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The Mertzon post office distributes tons of catalogues and circulars month after month. My share is topped with a mailing list of black bulls, covering every offering of the Angus breed from the Isthmus Locks to the Arctic Circle.

Somewhere behind the scenes in the registered business, a service must highlight suckers. Be a vast improvement in the cow business to have calf buyers as inspired to buy as bull dealers are to unload their goods. Life then might elevate to watching big league ball games from a glass bubble at the Astrodome, donning soft felt and cashmere instead of rubbing blue jeans rivets and wrong-side-in pant seams against pine planks in auction barns.

It's very strange that bull dealers in Window Sash, Wisconsin continue mailing slick catalogues offering the bloodlines of Fence Breaker and Skip-a-Crop, expecting a herder to flit on up for the pre-sale party and sale day extravaganza from a bitterweed ranch, where every morning opens with jumper cables firing a 1986 feed wagon.

The catalogues nowadays, or "for many nowadays," state EPD ratings of the individuals and the ancestry. I keep records by running the cows in separate pastures, according to year brands. After a year checking the progeny from a black ox according to his papers, I also rank his IQ.

Say, Black Dragon of Savanna sentenced to solitary pasturage, weighing in at 1400, picks a fight across the fence with Monster Taurus of Elephantine, scored at 2300 pounds pasture weight. Black Dragon receives an incomplete on his IQ to see if he is going to jump over or tear down the same fence and make the same mistake a second time. Like all ranch science, the grades are inconclusive; a semester in a registered bull's life in the pasture may not cover 10 days, counting the time he spends locating and staying with the herd, to his change from a crippled four-legged animal to hopping on three.

The symptoms of the father's intelligence, or lack of intelligence, show in his offspring. Black Smoke Ring by Attic Soot, for example, throws calves so dumb they charge their reflection in the water trough and the molasses tubs. On a sunny day, the stupid ones are easy to tell by the moss on the foreheads or the molasses stain on the faces.

In January, one of the more prominent bull dealers in Central Texas sold us four bulls from Montana. He is an astute judge of the weakness in men as well as in oxen. In a low-toned spiel, he cemented me and these northwestern bulls together in a flash of drawing pen and checkbook faster than the speed of a Las Vegas marriage mill. Had not other appointments been pressing, I'd have bumped him five

hundred a head, forgetting this was a private treaty exchange.

Delivery day, the cowboy working for the dealer roared up to the headquarters at mid-afternoon in a near speedway motion to beat darkness on the return trip. Eager to see the bulls, I opened the crowd pen gate to a bigger pen to have a better look.

Instead of starting a free-for-all fight from being hauled, the four bulls stood facing in four different directions. Puzzled, I asked the cowboy whether Montana bulls are pacifists. Why weren't the bulls fighting or crowded together in one end of the pen, butting, trying to cripple each other?

He answered, "I reckon they are tired of the same company. We've had 'em for sale since last July." After answering, he paused and offered a smoke, or maybe a piece of gum. He stopped being in a hurry, for sure.

Cowboys know to be patient with herders. They cuss bosses behind scenes, but waddies sense that the ones of us who used to work for wages at the same game are sad cases with little means of support and far too old to hold a job today.

No surprise, he moved out of the wind to the sunny side of the saddle shed to visit a bit. Once he sort of

shook or tilted his head toward the pen holding the bulls, and said, "Angelo is a good place to sell bulls. Packers opened strong after the holidays. Lots of hotdog eaters over there."

After he left, we branded and vaccinated them. Guess it was stress, but it seemed I was looking off, seeking a direction. Perhaps the smell of burning hair, the hot irons roaring on the burner, brought on a reverie of past bull works, affecting my bearing.

On the last feed run, the bulls were walking sound, yet arching their heads slightly north of northwest toward the Montana line and planting calves for the San Angelo special sales to come. I suspect that cowboy was too soft-hearted to fool us too much. Still, I don't recall whether he offered a stick of gum or a cigarette.