

Memories Engendered in Contemplation of a County Fair

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When asked to write about a County Fair, I thought about visiting my past shows of sheep and dairy cows at the Crawford County, Ohio Fair. I immediately realized that I would have to encounter my past. The past is a foreign country that some of us visit. What would it be like to visit that past? It reminded me what Odysseus said when he was naked and landed on the Island of the Phaeacians: “what kind of people have I come amongst? Are they cruel, savage, and uncivilized, or hospitable and humane?”¹ Except, I was wondering what kind of memories will I have, and would the past treat me in a civilized way and be hospitable and humane or depressing? What would it be like to look on an adventure that took place six and a half decades ago?

I will answer the question just posed by the end of this paper. But first let's explore my memories of how my brother and I prepared our cow for a 4-H show.

We grew up in rural Morrow County, which is 60 miles north of Columbus, 15 miles West of Mansfield and about 15 miles East of Marion. It was as rural as one can get in Ohio in the 1950s where I had a crystal set, a radio and record players. When television became available, we built a large tower for an antenna so we could receive Columbus television transmissions. I showed cows and sheep at the Morrow County Fair, Crawford County Fair (Bucyrus, Ohio), Marion County Fair and even the large Richmond County Fair (Mansfield). I even showed them at the Ohio State Fair where my cow won a remarkable 15th.

What makes an award winning cow? What criteria does a judge use? The perfect cow of any breed is called “A True Type”. To have an award winning cow, each of its parts must conform to a rigorous description put forth by the various breed organizations. The head must be characteristic of the breed, the back straight and

¹ The Odyssey, Book VI, Homer, as translated by William Butler, [The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Odyssey, by Homer, and the_odyyssey_full-text.pdf \(weebly.com\)](#) Book VI page 50

strong, the mid-section round enough to carry a calf, and an udder large with teets evenly spaced.

Breeds of Our Dairy Cows: We raised Holsteins, which were black and white and gave large quantities of milk but low in butterfat. We also had Jerseys which looked like Daisy, the Borden's milk cow. A Jersey is brown and smaller than the others breeds and looks like a deer when standing on a green field. It does not give as much milk as the other breeds, but the milk is richer in butter fat. In the sunshine a bucket of Jersey milk has golden flecks of butter fat reflecting mirror like in the sun.

My favorite Jersey cow, the first one my brother and I owned, was named Doris (actually named Duke Commando Rhena). By the way Rhena is Celtic for "great queen". We bought her from Doris Duke's farm, As you may remember in the 1950s Doris Duke inherited the Duke Tobacco fortune and was reputed to be the richest woman in the world. But Doris Duke was warm and friendly. On one visit to our home, she even went to a 4-H Club meeting with my brother Todd and I. Naming the cow Doris after her was our hope that she inherited wealth of good features and could produce much rich milk as well as her namesake's kindness.

She was a beautiful Jersey, looking much like the True Type. Her back was straight; her barrel round and large; her pin bones in alignment; the udder beautifully formed; and the head, with its round horns, was perfect. She indeed looked like Borden's "Daisy the Cow". But looks aren't everything, for she did not produce much milk and "dried up" early. Her daughter Susie was the same. It proves the point; physical great looks may not be so wonderful after all in all God's creatures.

Preparing a Cow for a Showing at the County Fair: Or can you put lipstick on a pig or in our case a cow?

For show animals, the answer is metaphorically "yes". You can change the entire look of a cow that has "prospects".

How is it done? We attempted to change Doris's and Susie's poorer features.

First, we worked on the horns. We wanted the horns to curve inward in a circular fashion, which is not natural but is beautiful. When a calf is about a year old it begins to sprout nubs of horns. These horns will grow out usually sideways. At

an early age we put a wire connecting the horns. As the horns grew, wire is tightened, pulling the horns to grow in a circular fashion so that the ends almost touch each other. This of course not only helps the beauty of the cow, but prevented us from being gored.

Next, we worked to turn the ugly scaly grey horns into white and black and shiny horns. Yes, underneath the craggy horny parts there is a beautiful white. To obtain the goal, we began to smooth the horn, first with a file then a glass shard. The glass is used from the horn base to about half the horn to carve away the black to reveal the pristine white under growth. The horn is still strong and can be used as a defense, but now it is round, half white and half black. Then we sanded the horn and buffed until smoothed and shiny. Shoe polish hid many flaws. We put compounds on the horn to create a shine. Finally, we buffed it like buffing a shoe so that the horns had a wet and shiny appearance.

To make the coat look healthy, we bathed the cows and brushed them daily until the coats were rich and shiny. We fed them special feed with molasses that added sheen to the coat.

To make the Cow's barrel look rounder and hence make it capable of carrying twins, the show cow is deprived of water and food the day prior to the show. On the day of the show we fed the hungry and thirsty cow water and beet pulp. The beet pulp is the residue from sugar beets after the sugar parts are extracted. The pulp is dry but when water is added it swells up. This fills the cow's barrel and make her look more fit for a calving experience.

Yes, even the hooves are groomed. The hooves are also filed and scraped with glass until they are smooth. Just prior to the show shoe polish is put on the hooves to make them look healthy and shiny.

But how do we change the cow's body to make it look like a great milker? Well, there are tricks of the trade. If the teets on the udder are not square or in the right place, a small piece of scotch tape might help.

If the back is not straight and there is a dip, you might softly hit the place where there is a dip and make it swell into place. There are other tricks of the trade.

Putting lipstick on the cow would have been easier, but not so much fun.

Breaking the Cow to Lead: A calf is like a wild animal that does not want to be led or handled. My brother and I trained Doris and she was easily broken to lead. Susie was feisty and difficult, willful, and unpredictable. She would buck and charge us. To restrain her we had to put a halter with a chain under her jaw and led her around the pasture for months. After many months she could begin to follow our commands and we were as proud of that as we were of the scars and bruises she gave us. But she remained unpredictable. Now we could lead two cows into a County Fair show ring for judgment.

Apparel: When we showed the cow, we had to look the part of a pristine dairyman. For a ten year old that was difficult especially since there were no showers at the fair and we stayed the night with the cows. At one point I was so dirty with fair dirt, my mother took me by the hair and held me under the faucet in the fair's cow barn and scrubbed away the dirt. All this was in front of my friends. For those who knew my small and artistic mother, you can imagine the rage she must have had at how I looked. In any case, I was clean for the show and looked like a physician wearing white pants and white shirt.

The cows are showed by leading them into the show barn and circling the judge. The judge compares each cow to the True Type and the one closest to that wins. The judge examines each cow and lines them up in a row, the first place being the head of the line.

Cows are judged in age classes. The first place animal in each age class is awarded a blue ribbon, second a red ribbon, third a white ribbon. Those cows that receive a blue ribbon are shown again and the winner of that is called a grand champion and receives a blue rosette ribbon. All that work for a piece of nylon-but you frame it and keep it all your life.

The most difficult trophy to win is Showmanship. In that class, the judge looks at how the cow is trained and what care was taken of it. Incomprehensively, I had decided to take the wildest of our cows, Susie into the ring. Yes, Susie was well turned out. Her hooves shined; you could see your reflection in her horns. Her barrel swelled and her coat was a healthy glossy look. But, how would she behave? I was concerned and very nervous.

As I lead her towards the judging ring, she was at first fidgety and then started to violently shake her head to get out of her halter. I feared how I would it look to friends, family, and competitors if Susie began to drag me around the ring? Would she bolt and attack the judge? I was on pins and needles. I began second guessing

as asked why in heavens name would I take her into ring with 30 other beautiful and docile cows?

But as she entered the ring, she must have had an epiphany like St. Paul on the road to Damascus. For the one time in her life, she behaved beautifully. The judge admired her and kept walking around her. And when he asked me to back her up-a most difficult feat for cows- she took nearly ten steps straight back without hesitancy. The Judge declared that this was one of the best trained cows he had ever seen and awarded me the trophy. I was totally dumbfounded by her enigmatic behavior; but nevertheless, this was among the proudest moments of my life.

Visiting The Past. But did I visit the past or just recount what it took to prepare a cow for show at the county fairs? As I traveled through the above memories, for myself, I answered Odysseus's question about the foreign country. While in many ways my journey was sad, it also was friendly and humane.

I visited the sounds and sights and smells of fair and farm; the smell of fresh straw being unbaled for bedding; the smell of freshly cut alfalfa; the smell of the animals during the winter when they are penned up; the taste of newly picked clover and fresh tomatoes; and the tactile feelings and smells of lanolin when shearing sheep. Telling you about how to prepare a cow for the county fair is like reading a Thomas Hardy book about rural Devon: it is words that affect only one of the senses. But farming affects all the senses: it affects the normal 5 senses. taste, smell vision, hearing, touch. But it also affects the 6th sense of proprioception, which is awareness of one's body on this blue planet.

But then the image came, the image that made me laugh out loud. During the winter the cows are in a shelter and do not roam the fields of pasture. When we first let them out in the spring, they bolt out into the green fields with their tails way up in the air making billowing sounds like Gabriel's horn. And since they gorge themselves on fresh spring grass, their milk will be of a green color and they will romp until they are tired and willing to be handled easily by us humans.

All this sounds like an allegory from everything from how we raise children to putting together a legal case. But it is merely a journey into the past. How I miss those days and the partnership I had with my brother as well as the other farm kids and the competition. Most of the people in our shows are no longer around. I guess I should visit the past more often.

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