

FARM BOY

by Fred Stenson

I was born onto a farm in southern Alberta: the youngest of three children, the only male. Although I was genetically the material from which farmers are made, I was temperamentally unsuitable. Squeamish and inept, I regarded the out-of-doors as a place of danger, rich in opportunity for injury and humiliation. My mother once presented me with a secondhand meccano set that she had bought at a farm auction. "It has motors and belts," she said. With the acute eye of the child, I identified the gift as remedial. To me it was a box of everything I did not like and could not do. I wept.

I knew I was not a farmer. By the time I was 12, the entire community knew too. Proof came at a Catholic Youth Organization slave auction (a day of each member's work sold, proceeds to the club). Outside our country church, we slaves sat on a hay rack. On the grass before us, the parishioners, farmers all, appraised us. If they had any notions about the equality of humankind, they were setting them aside for the day. In their eyes, we were labour: potential motive force for the moving of hay bales and the re-moving of rocks. There would be no sentimentality.

As the bidding began, the largest and strongest went off at whopping prices. The audience cheered. Sitting at the end of the rack, I dreamt of being like that: strong and full of know-how; culturally correct. I was sure it would feel good and, being near the church, I imagined a miracle whereby I would excite intense bidding too, going finally for the highest price of the day.

A couple of hours later, two boys remained on the hay rack, badly sunburned and kicking their legs. I was one and my friend Henry was the other. Henry had bad hay fever. His eyes and nose were red and running. For a while no one would bid on us at all. When a rancher from near Waterton offered a few dollars for both of us, the auctioneer snapped the gavel down. Done, and thank goodness.

In that moment, I saw it was time to move on. Another community was needed. Some other way of making a living. The irony is that, when deciding on my career, I employed farmer-style thinking, perhaps for the first time. Only a farmer would look at writing as a relatively promising way to make money.

**

The rub was I was only 12, a bit young to go it alone. During the years that remained before I could hit the road, I became stronger and less squeamish. While still mechanically challenged, I was able to do most anything with wrench or hammer as long as my father told me what, and didn't wait too long to



come back and tell me what next. I became a not-bad lay veterinarian, specializing in bovine obstetrics and calf scours. Then it was off to the university for three years of misusing public funds, followed by an epic back-pack journey around Europe where I wrote my first novel and became, in some minor toe-hold way, a writer.

Somewhere along the line, between the slave auction and actually putting out my shingle as a writer, something happened to my attitude about farmers and ranchers. I suppose I grew to admire them when I realized that their menu of skills is rare. I don't run into many city folk who can fix their own vehicles, furnaces and appliances; weld, rope, ride, deliver babies, throw the diamond hitch, grow vegetables, understand auctioneers, figure out in their heads how much seed and fertilizer it would take to plant a field of 116 acres...

I'll spare you the litany of what I and many other urbanites cannot do, but when you get a flat tire on a cold day and your first thought is to call the AMA, you know the rot has set in. My recurrent nightmare is that I enter a garage and the mechanic says, "What's wrong with your car? It's broke, that's what. Fix it? Are you kidding? Why don't you just get a new one?"

Nonetheless, dumb farmer jokes abound. Disguised as an urbanite, I hear as many as the next guy and often get a double dose of insult when they begin, "There's this dumb farmer named Fred, see. Old Fred he goes to the doctor and says, 'Doc, what can you do about this chicken growing on my head?'"

But of course it's silly to question why these jokes exist. Their function isn't to be true but to be prejudicial. If I say people with green skins drink out of the toilet, and can find someone willing to agree, then

we can play a rousing game of Prejudice. Likewise, when the farmers and ranchers roll into town with their dented pick-ups (cow-kicked, as a rule) and their hats with the pom-poms and earflaps, we can smirk and joke...

Except that I can't personally have much fun doing that. If on the day of the CYO slave auction I decided I wasn't going to be a farmer, it didn't take many years of city living to figure out I would never entirely be a city person either. As befits the non-aligned, I live in the last city suburb. The frontier. The barbed-wire curtain.

They tell us that the era of the farmer and rancher as solo entrepreneur is disappearing anyway. Soon all the grain and beef will be corporately grown. Chances are that when the guys on the tractors are corporate wage earners instead of self-employed farmers, they'll be wanting more than two bits an hour. Corporate farm executives will want remuneration equal to or greater than what their skills would garner in other industries. The shareholders will want more than the customary minus one per cent return on their investment.

All in all, by my conservative calculation, the corporate bread loaf will sell for about 25 bucks. The corporate cow will be worth so much she'll probably live in an antiseptic stall with a futon and a person who comes in every two days to buff her hooves. The corporate steak? Forget it. Thank goodness the corporate farm will have a public relations department to come and explain to us why, in a global economy and a new Millennium, the prices are necessary, justified and good for us in the long term.

In 20 years of writing, Fred Stenson has published eight books and has written over 130 films and videos, including: Landscapes, a seven-part film series; The Great March; 13 episodes of World of Horses; Land of Hope and Great Centennial Cattle Drive, which earned him his second AMPIA award.