

Instead of saying, "We turned our bulls out with the cows the first part of February," we should say, "We turned our bulls loose on the countryside the first part of February." As long as I have been trailing black muley bulls under watergaps, over fences and cattleguards, down county lanes and railroad rights-of-way, we have never had as many fence-breaking cases as we have this season keeping these papered oxen in the pasture.

What time they weren't roaming the country, they were standing on the fence bellowing and threatening the neighboring bull in the rumbling bovine sounds that blooded sires use to express maleness. The pawed ground along the fencelines looked like the scooped-out pans we once called buffalo wallows.

Long strands of barbed wire and broken woven wire from these inglorious battles laid ready to entangle any four-legged beast. One particularly active warrior cut his left front ankle so severely in the barbed wire, he was retired the first week of breeding season to be converted from a \$2700 investment to a total return of \$798 of dressed meat off the rail of an Angelo packing plant. His half-brother was brought in five days later dragging a hind leg. Thirty bales of hay, 150 pounds of range cubes, and 250 cc of antibiotic later, he will be shipped as soon as the slaughtering restrictions on the medicine end. If the fever

is gone from his injury, he might rail out the cost of his last confinement.

While the bulls are out with the cows – or better, away from the bull pasture – a one-strand electric fence has been strung on the inside of a 47-inch high woven wire fence, topped by three barbs. Short of yoking and hobbling these wandering beasts, a hot wire is the last resort.

For five years, we have had the most critical portion of the fence charged. But the electrified fence may be the reason my bulls don't respect ordinary linefences once they are turned out. The minute the electricity goes off, they know the difference. I suspect once they are away from the electric fence, freedom rings.

I know I reported when we bred those ferocious three-quarter black Brahman bulls, we worked them horseback in a waterlot fenced less than 40 inches high. The height was so unrelated to their jumping ability, those ring-eyed monsters never were able to decide where we wanted them, inside or out.

I was so terrified of the horns and the hooves of crossbred bulls that had they broken off a post or splintered a picket, the cracking sound alone would have been enough to put me in shock. Bystanders have advised for time immemorial "not to let that so-and-so bluff you." But most of that advice was passed through the planks of a strong two-by-twelve crowd pen, by an hombre holding a hotshot or a punch stick.

Be hard to say on which occasion the Big Boss was the most disappointed in the courage of his oldest son (me). But the time he drove up on a cowboy and myself standing on a round corral, dangling a catch rope inside, hoping to jerk it behind the tusks of a boar hog, comes closest to being the winner.

We'd lured the old hog off the railroad right-of-way by stringing out corn into the shipping pens. He'd never been anywhere in his long life that he wasn't able to break out of. The Boss drove off saying: "Gawd-a-mighty, I've raised a fisherman instead of a cowboy. Up on the river, Cal Johnson and Jim Bassham rope and tie down hawgs bigger than that one by themselves."

We have a couple of dozen calves every fall from a neighbor's bulls jumping outside fences. For awhile, he bred Herefords. We weaned 10 or 15 black baldie heifers every fall from his cattle. Last year, he switched over to a gray Brahman bull. Chances were high this humpy bull threw low birthweight calves.

The day I discovered the gray bull, I called my neighbor and asked if the Brahman would be out long enough for me to move the baldie heifers over next to him. I figured he'd be pleased about expanding his bloodlines to a three-way cross. He acted real cold to the idea. He hasn't been too neighborly since he learned we didn't bother vaccinating our cattle. Lots of time all this modern ranching stuff can be a big handicap.

The hollow horn association in Fort Worth opened a new hotline last week for members to report any disparaging comments they overhear about beef. Bulls ending up on the rail certainly qualify as beef, especially after the meat is cased into a thousand or so hotdogs. Nevertheless, if all this fence-wrecking and rounding up keeps taking place, I might as well turn myself in right now, because I am going to be plenty outspoken on the subject of fence-breaking bulls.