

# Lessons learned from a cantankerous cow

**M**aybe you've heard the phrase "party till the cows come home."

But what happens if the cows won't come home?

In this case, a yearling heifer was AWOL. Mostly angus and all Houdini.

Now before you roll your eyes and say this has nothing to do with you, I would argue that we all have some kind of cows, even if they don't have four legs, a tail or moo.

In this story of the hairy escapee artist, she was supposed to be grazing with five other heifers in the front pasture of my parents' farm. But over the past several months, No. 6 exploited every weakness in the fencing to find a way out again and again and again.

Dad knew it was the same escapee because she has a white patch on her black belly. The behavior was also the same. She usually slipped out by herself, stayed by the fence where the others were and when Pop opened the gate, she trotted back into the pen.

Six weeks ago, a motorist stopped by at supertime to ask if the cattle grazing along the road were his.

Indeed they were. Heifer No. 6 had taken the direct approach, stomped down the fence and taken a fieldmate with her. There they were, munching

grass along the busy two-lane highway.

Mom, Dad, my 13-year-old nephew and his friend drove the two back into the pasture. With the fence damaged, Dad decided to move all six to the barn, where the rest of the cattle were. Five trotted through the gate toward the barn. No. 6 refused to leave the pasture.

After chasing her around the field for two hours, Pop said enough was enough. "We'll get her in the morning," he said and shut the gate.

But in the morning, she was gone. She wasn't lurking near the other cattle. She wasn't skulking in the woods. She wasn't munching grass by the road. She had vanished.

Dad alerted the sheriff and called the neighbors he knew. No one had seen No. 6.

There were many sleepless nights of worry — about where she might go, whether she might cause an accident on the road, whether she might cause damage elsewhere.

Four weeks passed and there was still no sign of her. Then a nearby farmer did a nose count of his herd and found an extra heifer. It was the runaway.

The funny thing is that his pasture was fenced in with one lousy strand of electrified wire only 2 feet off the ground. No. 6 could easily step in and out of the field anytime she wanted to. She apparently didn't want to. There was an angus bull in the herd.

The farmer called back to say he tried to separate No. 6 so Dad could come get her. She jumped a 4-foot gate and ran back to the others in the herd.

"She's feisty," the farmer told my mother on the phone.

"We know."

But he wanted to know if Dad was willing to sell her.

Mom said she'd ask.

She left a note for my father saying she thought selling the heifer was a splendid idea. If we bring her home, she wrote, you know we'll be chasing her as long as she's here.

Pop called back and said, "Make me an offer."

The cows we all have are our responsibilities — our jobs, projects and other obligations we take on or think we have to take on. Sometimes we can keep them organized and in their pens. But sometimes we leave the gate open or our fences fall apart, and the cows get out, causing problems for us, our family and our friends.

That's when we have that feeling that we're always running to catch up because we're trying to corral our cows. Or we have the feeling that we're being chased because our cows are trying to run us down.

The secret is to have the right cows and a manageable number of them. Easier said than done, but it's true.

We also have to recognize when we have the feisty cow that wants to be in someone else's herd. We can spend our lives chasing it every time it escapes, or we can help it find a happy home.

And if we're very lucky, someone will offer to buy it.

**Mary Lawrence teaches editing at the Missouri School of Journalism.**



**MARY  
LAWRENCE**