

Bessie Mae Moo Cow

By Rick Reil

It was a beautiful spring morning. My wife and I had attended a movie the night before and being a Saturday, we decided to sleep in a bit. The bedroom window was open and a cacophony of our native Eastern Washington avians were serenading us as we enjoyed a rare bit of snuggling time. The idyllic moment was short-lived as was the fleeting thought of sleeping in.

The often-stressful reality of raising fifteen children was again brought to our attention by non-other than Bessie. She was our family milk cow, an exceptionally large Holstein. She was loudly reminding us that her scheduled morning milk time had passed. Her loud bellowing across the pasture fence, a dozen yards from our window, was a more effective wakeup than any alarm Walmart had to offer. Her internal clock also far surpassed those of any scientific agency on Earth. When six a.m. struck, someone had better be opening the door to the barn's milking stall with her grain, fresh and ready for her, in the feed trough on the other side of the stanchion.

Bessie would shuffle into the stall with all the grace of an elderly fat lady pushing a fully laden grocery cart at the local Safeway. Her boney hips and huge udder, swinging from her big belly, only added to the wonder of how she managed to keep from crushing you as she plowed into milking position.

With the stanchion closed, locking her head in position over her breakfast of alfalfa pellets, oats, and molasses, Bessie was almost ready to milk. Next was the task of securing her tail with an old piece of baling wire attached at the end by a nail to the wall at the back of the stall. A hook at the other end of wire, secured her tail to prevent, whose ever turn it was to milk, from getting hit in the face with manure. Following that you would pull up an old, little red, pre-school chair, sit down in position in front of her right rear leg and with a pail of warm soapy water thoroughly clean her udder. A large rubber belt would then be placed over her back with a steel rod attached that would hang under her belly. This was where the milking bucket hung. The bucket was attached to a hose which in turn was attached to a suction pump.

This elaborate contraption was all manufactured in the late 1940s. It had belonged to a dear friend of mine by the name of Clarence Grover. Clarence was an old man of over 80 years of age. I knew him from our church congregation. He milked several cows and sold the milk from his little farm which was just down the road from our house. When it was decided that the rather large Reil family, which consumed over four gallons of milk a day could benefit from a milk cow, Clarence was kind enough to teach me everything he knew about family milk cows. Though our ages were more than fifty years apart, we became close friends as we helped each other with our cows. I had purchased an ancient milking machine that was just getting us by. When Clarence died a few years later his family sold me his much nicer unit.

With the milking completed, the bucket was detached, the udder wiped off and the stanchion released. Bessie, now with a full belly would happily amble out the stall door and return to the pasture to mingle with our menagerie of sheep, goats, hogs, and chickens.

The milk was then taken into the house and strained through a 100-year-old milk funnel with a fresh filter into a large six-gallon milk can. It was then poured into gallon jars and placed in the old refrigerator

in the garage. Bessie gave about six gallons a day, this left us with a couple of gallons to sell to a few friends which helped pay the feed bill.

In fresh milk the cream rises to the top. The cream was ladled off and after aging for a day or two was poured into our electric churn and made into butter. There aren't too many things better than fresh churned butter. The left-over butter milk was used in pancakes. Even though we were well qualified for free school lunches we choose not to rely on the government. We had a wheat grinder and made our own flour and bread. Lunch meat was from our livestock. The biggest treat was fresh popcorn in baggies with homemade butter. The other kids at school were stuck with chips from the store. When they found out about our kids' special popcorn, they would trade anything in their lunches for the baggies with the wonderful treat.

Now, there are few folks today that are acquainted with a family milk cow. The closest most folks will get to a bovine is in a grocery store's meat department. Contrary to popular opinion, a family cow can be quite intelligent. Most often cows will know their names, crave attention, love to be scratched and petted, and are very aware of their surroundings. Since Bessie was our first and only cow, her need for companionship turned to our family members. She was sweet and gentle and loved attention. That was soon to change. It was time for her to become a mom again.

Hiring a bull was expensive especially with only one cow to cover. Our good friend Lee Bowman raised beef cows and took care of his propagation needs with artificial insemination (AI). Lee offered to help us out and came over with a dry-ice canister, Holstein semen, an infusion tube, and a very long plastic glove. Bessie was placed in the milking stall and locked into the stanchion. Lee, with his years of experience was successful and nine and a half months later a beautiful heifer was born. I helped deliver the calf since Bessie was having a hard time. I picked little girl up, carried her into the barn, laid her on some fresh straw I then dried her off, gave her the required shots, fed her, and named her Dolly. Bessie was fine and the next morning I milked her. For the first couple of weeks the milk is mostly colostrum. This is full of good stuff for calves. After that they are fed with artificial milk. I fed Dolly for several months until she was weened. She and I bonded. She was my sweet baby girl. I am not sure she ever knew she was a cow. She loved to be loved and would come when called. The kids could ride her like a horse. She had beautiful calves and was a great milk producer.

My wife Pat loved the cows. She helped with the milking and other chores as needed. My real job was being the Public Information Officer for the Benton PUD. I often had to travel to Portland and Seattle for various meeting with state and regional organizations. One day I was hurrying home from Portland, it was after six when I got to Kennewick. I hurried, worrying about Dolly and Bessie. They would get upset if I missed their milking time. Pat was about eight months pregnant, so I was worried about her too. As I pulled into the driveway, I saw my dear wife exit the barn with her apron on, carrying the milking bucket with a couple of our younger children hanging on to her apron strings. I hurried to help her with the heavy bucket. She smiled, gave me a kiss, and told me it was time to eat. Then as now, I consider myself a very blessed man. Soon our two oldest daughters were old enough to learn how to milk. That was a great help.

In the winter of 1985, we had a polar express hit our area. The temperatures dropped to minus twenty degrees. It hurt to breath outside. It was my time to milk. One nice thing about a big cow is their warmth. I snuggled up to the girls in the milking stall to keep warm. They spent the next few days in the barn until the weather broke.

As the kids grew and eventually left home, we sadly decided that we no longer needed five gallons of milk a day. The cows were sold, and our herd of sheep expanded. I miss the big girls; they were part of our family for many years. I have kept all the milking equipment. It is still sitting in the barn...just in case.

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