasses of milk with their warm cookies. We all scream for ice cream in a dish, cone, shake, or sundae. Summertime means tasty burgers and tender steaks on the grill, served with mouth-watering, corn-on-the-cob smothered in butter. As my sons described it, corn-on-the-cob is a "butter delivery device." Yes, butter really does make everything better!

Choose yogurt for a deliciously smooth, probiotic breakfast or snack. Don't forget the sour cream, whipped cream, cream cheese, cottage cheese, sliced cheese, shredded cheese, and cheese curds. Dairy products offer amazing nutrition and taste. We can't imagine cooking without products provided by dairy cows.

We might also decorate with cows, whether old farmhouse or new farmhouse style. You can pick cow paintings, posters, and pillows, as well as plush cows, ceramic cows, and metal-sculpture cows. Folks hang spotted cowhides on walls, lay speckled cowhides across floors, or throw brindled cowhides over their leather couches.

We wear graphic designs of cows on hats, caps, and t-shirts. People pay a premium for genuine leather jackets, shoes, and purses, which wear even more comfortably with age. Synthetics are economical but nothing compares to the original covering, especially when riding a horse or motorcycle.

Sure, we appreciate what cows produce and we admire their iconic image, but do we really know and understand cows? Let me take you behind the products and decor to a family farm in rural America *where I grew to truly love cows*. Believe me, they are a whole different animal!

lynn__2026

disclaimer

To begin, I don't claim to be an expert. I did not grow up on a farm. My parents were both raised in a rural setting, but I grew up in the sprawling metropolis of Denver, Colorado...near mountains, not farmland. I do remember attending the National Western Stock Show held annually there. But my working knowledge of agriculture began in earnest as an adult on a small farm in Northwest Iowa...where I have lived longer than I lived in the big city.

This book is not written to share expertise; it's written for exposure. If you're involved in agriculture, I hope you enjoy these cow stories, but you might not learn anything you don't already know. If you've had limited exposure to agriculture, particularly raising livestock, then hopefully this book will educate as well as entertain you.

Whoever you are, wherever you may live, whatever you already know about cows, thanks for reading. Maybe this book will at least make you smile and know, for the most part, that life still makes sense in rural America. Agriculture tends to keep farmers grounded (pun intended).

for love of the land

in midwest's gently green and rolling hills
my farmer grew up living on the land

his father farmed the same fields years before
where now our son is living on the land

i garden in the plot his mother hoed
she taught me ways of living on the land

dependent on both sunshine and on rain
we witness God's presence living on the land

the smells and sounds of cattle fill old barn
new calves are birthed and living on the land

we nurture crops and work to feed the world
from dawn past sundown living on the land

i learned to drive a tractor baling hay
lynn, city girl, loves living on the land

(in ghazal form)

greenhorn

Let's go back a few decades to my family of origin...come with me for a blast into my past.

Some of our relatives farm in Southwest Minnesota, and we visit them on our summer vacations as I'm growing up. My cousins and I chase young pigs, play with kittens, ride a pony, feed a pet squirrel, explore farm groves, and make sack swings in the barn haymow. Farms feature family fun!

Of course, visiting the farm also gives opportunity to "pick rocks" deposited in fields by ancient glaciers, walk a half mile to get cows from the pasture, and help with "chores" at feeding time. We love to watch my uncle milk the cows until he asks my cousin and I to leave the barn because his cows won't let down their milk with our noisy shenanigans.

My cousin tells me that chocolate milk comes from brown cows, and I almost believe her. I also remember my horror when I realize those eggs in the grocery store actually come from the back end of chickens. I don't want to eat eggs for several months after that. I'm an adult before I figure out what part of a pig the bacon comes from. Americans like bacon from the pork belly, unless it's "schmacon" which is actually beef.

After completing high school in Denver, I decide to attend college in Iowa, despite my apprehension there are only cornfields everywhere. It's a good thing the dorms are named North, West and East or I would have been lost on campus. Did you know that a favorite form of entertainment in small town America is "cruising" in your car on a Sunday night? That is how my parents-in-law met! Another is indoor rollerskating rinks, which is where my future husband and I got better acquainted...but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Before leaving home, I assure my mother, "I will never marry a farmer!" Later, at college, when I repeat this declaration to my dear friend (whom I've known since kindergarten) she asks with a smirk,

“Then why do you keep dating farmers?” What can I say? I’m privately thinking, “Why not?!” Farmers are intelligent, strong, and willing to work (not to mention, they’re skilled at “husbandry”).

Eventually, I graduate from Dordt College (University now) and happily stay in Iowa. I teach kindergarten and art to students at a small private school for a couple years. Then I decide to “eat crow” by marrying a local farmer!

In my vows, I promise “for better or for worse” ...or was it “for better and for work”? That is when my real education begins and I find out how much work a family farm actually is. Yes, when you are wed to a farmer you marry the farm, too. My farmer regularly puts in long workdays, and if I want to see him, I can help.

This region of the country is known for its high fertility. So almost immediately, I become pregnant with our first child! We test our well water for nitrates (also high in this area) which could affect our pre-born baby’s development. Since the nitrate level tests high, we sign up for rural water service. They dig a pipeline to our farm place, but how will we get it to the house?

In spite of my minor nausea and major fatigue, my hubby recruits me to help dig the 4 1/2-foot deep by 25-foot long trench from the regulator pit across our driveway to the house. I find myself in farm wife “boot camp” armed only with a shovel. I realize that any improvements on our farm will require personal sweat equity. Sweat builds character. Farming provides ample opportunities to build character. But you haven’t really sweated until you bale hay.

hay there

Cows eat hay, a lot of it, to keep their four stomachs running smoothly (more on that later). For many years, we raise our own alfalfa hay to feed to the cattle. Part of my rural education is learning to run machinery...how hard can it be? I did learn to drive a car with a manual transmission, after all.

My farmer drives the self-propelled windrower to the alfalfa field to cut the hay and lay it down on windrows to dry. (The prairie has perpetual winds, perfect for drying things.) I follow him in the pickup to the field driveway. I park the pickup in the road ditch and hop on the windrower next to him.

He engages the PTO (power take off) to turn the cutting bars and then puts the machine in gear to cut the alfalfa. He takes a couple swaths around the perimeter of the field and cuts a couple rounds back and forth, demonstrating how to raise the head and maneuver to turn around at the end of a row.

The farmer lets me drive for a round while he rides along and directs me. Then he stops the machine, jumps off, and says, "Now you can do it...watch out for the crick!" (translated "creek" in English) and leaves with the pickup. Does he realize I'm not, even remotely, mechanically minded?

I'm on my own and it's do or die; literally, if I tip this machine over the steep bank into said crick. That's when I start to sweat. I white-knuckle that steering wheel and finish cutting the field with no serious mishaps, except for a few crooked windrows and tufts of alfalfa I missed. Neither (wo)man nor machine breaks down!

Later that afternoon, I drive the windrower down the gravel road home with a real sense of accomplishment. Have you ever smelled a field of freshly cut hay? It's an amazing olfactory experience: inhale alfalfa aroma...exhale satisfied sigh. After a few days of drying, the hay should be ready to bale.

Our boys call them “idiot cubes,” those small “square” (rectangular) bales of hay because there are easier ways to bale hay. But my husband enjoys doing things the hard way (a notable family trait), especially if he can train our sons to do it with him. This requires a team effort with one person driving a tractor pulling the square baler and two or three people on the flat hayrack in back, stacking the bales.

They say “make hay while the sun shines” because the hay must be dry or “cured” to be stored for feeding during the winter. When the sun shines in summertime in Iowa, it’s usually hot and muggy; yep, perfect baling weather.

Standing on the wagon stacking bales takes good balance and considerable upper body strength. I helped on the rack when we were first married, but as the boys got older, they stacked and I drove tractor. Now you must understand that a tractor clutch can be kind of tricky and it takes practice to let it out smoothly.

If you do this in a jerky fashion, the guys on the hayrack lurch forward, then backward, and yell excitedly. One afternoon, our firstborn son sits on top of the stack, four bales high, when I unintentionally pop the clutch. He falls off the back, lands on his head, and says he sees stars. Thankfully, the ground is rather soft and he’s still conscious.

That same son now tells me, “Grandchildren are the reward for not killing your kids!” I hate to think how close I came that day when he fell off the hayrack. But I am glad the Lord blessed us with more strong sons (five in all) to help “make hay.”

Putting hay up into our barn the old-fashioned way is another interesting process to learn. My farmer carefully drops the big hayloft door open while my son parks the hayrack loaded with small square bales directly below it. Above, the hay trolley (a metal sling with iron claws) hangs from a large pulley under the barn roof’s pointed overhang. The hay trolley is tied to a heavy rope which runs along an inside rail the length of the barn’s ceiling.

The other end of the heavy rope drops down the back of the barn alley, around a low pulley, across the bottom floor of the barn, out the front door, and under the waiting hayrack. There, it's finally tied to the front of a small tractor which is facing the barn. Someone in the loft lets the empty hay trolley down from the front barn pulley, and another person climbs on the hayrack to secure the sling hooks into ten adjacent bales.

Someone else (usually me) slowly backs the tractor (my father-in-law's old "H" Farmall) to raise the hay sling up into the hayloft and across the barn ceiling. Another person, in the loft, grabs a shorter "trip rope" to release the bales in an approximate location for stacking.

Usually, two people work in the hay mow to stack the bales (another sweaty job in humid summer weather). I drive the tractor ahead again to pull the hay trolley out of the door and let it drop back down on a waiting hay rack for another round. And to think, farmers used to do this work with horses!

In later years, we use an elevator to move square bales into the hay mow and hay shed. Now, our son bales big round bales and stacks them with a loader equipped with a two-pronged fork. Hey, you got to make improvements to increase efficiency; that's called progress.

ruminations

Don't you love to see cattle grazing in a pasture? It's picturesque, but more importantly, it makes for contented cows: happy cows, happy farmer.

Only certain creatures can actually digest hay or grass. Cattle, bison, sheep, goats, deer, moose, antelope, and giraffes have that amazing ability. They belong to a special class of animals called "ruminants," which means they ruminate or chew their cud. This is possible because they possess four-chambered stomachs.

A human's digestive system, with our single stomach, cannot possibly handle such coarse fiber in our diet. We are grateful cows can digest plentiful "roughage" such as grass and hay, producing milk and meat that are deliciously digestible for humans. Let's explore the diverse digestive system of our favorite ruminant, the cow.

First, if you observe cattle grazing in a pasture, they will pull the grass into their mouth with their long, dexterous tongue and swing their head slightly to assist in tearing it against the hard pad on the roof of their mouth. They have only lower teeth for chewing, not upper. They will chew their forage slightly and then swallow the rough, bulky material, where it enters the rumen, the first stomach chamber.

The **rumen** is the largest area of the stomach, also called the "paunch". This is where the chewed grass, hay, or other fibrous food is stored and formed into balls of cud which will be regurgitated and chewed again, more thoroughly. The rumen's bacteria and microbes help with fermentation of the cud. This fermentation process creates gas which cattle must be able to release or suffer bloat, which can be fatal. An observant farmer can diagnose bloat in cattle and relieve it with a flexible hose inserted down the throat into the rumen.

Attached to the rumen, the next chamber is the **reticulum**, or "honeycomb." This part of the stomach traps heavy, dense objects, like rocks or metal that may have been ingested with the forage. Swallowing hardware can be dangerous for cattle, especially if it is

sharp and tears tissue; normally, the reticulum prevents serious damage.

The next stomach compartment is the **omasum**, nicknamed “many plies” because it’s lined with folds of tissue (similar to the leaves, or pages, of this book). These layers or “plies” absorb the nutrients and water from the cow’s meal passing through after she’s chewed it a second time.

Finally, the feed enters the last stomach, the **abomasum**. It is also called the “true stomach” because it functions like typical stomachs of non-ruminant mammals. Lined with glands that produce acid and enzymes, the abomasum works to further break down and digest the plant material.

After moving through all four stomach chambers, the food continues to be digested and is absorbed in both the small and large intestines until the waste is eliminated as a cow pie/patty.

(“Understanding the Ruminant Digestive System,” Horizon Veterinary Clinic, Brighton CO, copyright 2024.)

Have you ever looked into a live cow’s stomach or put your hand inside and felt the feed? I did! The local university’s agriculture department features a living cow fitted with a cannula or porthole directly into her working rumen, which allows access from the outside through an enclosed sleeve. This aids in research of ruminant digestion and analysis of feed. It’s a unique way to get up close and personal with the smells and sounds of a cow’s inner world!

methane management

As mentioned in the previous chapter, rumination results in fermentation, which produces carbon dioxide, which is converted into methane by bacteria in the rumen. This methane escapes in bovine burps and is also expelled in cattle manure. There's a lot of talk about methane as a factor in greenhouse emissions and climate change.

Our winters here seem to be milder than years ago. We experience less snow, fewer blizzards, and warmer temperatures than my husband remembers growing up. But you'd have to look at actual statistics to confirm that as fact. Climate change is an issue worth our consideration, but it can be difficult to determine what is truth and what is exaggeration.

Because it is able to trap heat in the atmosphere, methane is considered to be a greenhouse gas. Although methane's lifespan in the atmosphere is shorter than other greenhouse gases, it is more efficient at trapping heat than those other gases. While there are natural processes in soil and chemical reactions in air that help remove methane from the atmosphere, it is helpful for human activities, including agriculture, to be conducted in ways that reduce their methane emissions. This includes developing processes to capture methane that would otherwise be released into the atmosphere, and use it as fuel instead. For example, methane from large dairies can be captured and used as a fuel to reduce the amount of methane entering the atmosphere.

There seems to be some climate change/warming caused primarily by greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide and methane. We can reduce these gases in a reasonable manner and rate, but I don't think there's any cause for panic, fear-mongering, or political power grabs. From the 1940's to the 1970's, there was evidence that the earth's climate was cooling, and some people feared a future deep freeze. Climate changes happen in natural cycles, sometimes magnified by human activity.

Responsible producers want to meet consumers' desires for healthy products with the least negative environmental impact possible.

"Methane production from cattle has been a point of interest for ruminant nutritionists for many years...However, the focus of these studies was not the prevention or moderation of global climate change but rather the energy inefficiency associated with methanogenesis (synthesis of methane) in cattle. From this we can see that although environmentalists and agriculturalists are often depicted as being on opposite sides of this argument, when it comes to reducing greenhouse gas production in cattle, there is common ground between these two groups."

(Jacob R. Segers and Pam Knox, "What's the 'Beef' with Methane Emission and Cattle Production?", University of Georgia Agricultural Cooperative Extension Bulletin #1453, 12-1-22.)

Locally, I know of three large dairies that are partnering to capture the methane gas from manure. They pump the combined slurry into an anaerobic digester which mixes and heats it. The methane gas is captured, cleaned, and compressed. Then the methane is pushed down a pipeline to our city to be used as natural gas for utilities. It makes sense for the city, the dairy producers, and the environment. The process even benefits the cows by improving the recycled sand used for their bedding.

(Bob Bjoin, "Dairies partner to provide natural gas to Sioux Center," Iowa Farm Bureau, 2/13/23.)

stewardship

People were made for a purpose. The first humans were put in the garden to tend and care for it. Adam and Eve represented all humanity when God gave them a creation mandate, sometimes called the cultural mandate. Let's explore what that means.

“So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground’.” (Genesis 1:27, 28)

We have been given dominion over the earth and its creatures. This is not an excuse to dominate and exploit but a commission to rule with love and to develop potential. We should not abuse animals but must care for them responsibly and protect their well-being. As image-bearers of God himself, we are called to co-create by developing the resources he's entrusted to us. We serve him as stewards of his creation and serve others in that process. This is a high and holy calling.

I'd like to briefly discuss two approaches to stewardship worth considering: stress free stockmanship and regenerative farming. So-called “stress free” stockmanship inspires gentle handling of cattle that minimizes stress and encourages natural herding behaviors. Such humane methods have been championed by individuals like Dr. Temple Grandin, a professor of animal science at Colorado State University (who also happens to have autism). She helps design cattle handling systems that are safer for animals and their handlers, using curved crowd gates, single file solid-side chutes, fewer obstacles, non-slip flooring, and proper lighting.

(AHDB Beef & Lamb, “Stress Free Cattle Handling Systems with Dr. Temple Grandin” YouTube video, 2024)

The better we understand animal behavior, the better results we'll have working with them. Animals live in a sensory-based world and remember things based on previous experience. It takes a lot of effort to help animals feel comfortable instead of frightened. But working livestock patiently with less yelling reduces stress on humans, too!

Now, let's consider "regenerative agriculture". According to Iowa State University, Iowa's topsoil has been reduced by 50% over the past 50 years. This is an alarming trend we must reverse since Iowa has some of the richest soil in the world. Regenerative agriculture helps restore life to our precious soil resources. Over-tillage can lead to dust storms and eventually desertification, depleting soil fertility.

On lands where desertification has occurred, ranchers have discovered that managed grazing of cattle can actually reverse the process and renew the soil. Cattle in concentrated herds will loosen the soil surface with their hooves. Then they spread seeds and fertilizer with their manure. Eventually, a cover crop of plants will be established which, in turn, pulls CO₂ from the atmosphere to the plant roots. This process nourishes the soil by feeding helpful insects and bacteria, making the soil come alive again.

This is nature's regenerative way! Ruminant animals roamed ancient grasslands of the earth in a sustainable environment. How we take care of the planet matters because this is our home. Are we willing to manage grazing, rethink mono-culture crops, reduce tillage, increase cover crops, and protect our soil from erosion? We have a responsibility to steward our vital agricultural resources for the generations to come.

(Jimi Sol, "What is Regenerative Agriculture?" YouTube video, 2020)

blowin' in the wind

earth's richest, blackest prairie sod
formed in great plains, layered by God.
Iowa, this "beautiful land,"
wrested from indigenous hand;
busted, homesteaded, settled, plowed.
former grassland feels fenced in now
as livestock farmers raise calves and cows.
how sustainable is dust-bowl-like shroud?
while wind blows untamable, we're losing ground!

(Title taken from Bob Dylan's 1962 song)

love language

I *feel* the title of my book. But it may need an explanation because love is more than a feeling. It's an action word, often used as a noun but lived out as a verb. Unlike the Japanese language, which has around 50 words to describe "rain," English only has one word for "love," but it can mean a hundred different things! It seems we "love" many people, things, and experiences.

For example, someone might say they love their spouse, their cat, pick-up truck, sunsets, pizza, and swimming. Or maybe someone else loves babies, llamas, convertibles, sunrises, sushi, and biking. Do you love your grandchildren, huskies, jeep rides, mountain hikes, burritos, and camping? Me too! You get the idea that perhaps we use the word "love" too freely and the meaning may get a bit muddled.

If you look at the root words for love, there are varying terms from ancient Greek:

- 1) "*Ludas*" is a playful love experienced as excitement in the early stage of a relationship.
- 2) "*Eros*" refers to intense desire or passionately romantic love.
- 3) "*Philia*" is affectionate or brotherly love characterized by mutual respect and admiration.
- 4) "*Philautia*" refers to a healthy sense of self-worth or esteem shown through proper self-care.
- 5) "*Storge*" describes the strong love parents have for their children or the bonds of love within a family.
- 6) "*Pragma*" means an enduring love, a practical kind of love that stands the test of time like a married couple who mark fifty years together.
- 7) "*Agape*" is the highest, greatest form of love, which describes God's unconditional love for us.

(“The 7 Types of Love in the Bible”, <https://www.steppesoffaith.com/faith/7-types-love-bible>, 2-14-20.)

God is the essence of love itself; he invented love. We embody his love when we show selfless, altruistic love for others. God’s gracious, sacrificial love is best expressed in the life and death of his Son, Jesus.

John 3:16-17 tells us, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

We all recognize there are different categories and degrees of “love,” which makes it difficult to determine the exact meaning conveyed by such a simple, yet complex, word. Merriam-Webster lists several definitions of “love” (as both a noun and a verb) which include: warm attachment, affection, admiration, enthusiasm, and benevolent concern. Each of these could be used to describe a farmer’s connection and commitment to his animals.

All this to say, I have an abiding admiration and affection for cows. Cows are amazing creatures, and I hope you’ll share my enthusiasm (and my book)!

Of course, my husband and I share an exclusive, intimate bond that cannot compare to any other love in our lives. But if you measure sheer quantity of time spent together, I could be jealous of the cows.

value of work

A dedicated livestock farmer's work is an example of love in action. Like all domesticated animals, cows depend on us humans to provide their necessary shelter, food, water, healthcare, and adequate space for moving around. Depending on the level of a farm's automation and ratio of humans to cattle, it requires a considerable amount of man-hours to manage them. It takes time to feed, water, bed, corral, and keep cattle healthy.

Livestock chores must be done every day with no exceptions for weekends or holidays. If a farmer does try to take a vacation, he must find a relative or neighbor willing and able to handle the animal chores while he and his family are away.

My husband, and now our second son who manages the farm, regularly work 12-16 hour days tending to livestock, crops, facilities, and machinery. That would be the equivalent of 2 shifts for many non-farm employees! Of course, sole business owners generally work longer and harder, because the responsibility for productivity rests on their shoulders. Farmers are dedicated! Farming is both a passion and a business. When commodity prices are good, farmers can reap the rewards of their hard work.

Family farming is both a livelihood and a lifestyle, which means the whole family gets involved in one way or another. Each of our sons helped with farm work while they were growing up. Everyone gets up early to do "chores": feeding the livestock, cleaning up their pens, and/or adding fresh bedding. When chores are finished, the family eats breakfast. Everyone learns the value of work.

That's part of the lifestyle of farming: the family works, eats, prays, and sometimes plays together. Often, your siblings are your best friends because they're your closest neighbors. Climbing trees, building forts, chasing rabbits are examples of home-grown entertainment. Also, there is the fun of raising animals. Many rural families enjoy getting involved in 4H and showing animals and other projects at local fairs.

We sometimes like to romanticize farm life...happy idyllic scenes of rural America. But, unfortunately, not everything works as smoothly as it appears on glossy calendar pictures. Invariably, the silo door needs to be changed on Sunday morning when you're trying to get to church on time. Cattle run loose across the farm yard because someone forgot to close a gate securely. Raccoons (or, worse yet, rats!) climb into corncribs and bins, damaging grain, or tear holes in plastic-covered silage piles. Another flat tire on a piece of machinery must be repaired or replaced. Engines need to be maintained, and manure must be hauled away. The reality is, "There's always something!"

Livestock and crop farming present a variety of jobs that require diverse knowledge and skills. A family farmer is a real "jack-of-all-trades," as they used to say. He needs knowledge and skills in agronomy, animal science, carpentry, mechanics, meteorology, computer technology, heavy equipment operation, business, and marketing. It all makes for varied and interesting work but can seem overwhelming for an individual farmer. No one person can do it all well.

Farmers need access to the advice and services of professionals in the community to support their farming enterprises, and the community needs farmers to support their businesses in town. Related services include: farmers' cooperatives, research labs, veterinary clinics, trucking firms, seed companies, equipment dealers, accounting firms, banks, and more. The broad "field" of agriculture employs a lot of people and is truly the backbone of our nation.

Most of us no longer have time or space to grow our own food, so we depend on the labor of farmers, who comprise only 2% of the total population in the United States. We should support agriculture and appreciate our farmers or, in other words, "Do not bite the hands that feed us." Have you thanked a farmer today?

man of the soil

formed of elements found in dirt
humble dust on worn tee shirt
patient farmer works fertile soil
all year harvesting hope for toil
plant every spring, gather in fall
watch crops grow green, standing tall
by sweat of brow, coax life from sod
till soul returns to soil's God.

born in a barn

Our old barn was built in 1936 by a local carpenter named Tommy De Koster; he built similar structures (barns and houses) in our area, all straight and sturdy. The barn is constructed in the typical style of that era with a gambrel roof of different pitches to allow more room in the hay loft and still shed Northwest Iowa snow.

The main floor interior is divided in half lengthwise, with a wide central corridor (alley) leading from the front door to the back door. These “Dutch” doors are divided in half horizontally with diagonal bracing, so you can swing open just the top half or both top and bottom. We have a small “office” with vet supplies in one front corner of barn, and a cattle chute with head gate and scale in the alley. (A head gate holds a cow’s head and corrals its body so we can more safely work with one animal at a time.)

The back door of our barn leads into a small exterior shack which covers the silo unloader. We still use the two concrete silos behind the barn to store silage. Our son drives his truck under the unloader/conveyor spout to fill for feeding the cattle. The small 35-foot silo is dwarfed by the taller 75-foot one. My mother-in-law, the farm woman who lived here before me, dubbed the two silos “David and Goliath.”

On either side of the barn “alley way” are cattle pens: two on the east side (behind the office) and one long pen on the west. The west side has a wide door and ramp at the front where you can drive a skid loader inside to clean out the dirty straw and manure. But the two pens on the east side must be “mucked out” by hand with a pitchfork and shovel/scoop.

One winter day, I am chosen to clean the east side of our barn... alone. Everyone else is duly occupied with some other, no doubt more important, task. I begin mucking with determination. But as the time extends and my energy expends, my initial enthusiasm wanes. The manure-saturated straw is heavy and smelly. My back, shoulders, and wimpy arms grow tired and achy. Where is everyone? I’m starting to wallow in self-pity (and that truly stinks).

Then a thought comes over me. It’s mid-December, a time when we prepare to celebrate Christmas. I’m overcome by the (not so) fresh realization of young Mary giving birth to her firstborn in a barn! Each of my sons was delivered in a clean, well-equipped hospital, but the Christ child, God with us, arrived in a smelly stable where animals bedded; a reality that’s extreme, earthy and humbling. If HE, the Lord of heaven and earth, would condescend to be born in a barn, I can certainly clean one.

I keep working while pondering these things in my own heart. I’m encouraged by the epiphany in that unexpected space and feel doubly grateful when my husband and son show up to help me finish the dirty job. It’s just one of the things we do to keep our cows dry and comfortable.

gender study

This book's title is For the Love of Cows, a term often used for any and all bovines, but I've learned to be more gender specific. Of course, the general term is cattle. Domestic cattle belong to the sub-family *Bovinae* (hence, bovine), and the genus specie, *Bos taurus*. Maybe that's why farmers say, "Bos," when calling cows (or maybe that should be spelled "Boss") ...and they can be bossy!

A cow is actually a mature female; one that has calved (given birth), and produces milk (lactates). A *bull* is an adult male, one that is capable of breeding cows. A bull is proven if he sires offspring. More on bulls in the next chapter...

A *calf* (baby bovine) is born as either a heifer or bull. A *heifer* is a young female before she matures and births a calf. When she produces milk for her newborn calf, she becomes a cow. Bull calves are usually castrated and turned into *steers* so they don't breed or fight as they mature.

Beef from steers is more mildly flavored than that of bulls, whose active hormones may affect the taste and texture of the meat (although it's still fine for ground beef). Steers tend to put on more fat, so the meat features more marbling, which makes for tender, juicy cuts.

Years ago, we raised Holstein heifers (a Dutch dairy breed). When they were ready to have their first calf, we referred to them as *springers*, I suppose because they would soon "spring" their first calf (in early spring).

If a heifer and a bull calf are born as twins, 90% of the time the heifer will be infertile, known as a *queen*. But the bull twin's future fertility will not be affected.

You can see obvious differences between the sexes. Males are generally bigger boned and urinate from a spout under their belly. Female cattle have wider hips and a spout under their tail. (That's how I explain it to our young grandchildren, but they probably know more

than I think they do.) Both genders have teats but only bred females develop a full udder.

Dairy farmers depend on the milk production of their cows. Beef ranchers rely on the meat quality of their steers. All livestock operations need healthy fertility of both genders, and demand good breeding stock.

A lot of dairy farmers use A.I. for breeding their cows. To clarify, I don't mean Artificial Intelligence but Artificial Insemination. As you can imagine (or maybe you don't want to), the bull must be stimulated to ejaculate sperm. The fragile sperm must be carefully preserved and transported. The farmer (or technician) has to determine when the cows to be impregnated are in heat. We tried A.I. for one season, hiring a technician to breed our dairy heifers. But we decided the whole process was just too, well...artificial. Now we raise beef, and value good bulls for natural breeding.

There might be some "horsing around" among same genders when someone's in heat but the animals know by instinct who's male and who's female when it comes to mating. Although some people may be confused on the issue of gender identity, cattle seem to understand natural biology. Nonetheless, they won't be offended if you mis-gender them by calling them all "cows," unless they decide to charge you... like a bull.

feeling bullish

I'll admit bulls intimidate me. Farmers who've experienced close calls with bulls warn us to keep our distance from them. Dad tells us kids about Uncle Nelson being knocked down and out cold by an aggressive bull. Our oldest son worked at a rodeo when a bull tossed him; I'm glad I was not there to see it happen. They both survived the attacks but some people have not.

As a college student, I participated in a summer study program to Mexico where I witnessed bull fighting. We watched the bull charge the picadors on horseback, who would anger and weaken the bull by prodding his neck and shoulders with long lances. Next, banderilleros on foot jabbed barbs into the bull's neck so he couldn't lift his head. Then the matador teased the bleeding bull to charge his cape until finally reaching over the horns and killing the animal with a sword to the heart. I left the arena because I felt it was a cruel sport.

Bulls are magnificent animals but can be dangerous if provoked. Holstein bulls are notoriously unpredictable. When raising Holstein heifers, we buy bulls to breed them. One big white bull in particular doesn't like me. I merely walk down the driveway past the cattle fence on my way to the mailbox. He's standing guard in **his** cattle yard and takes even my passing presence as an affront and possible threat.

When that bull sees me, he tosses his head, equipped with prominent horns, and paws the dirt menacingly. I keep one eye on him while trying to judge the distance to the nearest tree in our grove. I know he could easily push through the fence if he charges; fortunately, he doesn't know it and stays on his side, bellowing.

My husband exudes bold confidence around bulls. Courage shows them who is in charge (no pun intended). We may be the more intelligent creature, but bulls definitely possess more brute strength, which must be considered when working with them.

Bulls like to rub their head or shoulders against posts and gates. It scratches an itch, I guess. One bull consistently rubs a gate up and

down in a squeaky, percussive rhythm; another pushes around any available feed bunk. One rambunctious bull tips a cow over into the feed bunk. With her legs up in the air, she's unable to get out without assistance. Cow tipping is a real thing!

Another time, a bull gets out of the yard at night and is trotting across the moonlit lawn. I watch incredulously from the kitchen window as he decides to rub against a young tree and bends it clean over. We decide it's time to corral him back inside the fence and plant a new tree.

One of our bulls claims fame when he is featured on local radio....and "now for the rest of the story" (to quote former radio news commentator, Paul Harvey):

That summer, we rent a neighbor's pasture to let our cattle graze there. With lush grass and a crick for water, the cattle settle into their element. Later in the season, after they grazed down the pasture, we bring the cows back home. Since the big black bull finished breeding the herd, we leave him in the pasture to enjoy whatever grass is left.

But he is not content without his cows. The next day, he grows frantic. Where have all the ladies gone? He paces back and forth along the "fence", which is just a single electric wire. It "snaps" if an animal touches it but won't permanently injure them. It hurts enough to strongly discourage them from touching it again (I speak from personal experience).

After pacing awhile, the bull finally makes a run for it and jumps. He clears the wire, and heads to the blacktop road which sees a fair amount of traffic. Now we have a potentially dangerous situation. A witness reports the renegade bull to a local news station.

Meanwhile, back on the ranch, I'm in our farmhouse kitchen cleaning up from a meal while listening to the radio. The announcer comes on with an alert: "A big black bull has been seen on county road B30 and drivers should be careful." A sinking feeling tells me said bull must be ours, and I go to the field to find my husband. (Yes, I'm old enough to remember life before cellphones!)

That bull relishes his freedom and leads us on a lengthy chase down ditches and along grass waterways. The corn stands thick and tall in the fields; fortunately, the bull opts not to trample through it. We finally corner him with 4-wheelers by a neighbor's cattle yard. We guide him through a gate into an empty pen, so later, we can safely load him onto a livestock trailer and bring him home to his beloved cows.

wildly domestic

The cow has always been an iconic symbol of rich abundance, a blessing from the Creator to mankind. Humans have long valued cattle for their milk, meat, and muscle as draft animals.

It is thought that cattle were first domesticated about 10,000 years ago in both the Indus Valley and the Fertile Crescent, and later in Northeast Africa. People developed the first cattle "breeds" in the 18th century. Today, we have thousands of crossbreeds through selective breeding and gene isolation for certain characteristics.

Many wild species of cattle still exist today, including banteng, bison, gaur, water buffalo, yak, and zebu. These wild cattle populations are vulnerable; we need to preserve their habitats so these species can survive.

Our unrestrained slaughter of North American bison in the 1800's was a travesty. While these Great Plains buffalo herds are coming back from the brink of extinction, genetic studies show they have been hybridized with domestic cattle genes which means there are possibly no true "purebred" buffalo (*Bison bison*) left.

(Christopher Preston, "What the Loss of Pure Bison Means for Conservation," www.discovermagazine.com 8-1-22.)

Conservationists are working to restore some of the native grasslands and buffalo herds in the Midwest. The Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve in Westfield, Iowa, is one example. Located in the Loess Hills, this is Iowa's largest remaining prairie and hosts a herd of over 200 buffalo. Another success story is found at Blue Mounds State Park in Luverne, Minnesota, where 100 head of bison graze on the Prairie Coteau. Their breeding stock come from the famous herd in Yellowstone National Park, which boasts a population of 4000-6000. American bison are making a comeback!

The ancient biblical book of Job mentions the wild ox when God questions Job: "Will the wild ox consent to serve you? Will it stay by your manger at night? Can you hold it to the furrow with a harness? Will it till the valleys behind you? Will you rely on it for its great strength? Will you leave your heavy work to it? Can you trust it to haul in your grain and bring it to your threshing floor?" (Job 39:9-12)

The wild ox referred to was probably the *Auroch* (*Bos primigenius*), the original species from which all domesticated cattle have been derived. This majestic beast, now extinct, inspired awe with its large muscular frame and long horns, which pointed forward and upward. In prehistoric times, aurochs ranged over much of Europe, Mesopotamia, Western/Central Asia, and Northern Africa. History recalls that Egyptian and Assyrian kings hunted the wild aurochs. The last recorded specimen in Europe died in 1627 AD, although the species may have survived longer in less inhabited parts of Asia.

("Wild Ox," Encyclopedia of the Bible, www.biblegateway.com)

The wild ox does not sound like an easy animal to tame and there were probably more than a few injuries/casualties along the way to domestication. Caution must still be exercised when handling cattle because of their sheer size and occasional wild streak.

close encounters

Most domesticated cattle are naturally submissive to humans and will usually move out of your way when working with them. They are herd animals and do not like to be isolated from the group, so they will do their best to stay together. They also have good peripheral vision, which means they can see you coming from any direction except directly behind them. Those big, beautiful cow eyes are very functional in helping them keep a safe distance from their handlers.

Calving is one occasion where it's necessary to get up close and personal with individual cows. After nine months gestation (272+ days), we watch for signs that a cow is ready to calve: a full udder, swollen vulva, mucus drainage, arched tail. These are indications that it's time to move her into the barn or other calving pen. If she calves outdoors, we still want to move the pair into their own pen for a few hours or days to process the calf and make sure they bond and the calf is nursing well.

It's a tricky dance to safely separate a wobbly newborn calf from its possessive mama and get it into a cart for moving to the barn. It works better with two dancers, a partner each for cow and calf. One person deflects the suspicious cow while the other person quickly lifts or pushes the wet calf into the cart hitched to a four-wheeler. With udder swinging, Mom usually follows close behind the cart carrying her bawling calf.

If there are complications during calving, we might have to intervene by pulling a calf that's stuck, calling the vet to perform a C-section, or possibly pushing a prolapsed uterus back in (and having vet stitch it). Sometimes new calves are poor sucklers, so our son often hand milks the colostrum from the mama cow and tubes it down her calf's throat to be certain the baby gets all the immunity benefits of that first milk.

Every calf's umbilical cord must be examined and sprayed with disinfectant. We also insert a numbered ear tag to match mom's number for our records. They may receive vaccinations after birth as

well. Bull calves' testicles are tightly banded, and fall off in a few days, making them into beef steers.

A cow "throwing" (birthing) twins is an exciting event on the farm but can also be a challenge. The mama of twins may not accept both calves or have enough milk for both. So sometimes they have to be adopted to a cow that has lost her calf. The best way to get the cow to adopt another's twin is to cover it with the skin of her dead calf. It might seem gruesome, but one calf has died and another might if the new mother won't accept it. The adoptive mama recognizes the scent of her biological calf and adopts the extra twin as her own. After a day, the two usually bond and the twin's ugly "fake fur" can be removed.

Within a day or two of bonding, the cow/calf pair can be moved out of their calving pen in the barn. A cow in a hurry to follow her baby outside can cause a mishap, as our adult farmer son discovers. He is caught between the calf and cow pair by the barn's back exit, a door with a step down. The cow knocks our son down and jumps right over him; all fourteen hundred pounds of her, airborne. Her back hoof lands on his hand and breaks his outstretched thumb but at least she misses his head. It is a shockingly quick and dangerous encounter!

Many farmers (and veterinarians) suffer the painful consequences of being kicked or boxed by cattle, probably more than once. Cattle get skittish if they feel they are being cornered, but it's sometimes necessary to move them into smaller quarters and isolate individual animals to attend to their health needs. We must proceed with agility and also exercise caution.

When working a group of cattle, we funnel them one at a time into a head gate. Then we can check their health and weight and perform any necessary procedures, such as vaccinations, pregnancy checks, or other treatments. Once when my husband is stitching up a wound on a cow, one of our sons unexpectedly faints at the sight of blood, falling headfirst, scattering instruments, and skinning his nose.

Another time, one of our cows, distraught at being confined in the head gate, kicks back fiercely just as my husband extends his arm between the bars to examine her back end. A broken arm, surgery, and

temporary nerve damage are the painful results. In typical “tough” farmer fashion, Hubby is outdoors working one-handed the very next day. Of course, the cow is just fine.

It's helpful for each of us to recognize our place in this world and learn to respect authority. We all like to know who's “the leader.” That's not a bad thing. We understand what's best for the animals, yet cattle are afraid of us on an instinctual level and that's good (especially for us since they weigh 10 times as much)! They tend to be submissive and move in the direction we herd them.

As human creatures, we would be wise to “fear” (respect) God by recognizing His absolute authority and infinitely higher intelligence, and by submitting to His commands. But He gives us a free will...and sometimes cattle are willful, too.

biblical beasts

The Bible is both an inspired and inspirational book so I encourage you to read it. Even if you don't believe it is the written Word of God (as I do), it is worthwhile reading for its historical and literary value.

The poetry of Genesis 1 describes God creating cattle and all land animals on the 6th day. His wisdom and word are powerful. What a beautiful world he designed for his glory and his creatures' benefit! Then God created the man and woman in his own image. God told them to fill the earth and subdue it (have dominion, care for it). We have a calling and responsibility to care for the land and animals which he has entrusted to us.

There's a biblical passage in I Samuel 6 that tells an interesting story about two cows taken from their calves and hitched to a wagon carrying the ark of the covenant. Typically, a cow will do anything to reunite with her nursing calf and protect it. Weaning time is a difficult process with a lot of bellowing on both sides of a strong fence. But

these two cows were on a mission from God, under his supernatural influence. They took that cart straight down the road back to Israel, leaving their calves and lowing all the way. It was a sign to Philistines and Israelites alike.

The Psalms mention cattle too. In Psalm 50, God declares that all the cattle belong to him: *“I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it.”*

God made all creatures, claims them as his own, and declares he doesn't *need anything* from us. I find that perspective humbling. Ultimately, farmers answer to God regarding their care of his livestock. *“The righteous care for the needs of their animals, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel.”* (Proverbs 12:10)

Psalm 104 is a beautiful song of praise describing the world God made and how he cares for it: *“He waters the mountains from his upper chambers; the land is satisfied by the fruit of his work. He makes grass grow for the cattle, and plants for people to cultivate—bringing forth food from the earth...All creatures look to you to give them their food at the proper time. When you give it to them, they gather it up; when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things.”*

Like everything God made, we belong to him too. God loves and cares for all his creatures, including us, and graciously provides the food (and all good things) we *need*. I find that perspective reassuring.

God desires a close relationship with us, his children...is that incredible?! Our relationship with our Father God deserves to be top priority in our lives. We must be careful not to make anything we value into an “idol” that we love more than him. The Old Testament recounts ancient calf worship. Cattle were *that* valuable to the people; a symbol of wealth, prosperity, and fertility.

Exodus 32 records the sad account of Aaron and the Israelites worshipping a golden calf, even while God was making a covenant

with Moses on the mountain: *“Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘Go down, because your people, whom you brought out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’”* (Exodus 32:7-8)

God’s rebellious people worshiped calf idols more often in their history. Maybe that’s where the phrase “holy cow” comes from? But it was really an unholy image, destined to be destroyed as the prophet Hosea later pointed out: *“This calf —a craftsman has made it; it is not God. It will be broken in pieces, that calf of Samaria.”* (Hosea 8:6)

Jonah (you’ve heard the big fish story) eventually prophesied to the pagan city of Ninevah and even the cows repented! Following Jonah’s message that the wicked inhabitants would be destroyed for their sins, the king decreed: *“Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. But let people and animals be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God.”* (Jonah 3:7-8) Then God, in his great compassion, spared the city (much to his rebellious prophet’s chagrin). He asked Jonah why he should not have pity on the 120,000 plus people and the “many cattle as well.”

We are created with hearts made to worship. There are still people today who “worship” cows (eg. vegans, Hindus, and the Mundari tribe of South Sudan). The rest of us probably adore other “idols” in our lives, like pleasure, power, possessions, or popularity. Idols deceive and inevitably disappoint.

Psalms 148 talks about all the creatures praising God, including “wild animals and cattle.” Cows glorify God best just being cows and doing what he created them to do: moo, graze, ruminate, reproduce, lactate, and more! God alone is worthy of worship, and we give him glory by living our best life according to his good rules.

God’s eternal kingdom is coming and you’ll want to be part of it. The prophet Isaiah describes this future kingdom where all God’s creatures live peaceably: *“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard*

will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.” (Isaiah 11:6-7)

Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? I remember watching Wild Kingdom or other nature documentaries on TV as a child and being disturbed by animals killing other animals for food. All of creation groans with the weight of sin, but someday that weight will be lifted, and paradise will be restored in a new heaven and new earth, just as God originally intended them to be. We probably won't be eating beef there but will instead taste heavenly manna and fruit from the tree of life!

saddle up

My oldest son might wish I wrote a book about horses. He prefers them to cattle and he's owned a couple riding horses. Horses are marvelous animals...except when they bite, buck, kick, or chew on wood corral rails (known as "cribbing," which is one reason he moved his horse off our farm). But most people would think of a horse, of course, when choosing a mount for pleasure riding.

My husband grew up owning a horse named Ginger. They would enjoy Sunday afternoon rides with the neighbors. Ginger was broke to ride with a saddle and also trained to pull a cart. Ginger proudly pulled an antique buggy driven by my husband when we rode away after our wedding reception. A few years later, Ginger pulled us in that same buggy for our town's centennial parade. Ginger lived to the old age of 28 years when he died of a twisted gut. We saved his hide (literally, skinned and tanned) in his memory.

Horses have been domesticated for a few thousand years; cattle were domesticated even earlier. Like horses, some cattle are more tame than others. A few individual cows are so docile, our sons have

actually ridden them. I think it raises the term “cow-boy” to a whole new level!

Skeezik is one such unusually “chill” cow. Our middle son gave this heifer her name. This son, who once dreamed of becoming a rodeo clown, can climb on her back while she stands still in the cattle yard. Skeezik actually seems to enjoy the attention. She never bucks, although our son slides off her wide back a few times when she abruptly takes off walking.

One day, he throws a blanket over her back, cinches a saddle under her belly, and wraps a halter rope around her nose. Then he leads her out of the gate and rides her around the place for fun. Skeezik pauses by the machine shed, and in front of the house, to happily pose for photos with her daring rider grinning in the saddle.

Our youngest two sons like to ride a cream colored, curly haired steer named Duke. This activity provides our family with cheap entertainment while doing chores. Duke is so tame, they can run and jump to mount him, or stand in a bunk and climb on. A couple heel kicks usually get him going at a slow amble, but the boys aren’t sure how to stop him. Squeezing tightly with your legs is the only way to stay on (though usually not for long). Yee-haw!

Of course, all the boys have tried riding calves...more their size, right? But baby bovines are fairly frisky (unless they’re sick) and will quickly dump you in the straw. Besides, the mama cows distrust any would-be wranglers who climb on their calves and may intervene to protect their babies. Can you blame them?

That reminds me of a joke: What do you call a cow that has just given birth? “De-calf-inated (decaffeinated). You can read more jokes at the end of the book. Pour me a cuppa joy!

terms of endearment

Besides Duke and Skeezy, we don't usually name cows because if you become emotionally attached, it makes it harder to sell (or eat) them. But some cows, calves, beef steers ("beeves"), and bulls possess unique characteristics that earn them a special name.

Have you ever seen "ghost cows"? My husband sometimes encounters them in the late fall when he goes to the cornfield where the cattle glean whatever ears or kernels were dropped by the combine. He brings them water and hay in the thick morning mist and calls for them. Suddenly, they appear startling close, shrouded by fog and eager for breakfast. I've also been surprised by ghost cows in the yard on a foggy winter's day; the white ones are the sneakiest.

Every cow has her own personality. One cow softly moans while I spread cornstalks for salad roughage, which she ignores until I bring the entree...a slab of green hay. A particularly happy heifer always delights in her meal by flinging hay high in the air as she bites off a chunk.

Daisy is a productive cow that repeatedly calves twins and nurtures them both until weaning. I name her current pair: Midnight, a little black bull, and Starlight, an even smaller white heifer. Daisy is friendly but very protective of her babies. One morning, as I'm in her pen giving her fresh water and hay, I come too close to Midnight. Daisy nudges me up against the fence with her big head and holds me there as a gentle warning. I'm pinned temporarily but thankful she didn't hurt me.

My granddaughters have a favorite cow they call Sweet Cream. She has Charolais blood, which is a white cattle breed from France. She's a calm and gentle mother, having birthed several good calves. After her current calf, Buttercup, is grown, my daughter-in-law hopes to milk Buttercup for the family's own nourishment.

If a cow is healthy and if you clean/disinfect her udder, use stainless steel buckets, properly filter and cool it, the raw milk should be safe to drink. But you cannot sell raw milk in certain states where the law

requires pasteurization. Don't take my word for it; do your own research before you buy a milk cow for your backyard!

My granddaughters are fond of Sweet Cream but some cows are not so gentle. Some cows become agitated and aggressive when they birth a new calf. There's one mean cow (black with a white face) the girls call Sour Cream. She may not like her moniker but it seems to fit. And if the hoof fits, wear it!

Unfortunately, not all animals prove to be proficient at reproduction. Take the bull I dub Pretty Boy, who seems pretty content to fit in like "one of the girls." He only bred 5 of 30 heifers in his debut season. We are not surprised to find his sperm count is low: a dud instead of a stud. Disappointments like that are hard to take for the farmer who must return and replace inferior breeding stock.

One big black bull deserves his distinguished title of Frederico Rodriguez de la Vega. He's just that handsome! "Freddy" impresses with his broad neck, deep chest, and narrow hips... near perfect confirmation for an Angus bull. So the boys give him a title to match his macho.

Of course, we sometimes use other terms of endearment when working with cattle, like these: filthy animal, big lummoX, meathead (with Archie Bunker sneer), and snot nose (*singular*); or delinquents, renegades, dibble-toes (my husband's euphemism) and knot-heads (*plural*).

They usually stare blankly in response to such insults, maybe shift their weight a bit, and calmly continue chewing their cudS.

delicious & nutritious

Who doesn't relish a juicy burger or marbled steak grilled to perfection? How about slow-cooked roast or finger-licking ribs for dinner? Or reach for tasty jerky or a spicy beef stick as an easy snack to go? Some people like to enhance the flavor of beef with a special seasoning or sauce, while others prefer their meat unadulterated. Almost any way you serve it, beef is delicious!

Beef is an excellent source of protein, which is necessary for growth, cell replacement, and muscle mass. Animal protein contains all nine amino acids (particularly leucine) essential for body maintenance and optimal health.

In addition, beef is a good source of iron, zinc, phosphorus, and B vitamins. The bioavailable iron in beef helps prevent anemia in humans. Besides all that, beef has zero carbs on its own which makes it a good choice to maintain healthy blood sugar levels.

Red meat also provides necessary fats for brain and nerve function. Different fatty acids (stearic, oleic, and palmitic) contribute in various ways to overall health. The role of cholesterol in the human diet is still being debated. Of course, moderation in all things is wisdom.

Compared to grain-fed cattle, grass-fed beef may contain higher amounts of iron, zinc, antioxidants (including carotenoids), omega-3 fatty acids, and vitamin E. Grass-fed beef may also contain fewer saturated fats, making it a more heart-healthy option.

(<https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/beef#benefits> medically reviewed, 8-27-25)

Our second son convinced us to begin raising beef in 2005. We started with a few "smooth mouth" (toothless...good thing they have a hard palate) cows and built the herd over the years. If you are local to Northwest Iowa and interested in ordering wholesome, naturally raised, grass-fed beef, check out Luke and Nancy's website at:

pleasantpasturesbeef.com

Besides delicious and nutritious meat, many useful by-products come from cattle. In fact, 99% of a cow can be used! Common household items such as pet foods, cosmetics, crayons, candles, detergents, and paintbrushes are derived from the fat, protein meal, and hair of cattle. Collagen-based adhesives are used in bandages, sheetrock, and wallpaper. Cows provide pharmaceuticals like insulin, bone marrow, vitamins, hormones, and steroids. Numerous lubricants and mechanical fluids contain fatty acids from cattle. Leather from cattle is made into coats, luggage, purses, belts, shoes and boots.

(www.extension.iastate.edu/allamakee/files/documents/Lesson1Activity4Dairy_By_Products.pdf)

au naturel

There are plenty of good reasons farmers wear boots in barns and cattle yards... so you don't have to watch where you're walking! I thought cow pies (manure of the right consistency) were no longer valuable once American settlers and cowboys stopped burning dried patties for their campfires on the range.

But cow poop is a very valuable commodity as the perfect natural fertilizer for the land. Cattle manure is an excellent source of nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, sulphur, magnesium, calcium, and other nutrients that plants need. It is considered a dilute fertilizer due to its high water content. Manure mixed with straw and bedding adds organic matter to the soil. This organic material feeds the natural bacteria and fungi in soil and helps with water retention.

Farmers will buy and/or sell manure (liquid and dry) depending on if you're one of the "haves" (livestock farmers) or the "have nots" (crop farmers) and they pay people (applicators) to spread it on fields that have been recently harvested or will soon be planted. This is accomplished by spreading dry manure on top of the ground with a "spreader" or incorporating liquid manure into the soil with a tank and "knifing" it in.

However valuable manure may be, caution must be exercised not to overuse it and/or commercial fertilizers. Excessive fertilizer can be detrimental, as too much of it can stunt or "burn" crops and pollute nearby water sources (especially if there is rain run-off). Sadly, many of our wells in Northwest Iowa have been contaminated by nitrates from over-fertilizing. Cooperatives and farmers should apply fertilizer only as needed. Taking soil samples and using field mapping technology help in fertilizer management. We want to keep crops healthy, soil nutrients balanced, and our water clean.

Farm crops and gardens grow better with a little chicken, hog, or cattle manure tilled in. Even people in urban areas can purchase bags of dry animal manure in pellets to spread on their lawn or garden. Manure is just another useful product that cows naturally produce... and they produce a LOT of it, which is why we sometimes refer to them as "manure factories".

Unlike swine, cattle are not discriminatory where they drop their pies. As soon as they get up, they will poop where they stand, even in their bedding. Growing calves will sometimes climb in their feed bunk and do their doo. Before feeding, I first have to scoop the bunk clean and ask, "Don't you guys have any sense of etiquette, decorum, or basic sanitation?!" They all give me blank stares just like my pre-pubescent sons when I ask them the same question about personal hygiene.

Cows can also make pungent puddles so be careful not to stand too close. Like the Greek, Archimedes, I've held my nose and cried, "Urea! I've found it!"

weather or not

Living in the Midwest means livestock and their caretakers must face extremes in weather, particularly in the middle of summer and the dead of winter. Cattle seem to naturally adapt to seasonal changes but extreme weather conditions can stress both man and beast.

Frost-covered cattle huddle, stamp, and steam on winter mornings. After a week of below zero temperatures, it's easy to get ice cream straight from cold cows! But seriously, frozen cattle yards are hard to walk on and ice can be treacherous. The perpetual winds create even colder wind chill.

Livestock waterers will freeze on a cold morning if the heating elements are not turned on the night before temperatures dip. You may be fortunate to simply have to break through the surface ice, or you may need to make repairs on the completely frozen watering system.

Tractor loaders will need to be plugged in and/or warmed up before use. Scooping snow out of cattle yards with a loader, piling it up, and/or hauling it away with a wagon/spreader can take hours on a cold day. Most farmers have to clear their own driveway to get to the road. Before feeding the animals, inline bunks need to be scooped out by hand.

Don't be surprised if your face and digits are numb when you finally return to the house after chores. It's important to take breaks, go inside barn office or farm shop to thaw by a heater, have a cup of coffee or tea, and insert heat packets in gloves and boots to prevent frozen fingers or toes.

Spring thaw turns into mud season on the farm. Sometime a frost boil will rise up to the ground's surface and create a strange, sticky, sink hole. Rains are welcome and the budding of trees raises hope of another growing season. Everyone in the farming community exudes energy and enthusiasm as the ground is prepared and seeds are planted.

Summertime is an exciting season of growth but also brings its own challenges. Early summer humidity and severe thunderstorms can spawn dangerous tornadic activity. This happens on our farm one memorable day in May, when our youngest son is home alone while my farmer and I travel back to Colorado for a graduation.

It's Memorial Day weekend. The weather slowly deteriorates as the temperature drops; a strong wind picks up, and dark roiling clouds move in. A small funnel cloud forms and stretches its menacing finger down to our grove. The twisting tornado uproots and rips apart several trees; then tears off pieces of the hay shed roof. Our teenage son sits in our dining room, nonchalantly playing games on the computer, as he looks up to notice the chaotic scene. When he sees debris fly past the picture window, he decides to make haste to the basement! Thankfully, no one was hurt, but it sure made a mess of our farm place.

Like wind chill in winter, humidity in summer can make existing temperatures even more oppressive. Animals follow any available shade and switch their tails constantly at the relentless biting flies. Sometimes my husband turns on misting sprinklers to give the animals relief (while children splash in kiddie pool or half-filled stock tank).

Fall is a beautiful season, as summer gradually cools. Mornings and evenings feel crisp; the sky shines bluer than usual. Trees cycle through their beautiful autumn colors while the crops ripen and dry in the fields. A busy harvest season commences. Fall rains and eventual frost are also welcome and necessary for the dormant season to come.

So if you don't like the weather we enjoy in the Midwest...just wait a few hours, it will likely change.

summertime

farmer mowing grass
nesting killdeer scold and swoop
wild roses blush pink

. . .

humidity soars
whorls of corn reach up to sky
thunder rumbles rain

. . .

smell of fresh cut hay
cattle swishing tails at flies
farm wife hoes garden

(haiku series)

well bred

Having endured many long, cold Iowa winters on the farm, my semi-retired husband now enjoys going South/Southwest for a few weeks in the winter. We especially like visiting The Lone Star State, which is directly south by twelve hours in our same Central time zone.

Texas is cattle country and home to cowboys, ranches, and rodeos. We marvel at the variety of cattle breeds they raise there. In rural areas, you often spy longhorns grazing. We've seen them in pastures adjacent to campgrounds where we've stayed overnight. Believe me, there are long horns and then there are loooonnng horns! It sure seems like awkward headgear for going through gates and barn doors.

While in Texas, you can tour the historic King Ranch, home of the Santa Gertrudis breed. It's a hybrid cross between zebu and European cattle, originally bred here and officially recognized as a beef breed in 1940. These handsome cattle are a deep wine-red color with some traces of white on the underline. They are hardy and heat tolerant. Santa Gertrudis cattle feature heavy folds of skin below the neck and bulls have a small hump. Personally, I am enamored with the breed's name...with a nod to my maternal grandmother, Gertrude (Grandma Gertie).

Further west in Texas hill country, lies former President Lyndon B. Johnson's ranch with his herd of purebred Herefords. The Johnson family gifted this working ranch to the National Park Service. You can drive past the old schoolhouse, family cemetery, air strip, and hangar to the sprawling ranch home. Watch for the Hereford cattle that roam freely on the property and rest beneath the spreading oak trees. These red and white Herefords are built solid and have calm dispositions. On their curved horns, you can see the LBJ branding.

Brahman cattle are also a popular breed in Texas. They originated in India (*Bos indicus*), where they are considered sacred by Hindus. Brahman adapt to weather extremes, and are especially tolerant of heat and humidity. Both genders of these long, lop-eared bovines

feature a prominent shoulder hump and deep folds of dewlap skin under their neck.

Black Angus are currently the most popular breed of beef cattle in the United States, which is what we raise on our family farm in Iowa. Several factors make them popular, such as calving ease and good mothering abilities. They are also efficient feed converters and produce well-marbled, flavorful beef. Sometimes they are crossed with other breeds to give them white heads/faces, which we call “black baldies”.

“Brangus” cattle are a cross between Angus and Brahman breeds, with the Angus characteristics more dominant. There are also Red Angus beef cattle, which are a bit more heat tolerant than the Black Angus and have beautiful rusty brown coats.

(“Breeds of Livestock”, <https://breeds.okstate.edu/cattle/>, Oklahoma State University Extension, 2026.)

Have you heard of Wagyu beef or Black Wagyu cattle? This Japanese breed is fairly new to the United States. They aren’t as well-conformed (balanced) as Black Angus. Wagyu are built more like bison: with broad shoulders and a narrow rump. They have smaller heads and unique horns. They take longer to finish but their meat is heavily marbled, producing a rich, “melt-in-your-mouth” buttery flavor and texture.

As mentioned earlier, Charolais cattle are an old French breed with curly, creamy white hair. In their native France, they were bred for draft power, milk, and meat. A few were imported to Mexico and later, two bulls of that small herd were purchased by King Ranch in Texas in 1936. Charolais are desirable to cross-breed with other cattle for their larger frame and ruggedness.

Simmental is another European breed which originated in the Simme Valley of Switzerland. These large red and white cattle are known for their rapid growth, imposing stature, and excellent dairy qualities. Our operation currently focuses on beef cattle but popular dairy breeds include: Holstein, Jersey, Guernsey, and Brown Swiss. There are many large dairy farms in our region as well as beef feedlots.

vets are vital

We certainly want to recognize and thank our brave military veterans for their sacrificial service to our country. Salute! But when my farmer talks about “calling the vet,” he’s referring to our local veterinarian, not our rural neighbor who is a war veteran. I think both types of vets show courage and are trained to serve a vital role.

Veterinarians are professionals dedicated to the health of our livestock and pets. They “preg check” cows to determine development of calves, vaccinate for various diseases, perform AI (artificial insemination), deliver calves in difficult births, de-horn animals for safety, perform surgery when necessary, give advice on herd health, “post” animals to determine cause of death (post mortem), and conduct important research.

Pursuing a degree in veterinary medicine can be formidable. A vet student takes rigorous classes similar to a medical doctor but learns about more than one species! There are internships to complete and licensure tests to pass, not to mention the huge educational debt incurred. We’re grateful for those determined individuals who achieve their goals to become doctors of veterinary medicine.

Northwest Iowa has an abundance of livestock but a shortage of production animal veterinarians to attend to large animal health needs. The majority of vet students today focus on small animals (pets). I can understand that pets are popular as we’ve had our share of special dogs and cats over the years. But our food production animals also deserve the best care possible!

Our fourth son is a doctor of veterinary medicine, practicing at a local clinic. He works in both small and large animal medicine, primarily focused on bovine and swine. He graduated from Iowa State University and is grateful for help from Rural Iowa Veterinarian Loan Repayment Program in paying his educational debt.

Our son’s journey to veterinary medicine began when he was young, with a fascination for all farm animals. While growing up, he

raised a few of his own pigs, calves, and chickens. We discovered how comically amusing hens can be with their unique and varied personalities. One chick surprised us by developing a large comb, crow, and rooster tail. But that is another story...

Naturally curious, our son wanted to learn all he could about the livestock. Whenever a veterinarian came on our yard, our son would go out to the barn, stand beside the vet, and watch closely as they worked. He was fascinated, whether the vet was helping bring a new calf into the world, or posting a dead specimen to figure out why they had expired.

One special memory for him was tagging along with his Aunt Lois doing the calf chores on their farm. She and Uncle Rod milked Holstein cows and raised many calves. That particular day, our son helped her bottle feed the young calves in their individual huts/pens. An ordinary yet exciting activity proved a pivotal experience for our son, sparking his desire to care for animals.

All five of our sons were involved in Cadets, a boys' club sponsored by our church. They all learned a lot as they earned many badges. Our fourth son earned his vocational badge by shadowing a local veterinarian, who took him along on his rounds a few times. That experience confirmed in his mind that he wanted to become a vet someday. We give heartfelt thanks to everyone who encouraged each of our sons along their way!

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As I finish this book, I pray the words of Psalm 131: 1-2. *"My heart is not proud, Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quieted myself, I am like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child I am content."*

epilogue

I want to write a book to help people understand
how all good farmers truly care for livestock and the land.

They breed and feed, deliver young, and daily nourish herd;
they keep cows safe when dread disease or weather does occur.

It's more than just a business, much more than bottom line;
I think it's for the love of cows, farmers devote their time.

They work sunup to sundown, plant crops of corn and hay;
and manage pleasant pastures for cows to graze all day.

cows give us beef and dairy, best protein you can find;
when we treat cows humanely, they help feed humankind.

You can read more poetry on my blog, "a poem in my pocket" at:

madhatterpoetry.com

gratitude

To recognize the people who made this book possible is pure pleasure and probably the easiest part for me to put on paper. First, I thank Bonnie (Miedema) Reinders for proof-reading the text with me. She perfected my punctuation and laughed in all the right places. I'm also grateful to the Dordt Printshop for printing my "mini memoir".

I also want to thank each of my adult sons (from oldest to youngest) for all the work they've contributed to the farming operation over the years. It was truly a family endeavor and everyone pitched in. Thanks to each of you for putting up with Dad's demands, my moods, and for all the love and joy you've given us! You make us proud (in a humbly good way).

Levi: former railroad engineer, current truck driver extraordinaire, devoted dad, and political pundit. May you live your life courageously, love people sacrificially, and always desire to walk humbly with God.

Luke: dedicated farmer, entrepreneur, and mechanic with an eye for detail, a mind for possibilities, and a heart for livestock. May you be blessed in growing your faith, farm and family for God's glory.

Lorn: electric utilities technician, all-around handyman and team-player, outdoorsman, and recreational vehicles expert. May you always enjoy life to the full, lead your family well, and (try to) stay safe.

Lyle: doctor of veterinary medicine by day, swing dancer by night, whose secret alter-ego is Spiderman. May you care for livestock and serve others with a big heart, gentle wisdom, and quiet strength.

Ladd: licensed architect, serious strategy gamer, motorcyclist, and Viking incognito (Nordic, not NFL). May you boldly be your best in Christ, tapping into creativity and joy as you build beautiful dreams.

And thank you, Ladd, for sketching the cow for the cover art of this book. (I will never forget the handmade birthday card you gave me with a dinosaur saying, "You are steak!")

To my dear daughters-in-love: Nancy, Jessica, and Hannah. Thank you for loving my son(s) well and being the patient, understanding, and loyal help-mates they need. May you be blessed as you teach and nurture each of those precious grandchildren. May you always aspire to be wise and godly women, diligent at home. You are truly a treasure, and bring so much love, joy, beauty, and value to our family!

My deep respect and gratitude belong to my farmer husband who first suggested I write this book. You taught me almost everything I know about farming, which was no easy task. We're not perfect but we're better together. I will love you "til the cows come home" and beyond! Thanks for committing to me these past forty plus years. It's been worth all the blood, sweat, and tears. You are the hardest-working man I know...and remain unnamed in this book, as you wish. Everyone has a story and someone needs to tell it.

Above all, thanks and glory be to God, from whom all blessings and inspiration flow. Our Father in heaven created cows and cares about each one. I pray, dear family members and readers, that each of you comes to know how much He cares for YOU!

just joking

Finally, for my fun-loving grandchildren (whom I love to the moooon and back), here are some silly cow jokes, one for each of you! Feel free to moan, groan, smile, snort or laugh out loud!

What do you call a sleepy male bovine?

A bulldozer.

What do you call a rude steer?

Beef jerky.

What do cattle like to do on Saturday night?

Watch moovies.

What do you call a cow that doesn't give milk?

A milk dud.

What kind of shows do cows like best?

Moosicals, of course.

Why do some cows have bells?

Their horns don't work.

What do cows like to read?

Cattle-logs.

What did the farmer say to the calves after dark?

It's pasture bedtime.

Why did the cow cross the road?

To get to the udder side.

Why are cows such great dancers?

They have all the best mooves.

Which cattle enjoy stand-up comedy?

Laughing stock.

How does a cow apologize?

“Sorry for my Miss Steak.”

What do you get if cow jumps on trampoline?

A milkshake.

Which is farmers’ favorite motorcycle brand?

Cow-a-sock-ee.

What do you call a cow that robbed a bank?

A cash cow.

Where do cows get their medicine?

From the farmacy.

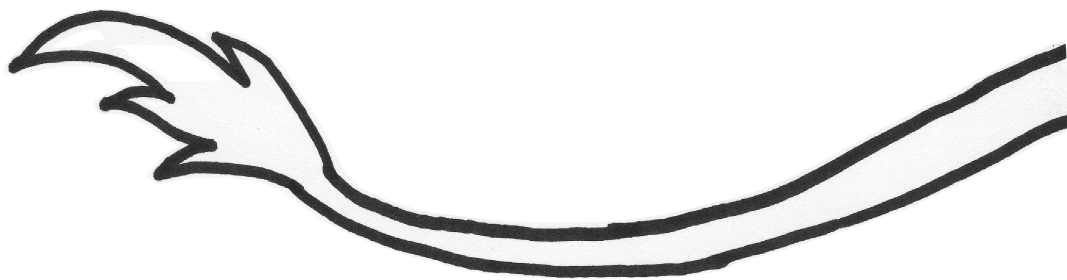
What do you get from a pampered cow?

Spoiled milk.

What do cows say when they hear a bad joke?

“I am not amoozed.”

We've come to the tale (tail) end!



***"Agriculture is our wisest pursuit,
because it will in the end contribute most
to real wealth, good morals,
and happiness."***

- Thomas Jefferson, letter to G. Washington, 1787



250TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

***"Agriculture is the most healthful,
most useful, and most
noble employment of man."***

- George Washington, at Mount Vernon, 1797