

Our Homestead Story

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A Note From the Authors

Writing a book about your life is fun and also a little scary. It is fun to know that you are writing down a history that will probably end up being a treasure for your great-great-grandchildren. It is also fun to be able to record the many acts of kindness and love that we have been the recipients of over the last few years. So what makes it scary? That we have left someone out and will remember it about two weeks after the book is printed. Or that we have written something to which someone might take offense. If we are guilty on either count, please forgive us.

Some people might think we moved here just to get some material to write this book. Hardly! We can think of lots easier topics on which to write a book than living a more self-sufficient lifestyle. Actually, we never even thought of writing this book until one of our friends suggested we jot down our experiences.

You'll notice that the book is written in first person, with Steve as the speaker. That doesn't mean that Susie didn't help write the book. We are a team, and work together on most everything. That's the way it's supposed to be. We wrote it in first person primarily to make the book more enjoyable to read.

As you read this book, you may say to yourself, "I could never do that! It would be too hard." Or, "I'm not an expert. I'm sure it wouldn't work for me." Maybe you couldn't do some things we have written about. But you can probably do a lot more than you think. And forget that only experts can do certain things. That's a fairly new idea in our culture. In the good old days people did pretty much everything themselves. Don't be afraid to tread where only "experts" walk.

On the other hand, you may read parts of this book and say to yourself, "I know a much better way to do it than that! What makes the Castleberrys think they're experts?" We're not experts and we freely admit it. We're learning, every single day, and hope to continue learning for many years to come. One thing we have learned is that much of what we have tried is more art than science. There usually is not one best way to do things. If you see an error in what we've done, chances are that we are discovering the error ourselves right about now. I suppose we could just wait until we have all the correct answers. Naw, we'd never write the book if we did that!

Now for the disclaimer: This book is intended to provide an account of our first few years of homesteading and what has

worked/not worked for us. However, it's not intended to be a medical manual, replace the electrical code, etc. Thus, before you try copying any of our activities please make sure you know what you are doing. Plans may have to be altered to meet local codes or zoning ordinances. We caution you not to attempt any potentially dangerous activities without competent professional assistance. You get the idea. Also, we haven't, in most instances, given you a blow-by-blow description of how to accomplish something. There are excellent how-to books that do that (See our Recommended Readings List in the back for a list of some). We have just attempted to share with you the beginning of our pilgrimage toward more self-sufficiency with God's help. We hope you enjoy reading Our Homestead Story. There's an order form on the last page for this and other books we've published.

Our son Ben was just eighteen months old when this story begins. The picture on the front cover is our Ben, driving the tractor last summer at the age of 11. Enjoy your children! They grow up fast.

Steve and Susie Castleberry
May 2003

Chapter One

Cows Will Be Cows

What do you mean, ‘Uncle Jim is at the door?’” I asked, struggling to turn over and look at the clock by the bed. It’s 6:30 on a Saturday morning. The youngest children are still sleeping quietly. I got to bed a little later than I had hoped last night. And now Jeannie is anxiously telling me that my friend is at the door and needs to see me *right now!* As I start to crawl out of bed she continues, “Daddy, Uncle Jim said the cows are out on the state highway.” Suddenly I’m fully awake, pulling on pants, trying to get on socks at the same time I am putting on a shirt. It doesn’t work well.

Reaching the front door, I find Jim already turning around in my driveway preparing to head back toward the road. As he drives by, he leans out the window: “The cows are **way** down the road.” How can he sound so calm? He heads out to try and keep them from running further.

I tell Jeannie (11) and Stevie (9), my two oldest children, to get the calf halters from the barn, and we quickly hop into my van. We drive about a mile down the road, passing a dead porcupine as we go. “Hey! Did you see that neat porcupine on the road? Can we look at it later?” Children don’t have any trouble setting priorities. It’s just that their priorities often don’t coincide with ours. “We’re looking for calves right now, so just keep your eyes open,” I reply.

Down a slope, back up the other side, and then, there they were.

You couldn’t miss them! Lights flashing on Jim’s car, the car parked smack-dab in the middle of the road, and Jim hobbling around on a pair of crutches trying to corral the runaways - they weren’t hard to spot! I parked my van on the side of the road and the four of us started numerous attempts to capture our prey. Ever try to catch a frisky calf that has been waiting for this chance to frolic on a busy state highway? It’s not easy! We finally managed to halter Brownie and Spot (a couple of Jersey calves) but Todd would not be caught so easily.

Todd requires a bit of explanation. Our good neighbors, Martin and Bev Bitner, along with their son Todd and his wife

Becky, live just across the hayfield from us. They have a large dairy farm of Holstein cows, and they (the Bitners, not the cows) befriended us shortly after we moved in. Martin's hard work, Bev's motherly kindness, Becky's cheerful smile, and Todd's crazy sense of humor made them special to us. That first autumn, Martin had knee surgery and Todd needed help milking, so the older children and I went over to help out with chores for a while. A few weeks later, on a cold snowy day near Christmas, a beautiful little black and white calf arrived in our barn with a big red bow around his neck. The calf was the Bitners' way to thank us for our help. The children immediately named the little calf "Todd" in honor of their hero, Todd Bitner. The name, however, made for some confusing and fun dinner-table conversation (like this example between my children and Susie, my wife):

Stevie: "Todd seems to have an awfully bad cough. Wonder if he could be sick?"

Susie: "You know, there is a lot of flu going around."

Stevie: "Flu? How could he get the flu?"

Jeannie: "Maybe he just swallowed milk down the wrong way."

Susie: "Was he drinking milk when you saw him?"

Stevie: "Of course he was. He's always drinking milk, Mommy. And boy, was he slobbering it everywhere today!"

Susie (after a minute of thought): "Oh, you mean Todd the *calf!*"

Finally, we devised a system for keeping matters straight. We began calling them Todd-the-Calf and Todd-the-Human. Todd-the-Human cooperated beautifully, with his usual irrepressible humor. The phone would ring and a voice would say, "This is Todd-the-Human. Can I speak to Steve?" Or sometimes, "This is Todd-the-Calf. When are you going to install a private line in the barn?"

Todd-the-Calf came to us at only three weeks old, and was bottle-fed for months by the children. Being the only animal we had, he didn't realize for quite some time that he was actually a cow, and not one of us. Todd had never seen a cow (that he could remember) when we got Brownie and Spot a few months later, and was so afraid of them that he ran right through the fence. Our solution was to introduce them to each other slowly, putting Spot and Brownie in one pen in the barn with Todd in an

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adjoining pen. Good plan. They became good friends. Partners, you might say. Todd was a large Holstein calf, and Holsteins are a bit more, oh, shall we say, high-strung? He developed quite a reputation for living on the “wild side.” He became the ringleader of the bunch.

Anyway, since he wouldn't let us get close enough to halter him there on the highway, we had to grab a 25 foot-long nylon tow rope from the van and lasso the silly buckaroo. How are *your* lassoing skills? Not having been raised on a ranch out in Montana, mine were slim to none. Finally, we had all three in their calf halters. Jeannie, Stevie, and I started walking them the mile down the highway to our farm. Of course that dead porcupine *was* kind of hard to pass up, but we managed to keep our noses to the grindstone.

As we started down a hill, the calves decided this would be a good time to crank up the speed. “Don't let them run!” I shouted to the children. Seriously now, what kind of advice is that for children who weigh about a fifth of what their calf weighs? However, the calves soon tired of running. After all, they had been running all over the countryside for the last couple of hours. As we crested the top of the hill, I wondered what else could possibly happen.

Rain. Slowly at first, then more and more. Looking behind me I saw Uncle Jim following us in his car, lights flashing, and now with his windshield wiper blades going. He waved. I waved back.

Finally, we (the calves, me, the children, and Jim's car) started down our long driveway. First one and then another of the cows seemed to sort of sense that we were home again. So they . . . well, they sort of saluted; saluted in that special way that cows do. Right in the middle of the driveway. Thanks boys.

Walking the 1/4 mile of fence line in the calves' pasture (we were wet now, what difference did it make to get wetter?) we found the place they had used for the “Great Escape,” and put up a strong welded cow panel as well as three strands of barbed wire to keep them in. You can't imagine the determination and conquering grins on our faces. “They sure won't get out this way again!” And it worked. At least they didn't get out *that* way for their next escape. No, the next time they just walked right out the front barn door.

Why is it that cows (and all other animals) can know immediately when a barn door is left open, but the children who left it open can never, ever seem to remember leaving it open?

This time it was a Sunday morning. Brownie and Spot headed across the state highway and saluted in Jeff's driveway. Jeff is *not* a farmer. Thanks again, boys. Todd, the ringleader calf, somehow got stuck inside our hayfield fence and couldn't figure out how to join his outlaw friends on the highway. Instead, he simply moomed his suggestions to them over the fence.

We were all awake, already dressed for church and didn't know anything was up. "Hey, what's going on?" said one of the children, suddenly noticing a commotion on the highway. It kind of looked like a busy mall parking lot filling up the morning after Thanksgiving, with cars streaming in and parking one after another. Since we don't have any shopping malls within half an hour of our house, I cleverly figured out that something was up. When I went outside, I heard someone say *something* about cows.

Well, we were in the thick of it in no time. "Get the calf halters!" I yelled to the children while the rest of us ran for the calves. A few of the people jumped out of their cars to help, while others just sat in their cars and enjoyed the show. The "show" was perhaps enlivened by the fact that Susie, even though she had on her high heel church shoes and was seven months pregnant, was chasing the calves too.

Finally, the calves were back in the barn. How thankful I was that God had protected us from harm, and kept the calves from being hit by a car. After all, some of the cars driving around today are worth more than my whole farm! And that includes the value of our bull calves, Todd, Spot and Brownie. But perhaps I am getting ahead of myself. Let me back up a bit and tell you a little about how we got where we are.