

Counting Sheep

Keeping the events of one's childhood in their proper sequential order is difficult, perhaps not even possible. Now, 60 years later, I remember myself as being ten years old, but it could have been a year or two on either side. It was certainly during the middle years of World War II.

Because my father's job required a great deal of travel, my mother accompanied him, and my brother and I were left behind to live for long periods of time, it seemed forever, with my father's parents. His name was Art, but we called him Pop; her name was Ida, but we called her Spufendiker. My grandfather kept a Jersey milk cow and a couple of sheep just on the outskirts of Colusa, where they lived. This was a few years before they relocated to Vallejo, shortly before the war ended, to be close to their first-born son and his family. The cow needed to be milked every day, and when my grandfather returned home in the late afternoon from his work as a rice irrigator, he would take me along with him in his old pickup to take care of his animals.

It was my job to walk down the lane and open the pasture gate and retrieve the cow. This was not difficult because the cow was waiting at the gate; it was her milking time and she was ready. Back down the lane we would come, make our way into the barn and into a stall where my grandfather had laid out a supply of alfalfa hay for her to eat while she was being milked. After a few minutes, when she was settled and contentedly munching her food, I placed a small three-legged stool on her right side, put the milk pail under her bulging udders, leaned my head forward into the hollow between her leg and her stomach, and began to milk her.

When my grandfather was satisfied that the cow was content and that I was in control of the situation, he would announce, "I'm going to go count sheep." And walking with his limp, he left the barn. I continued on with my milking. I had to be careful the cow did not move around too much and accidentally step on my foot or sometimes, deliberately, I think, kick the milk pail over. No need to worry, she and I had a good relationship, and I treated her as a pet even though she was sometimes bossy and uncooperative.

After I finished the milking, I poured the milk into a large milk can with a snug lid on top and a swinging handle attached to each side (the very same cans I have seen offered for sale in pricey, upscale antique and garden stores many decades later). I washed out the milk pail, hung it back on the hook on the barn wall, and put the milking stool back up on the shelf. My chore was done, I just had to wait for Pop.

I amused myself by petting the cow on the head while she ate and waited for her to nudge up against me, which she invariably did, so I could nudge her in return. Sometimes she turned her head, looked me full in the face, as if to express her appreciation. Well, anyway, that was how I interpreted it.

When Pop returned, he picked up the milk can by the handle, and together we walked to his pickup and made the short drive back to the house. The milk now belonged to my grandmother.

Even now, in my old age, I am a little sheepish to admit that it was only many years later, after I had left home, entered religious life, and was in college, that I realized my grandfather had not been counting sheep, after all. Rather, he had walked back down the lane to the main road, perhaps a distance of 100 yards, to a roadside bar where he would enjoy his daily ration of alcohol.

I draw no moral from this little story save only to remind the reader that those days of the mid-40's, in a small town of fewer than 2,800 people, perched along the Sacramento River, were innocent and simple days. Those were the days when little boys believed their elders, especially their grandfathers.

Sad to say, I doubt that counting sheep would fool any little boys in this day and age.