

The best heifer bulls we ever bought came from Missouri.

They were black. They had four legs, tailheads, tails with switches, lungs to bellow, all the apparatus to be called bulls, and the right amount of ribs, I suppose. Yet they looked more like a pen of big black dogs sifted by the show judges, or maybe a strange breed of bovines in a freak show the circus claimed traced back to gobblers or boars, because they sure didn't fit the accepted image of black Angus bulls.

What we like and liked most about the bulls was calving without the puller and the flashlight. Looks didn't matter. Like the old cowboy said, "Gathering the eggs without having to catch the hen." Let's give him credit for the saying so long ago before the word "heifer" was added to "bull."

A high-stepping oxen dealer from Central Texas sold us the bulls. One of my neighbors bought six head at the same time, so for once our bad fences didn't matter. It made no difference where or whose bulls were with whose heifer calves. His main operation was too far away to know the details of the calving, but his cowboy never called once for three years needing help to pull a calf.

The same bull dealer delivered four heifer bulls from South Dakota last week. Four stretchy, 20 month-old black oxen trimmed for a sale ring in tonsorial skills only this dealer and his hands can apply to the tails, the heads and the scrotums to set buyers on go.

North winds peaked so fierce the day after the bulls arrived that the pear burner heating the branding irons kept blowing out. I stayed in my pickup out of the way, up by the corral holding the bulls. Thoughts hit, like, "Are these four inseminators going to sire small calves or jumbos?" "Are they heifer bulls or heifer catastrophes?"

A quick glance at my own image in the side mirror brought the subject to a head. Last week, you asked a cow person to partner on breeding and calving a pasture full of heifer calves. First and what turned out to be last, too, she asked, "First justify why you want to breed any heifers to calve next winter, much less a hundred and twenty-five head of heifers."

It took a bit to give an answer. I might be old and forgetful and be more of a woolly operator than a cowman, but I know you can't stay in business without keeping replacements.

"Well," finally I replied, "if you don't keep plenty of heifers, you'll run out of black cows and be at the

mercy of those Central Texas hollowhorn dealers at twelve or thirteen hundred dollars a head for a young cow. Up on the Divide you can beat those figures by a hundred bucks a head calving your own heifers if you don't have a death loss or a big feed bill."

Focused back on the bull pen and the cowboys trying to heat the irons, the rest came out: "And to brush by the reasons why you have to keep all those heifer calves is the same explanation for why I am out here, looking at four bulls against doctor's orders not to go to the ranch for six weeks after the last surgery — ranching is an incurable disease, if not an unshakeable curse."

Once the bulls were branded, a hand came up to ask whether they were ready to turn out the gate. Yes, they were ready. The question, the important question, was going to come the first week of January: how many heifers to keep.

Before all this heart surgery mess, the healers' charts showed my life expectancy last March to be a year and one half without the operation and double that, or three more years, with the operation.

Eight months and three operations later, rough figures showed about 28 months left before being rolled over Stu Evans Hill to the Mertzon cemetery, or maybe awakening with

a hospital nametag on your wrist where the VFW stamp went at a Saturday dance. If the heifers were sold, say, next year, the sale would qualify for capital gains, but if taxes went up, that wouldn't be a benefit.

Another way to look at it is that the heifers could be valued at the end of the year and lower estate taxes in 29 months, or if I cheated the wheel for more time, could be used to underwrite the vegetation overhead at a nursing home.

The question had to be tabled to drive back to Mertzon. Maybe I can move back to the ranch after Christmas to be closer to the business.