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Dangerous Animals on the Meadow

I rode the motorcycle home after irrigating on the meadow and saw Laura closing the driveway gate. I stopped close to her. I said, "What are you doing?"

"Those cows got into the yard, so I chased them out, and I was about to close the gate, but I'll let you in."

"And that big bull behind you, are you going to keep him in the yard as a pet?"

She thought I was joking, but she turned and saw the Hereford bull standing pensively, horns spread about 6 feet, about 25 feet away from her, as if he wondered why he was being separated from the cows, who stood in the gravel county road, ruminating over their next move.

Laura squeaked and jumped. "Oh my," she said, "I never saw him. He must have been behind the house."

"Swing the gate through this way and stand behind the rock jack. He'll come out."

She did, posthaste, and he did, in a leisurely fashion. I turned the motorcycle, ready to flee or to get between him and Laura if necessary. He peacefully joined the cows, and they walked away, looking for greener grass.

Through the eight and a half years we took care of the ranch in northeastern Oregon, we usually had Hereford bulls, probably the least aggressive of all bulls. But John, the ranch owner, said, "Yes, Herefords are almost always peaceful. Still, a bull is a bull. Don't forget that."

I repaired fence on the west boundary, up the ridge in old-growth timber, where big trees stood far apart in sparsely-grassed, rocky ground. Riders drove the herd down the outside of the fence, taking them out of National Forest to the meadow along the river. Cows complained loudly about being moved from where they wanted to be and forced by men on horses to go they didn't even know where. Two bulls argued about who had first rights and who was strongest.

The bulls placed forehead to forehead, horn to horn, and pushed. One bull pushed the other rapidly backward, but the backing bull got good footing, stopped, and then pushed the other bull. Both animals of massive muscle and bone pushed

and skidded in unpredictable directions and tore up turf in the process.

Fences, bushes, small trees, fence-repairers could be trampled, not because the bulls mean to destroy them, but because they aren't concerned with where they go, only with attempting to overpower each other.

I couldn't judge it right that day. Every direction I started to retreat turned out to be the direction the bulls took, and they kept getting closer to me as they pushed, growled, and skidded.

I was pleased to see John approaching on his horse. He asked me, "You had lunch yet?"

I said, "No," and he said, "Maybe you'd better climb up here behind me, then. We're going to stop down at the gate and have a sandwich."

I hadn't planned to eat with the crew, but I changed my plans. A horse can usually outmaneuver a bull, even with two riders on board.

Cows can be as dangerous as bulls.

Rick and Gwen, who tended cows in National Forest rangeland, came to visit when our daughters, Amanda and Juniper, and their daughters, Angie and Ginnie, were small. The children played in the corral, and we adults conversed near the barn. Someone had left a mixed-breed, horned cow in a chute. When cows were left for more than a day, I let them out so they would have access to food and water.

I walked over and opened the gate. The cow exited, very angry, head down, at a full gallop toward the girls. Gwen, quick-minded from a lifetime of working with cattle, yelled, "Climb the fence."

Four girls responded instantly and didn't stop until they sat on the top corral rail and watched a lean, red-hided cow gallop past and out the corral gate, still angry but thinking now of food and water. It hadn't occurred to me the cow would do anything but bow her "Thank you" and walk gracefully out to grass and water. I was grateful for everyone's fast reaction, and I never again let a cow out without first making sure everyone around was clear.

That was the year John decided to forsake his conservative ways and bring in Brangus and Braford bulls, for bigger, faster-growing calves. He told me he regretted his change in policy and warned me that we had far more dangerous bulls on the meadow than usual. Our daughters were always eager for adventure, but challenging 2,000 pounds of muscular, hump-shouldered bull was never among adventures they

wanted to pursue. We all gave the bulls a wide berth.

Except the Australian shepherd, blue heeler, mixed-breed dog I had then, who considered it his duty to move any bovine he passed.

Jim and I crossed the meadow, headed toward the timber to cut firewood. Jim drove the tractor. I rode the wagon behind the tractor. Dog trotted along beside the wagon. We passed one of the bulls, the most massive bull I've ever seen. I thought such a huge animal could not move fast. The dog decided the same thing, slunk low, and nipped the bull's heels. We were both wrong.

The bull leaped straight up, spun in the air, agile as any cat, and came down at full attack. The dog escaped under the wagon and out the other side. The bull decided not to attack the wagon, though for a moment, I thought he would, and I entertained images of the wagon flying and of me turning end over end through the air. I was greatly relieved when the bull stopped short of the wagon, thought about it, and resumed grazing.

That dog never overcame his need to nip bovines. John had replaced the Braford and Brangus bulls with Herefords when Laura and I and our daughters fed hay to the herd one fall after the first snow. The bed of the wagon was three feet off the ground, and the four by four by eight foot bale of hay sat on that. I stood behind the wagon, about to cut plastic twine securing the bale. The herd, 85 cows and 5 bulls, crowded the wagon and pulled hay from the bale, impatient for me to start throwing sheaves on the ground.

Afterward, I visualized what had happened. The dog, never one to let opportunity pass, came from under the wagon and bit a bull on the flank or on the nose. He picked the biggest bull, with long, shiny, gracefully-curved horns. The bull set out to destroy the dog.

All that, I figured out afterward. When it happened, the dog galloped at top speed around the wagon, and the shiny-horned bull thundered close behind. Though the bull wasn't after me, his right horn nonetheless aimed at my right hip and came fast. About three fourths of a second later, I sat on top of the big bale of hay, seven feet off the ground, and watched the chase end as the dog skittered under a corral rail and the bull stopped. stood a minute or so, then turned and walked back toward the herd.

Later, I tried to climb the wagon and a big bale of hay and couldn't do it. Nor could I remember how I did it.

We learned to be careful around cattle, to know they were large, potentially dangerous, and unpredictable presences.

When people asked us, “Are there dangerous wild animals around here?” we replied, “No. There are bears and cougars and bobcats and coyotes and elk and deer, and once in a while, a rattlesnake, but no dangerous wild animals. The only dangerous animals are those bovines you see out on the meadow, placidly chewing their cud, especially if they’re riled up by that stub-tailed, moon-eyed dog you see sleeping peacefully there in the shade.”