

Keeping pets

In the days of the great trail drives, Texas drovers went north with 2,000 to 3,000 head of cattle and often came home with one: a pathfinding oxen that had led the herd north on the outbound trip. Such oxen were so valuable and utilitarian, and the cowboys liked them so much, that rather than sell their ox in Kansas, the cowboys often took it back to Texas with them when the drive was over. As a student of history, I am often amazed to find how often these oxen were named "Pet."

It just so happens that we too had a bovine that we named Pet. I think most ranchers do. Sadly, our Pet was not respected by her peers or a leader among bovines like those old oxen. I don't even think she could lead a wild-eyed thirsty cow to water.

We acquired our Pet by purchasing heifers at the replacement heifer auction at the county fair. All the heifers we bought made good cows, but Pet was a big pain in the patoot.

She was dog gentle, invariably in the way and always stood around our corrals balling, expecting to be fed. I asked the wife not to encourage Pet by feeding her, but mysteriously Pet got fatter than the cast of "The Biggest Loser."

Pet especially loved our sheep, which we ran right in amongst the cows. I'd go so far as to say that Pet thought she was a Suffolk. So when we gathered the flock for the 4-H kids to pick their club lambs, Pet just naturally came along. It was quite a hoot watching a bunch of 8- and 10-year-olds try to catch lambs as they and the sheep ran through Pet's legs.

Astonishingly, one year, one of the young tikes recognized Pet and asked if, by any chance, we'd purchased her at the heifer sale at the fair. Sure enough, the heifer had been raised by the young 4-Her's brother. And here's the eerie part: long before we named her Pet, they'd called her Pet too!

My friend Lyman from Nevada once wrote me a hilarious letter about his Pet that he insisted was written without the aid of alcohol or any other artificial stimulants.

Lyman named his cow Pet because she'd been a bucket baby and was, as her name implies, a big adorable Pet. The heifer loved Lyman, and although Lyman wouldn't want me to say it, the tough cowboy loved her back. At first, only in a spiritual sense.

It seems that one day Lyman was moving a bunch of preggy heifers closer to his corrals where he could watch them when they started calving. He figured he'd keep them close at hand by feeding them a little hay. One day after he moved them to the nearby pasture, he hobbled his horse, opened the gate to the stackyard and jumped on his tractor to fetch a round bale of hay.

Please note that when Lyman switched from being a cowboy to a farmer, he'd failed to switch from cowboy boots to clodhoppers. Let this be a warning ... the catastrophe that followed is a good example of what happens when cowboys try to be farmers. We just don't have the footwear for it!

As soon as Lyman started the tractor the heifers knew what was coming and made a mad dash for the hay. This meant that Lyman had to fetch the hay, leave the stackyard and close the gate behind him before the charging heifers arrived. The second Lyman was through the gate he jumped off the tractor to close it. But because Lyman was a cowboy living in a farmer's world, he didn't get far.

The spur on his cowboy boot got hung up on the tractor step. So there he was, hanging upside down by his leg, with his fingers only occasionally touching the ground. That's when Lyman's and Pet's relationship went from being strictly spiritual to physical as well. When Pet saw her love interest dangling from the tractor, she saw her opening and licked and drooled all over him with her foot-long tongue that is the texture of 80 grit sandpaper.

As Lyman hung there, covered in bovine adoration, otherwise known as cow slobber, the thought occurred to him that I know has been shared by cattlemen down through the ages—ranchers shouldn't keep Pets.

It's the Pitts

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Holyoke Enterprise March 8, 2012