

On the last day of the year, four bulls matched a big brawl, ending in a fall over the net and electric fence separating the bull pasture from another ranch. Different than the old custom of wandering oxen moving at timeless will across the expanses of the '09 Divide, the new neighbor and his wife moved their cows to a far pasture and whirled back on four-wheelers to help my cowboy put the offenders back.

In lead position of the affray stood an ox from a herd the neighbor recommended I buy bulls from. Strange that his advice must have changed once several of the bulls became part of our herd. (Using "bull battery" instead of herd is not a choice. One definition for "battery" is a collection of similar things. The only uniform point of my bulls is that they are all black and oblivious to the purposes of fences.)

Peculiar too, that in an age when cell phones are more common instruments on a ranch than bullnose pliers, the neighbors went to such trouble over four bulls on a day when the water troughs floated soft ice chunks and a north wind lifted dust in the air.

One clue the cowboy caught was: "We been watching close to be sure your electric fence stayed hot." The more

the watching rolls around, the clearer the message signals a symptom of bovine genetic phobia (BGP) or registered bull-itis (RBI).

It was slow to come together, but sounded like his ol' stepdad blabbed about the time he came by the morning those federal animal health guys bled a pen of first-calf heifers over a piddling little old chicken-born-licken rumor of brucellosis exposure from infected dairy stock looking across an outside fence, or maybe exhaling from a trailer going down the county road.

Lots of herders suffer paranoia of being quarantined from, or even exposed to, brucellosis. In fact, I hyperventilated at the first summons on the phone, like an iron lung backdrawing. But I recovered once I realized that if the mortgage on those heifers appeared on the slide under the Feds' microscope, it would be the first time in history a government agency declared an onsite emergency on a bitterweed ranch.

All I remember of his step-dad's visit was heading to the side of the corral to greet him. I'd been looking off so much during the work that I drifted 10 feet off course. One other thing comes to mind; afterwards he stopped dawdling when separating our cattle in mix-ups, even though the tests were negative.

Kind of dim, but that silly scare might link to last week's overreaction. I am going to change the way I've been selecting bulls. Before Christmas, my pal and I worked off five head from an offering of Montana bulls in Central Texas. The bulls showed to be the right kind for running on dry stubble and fresh air, coming from the Northwest. But next day, delivered to the ranch, the five head changed from the day before. Going down the loading chute, I visualize soggy steer calves ready for an autumn coup climbing the chute headed for the Angelo sale. Mouthed the words of the starter, and almost heard him saying: "This pen of 30 ribbon calves come from Monte Noelke. He always sends us good cattle."

They were still black, still gentle, but while the branding irons heated, imagination spawned registered names for the bulls such as "Shorty of Dry Hollow," "Dumpy the Deuce of Clubs," "Baron of Cow Hock," "Lantern Jaw of Jericho," and "Prince Piecemeal."

The roar of the branding torch made thinking impossible. Every five minutes a gust of wind blew out the flame, catch bars fell over on the wrong side of the chute, one automatic gun misfired, and the other one leaked as the winds increased, kicking up corral dirt between the fire

and the work, blasting our faces on one side and freezing our backsides.

Came next the projection of a thousand hollow-horn sessions, scenes of hundreds of woollies' encounters, and sounds of a million choruses of regret. To wit: "Oh yes, little cowboy, here you stand, a bent ol' herder deafened by time and the roar of a branding torch, blinded by dust and age, frozen by the wind and scant cover, and impoverished by an addiction to a madness to buy cattle that'd make the dankest opium dens of the Orient seem spallike in comparison."

That night and this day, the fifth of January, from now on, I am going to buy the whole offering of bulls and sort them here at the ranch. Further, I am going to hire the contractor who built Guantanamo prison to fence the bull pasture. Last, I am going to search for something useful to do with the rest of my life besides following the ultimate fantasy and misspent goal of being a cow herder.