

Our cow can whip your cow

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

You may be surprised to learn that there are places in the world where people argue over milk cows.

I have lived among farmers who used to argue about their cars and their cows. The cows mattered most. It was cars that fired up friendly arguments in the years immediately after World War II, especially in a choice between Fords and Chevrolets.

To this day, I can still hear my father and the farmer down the road sorting out what they alleged was the massive strengths and failures of certain post-war autos. Ours was a Chevy family. The neighbors preferred Fords. Some families just have no judgment.

The debate over cars was partly serious but mostly lathered in a lot of teasing among neighbors. However, there was one thing that mattered more to farmers than something as unimportant as a car. And I speak with respect. Cows!

A Ford owner and a Chevy owner would needle each other if a car wouldn't start on a frosty morning, but they were quick to help each other get the engine up and running.

Cows were a more serious matter. They were waddling milk factories. These were dairy farms and milk was money.

But how best can you make the most money? Some cows carried a huge, bizarre bag of milk hanging down just ahead of their rear legs. Those cows produced astonishing amounts of the milk made inside their own bodies.

Some cows were smaller in stature and in production amounts than other cows, but they produced richer milk with more cream than large cows. So farmers argued over which style of dairy cow was better for the bottom line. It was a capitalistic dairy version of my-cow-can-whip-your-cow.

I remember, as a 6-year-old, watching my father and mother on cold mornings sitting on short stools, leaning their heads against the warm body of the cow. It was a time before milking machines. They adroitly pulled bare-handed on four elongated cow nipples in about the shape and size of a common hot dog.

Looking back, I can see the unfairness for my mother and other milk maids. She and my father sat there milking cows for profit, tugging milk out of the cows. Dad milked only cows. But my mother did double duty, assigned to producing milk twice in her life - incessantly for the cow milk market and three times for her personal babies. (Thanks, Mom.)

As a young spectator, I also liked to lean up against those warm cows on a winter morning. It was like hugging a huge life-size hot water bottle, but with warm milk inside the container rather than hot water.

With few exceptions, the cows seemed to appreciate our hugs around their hairy necks as they were divested of their liquid loads. But some large animals are far more likely to bond with humans than are cows. Horses, for instance, form affectionate and virtually monogamous relationships with favorite humans.

During my high school years, our family had a small, white burro as a pet, about half the size of a quarter horse. My dad named him Lightning because the lazy bones preferred walking slowly rather than running everywhere like a school boy.

But when the school bus stopped to let me out each afternoon, Lightning came running, braying like a Democrat who had stumbled into Republican Boise, and he was lonely.

For fun - his and mine - I taught him a trick. I would lie down flat on my stomach resting on his bare back and hanging on with my arms and legs. Then I would let gravity rotate me down around his belly and into position where I would cling upside down from his big belly.

I could hang on only for a few steps but Lightning did his part, walking slowly and carefully until my arms and legs tired and I dropped to the ground and rolled out from under him.

Now, when it comes to the large animals who love us, I am the lonely one. Lightning is gone.

I live these days in sight of my 80s. It is a time when a person becomes more aware of his last school bus ride.

Someday, if you hear a burro braying, followed by a thud, that will be Lightning dropping me gently into one of the kinder corners of hell.

It's time for me to toast him. Somebody bring me a glass of milk.

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