



Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

There's nothing like a warm spring day to make a high school vocational agriculture student want to get out of class and onto a farm somewhere.

With that as our primary motivation, four of us farm boy types convinced old John Kirby, our ag teacher, that we wanted to be a livestock judging team. That would mean days of practicing out on the farm and a trip to district competition and, hopefully, even to state. And it also meant we could miss

some school - boring classes in physics, chemistry, English and other unnecessary stuff.

All of us had strong interests in livestock, although it was quite diverse. But somehow we felt we could put together a team.

There was Ronnie White, who was raised on a 50-acre dairy farm. He was short and stocky and had the most tremendous grip from years of hand-milking a herd of Jersey cows. Ward Gilmore stood 6 feet 5 inches and

played on the school basketball team. His real love was Angus cattle, and although his house was in town and his father ran a grocery store, he spent all of his spare time on a farm.

Leonard Alexander moved in from Kansas in his junior year with his widowed mother to start farming an old rundown place that he hoped to turn into an outstanding Angus breeding farm.

And then there was me. My only experience with hogs had been with a Spotted Poland China sow named Evelyn. She had been purchased as a baby pig for eight dollars from a lady with the same name. Why the hog became her namesake I really can't remember.

Evelyn the pig was carried home in the trunk of Grandpa's car and was to be the start of my swine enterprise. But that's another story - back to the judging team. Besides beef cattle and hogs, we had to judge

sheep - those wooly, little critters that hide their true looks under huge wool coats and to the untrained eye all look alike.

It goes without saying that I knew less about sheep than I did about hogs, and since horses weren't part of the program I was not a very likely prospect for the team. But it was my idea so I had to see it through.

Mr. Kirby would take us on endless field trips where we polished the finer points of livestock judging, learning how to appraise those animals for their meat-yielding qualities, how to score them and how to give verbal reasons for our placings. It was all good fun and nobody thought it would amount to much and it did get us out of a lot of class.

And so on a warm day in April we went off to the district competition. I'm not sure if it was Mr. Kirby's good training or Leonard's sharp eye that carried us through with top rating. Ronnie and I tied for last

place on the team, so we drew straws to see who would be the third team member at state and who would be the alternate.

I lost. That meant I went along for the ride. I judged the livestock, but my score didn't count. I was there in case one of the team members wasn't able to make the trip or turned up ill, or was otherwise disqualified.

State judging was all fun and games except for a couple of difficult hours at the livestock pavilion. The rest of the time we roamed the University of Missouri campus decked out in blue FFA jackets, Levi's and cowboy hats, hoping to make our mark on a community that saw thousands of our kind every spring.

We visited all of the student hangouts - the pool halls, the beer gardens - The Shack, The Stables, Dirty Mac's. We cruised the streets until the wee hours every night in a 1948 Hudson, returning to our "reserved" parking space near the Daniel Boone Hotel, saved for us by a no parking sign we had borrowed from a nearby construction site.

Much to our dismay, our only success was in the livestock arena where the team won first place and a trip to the American Royal in Kansas City for national competition.

Again, as alternate I went along for the ride and consequently didn't share in the gold medals our team picked up. What started as a lark wound up like some kind of a fairy tale at a big breakfast at the National FFA convention with the Missouri team winning top honors.

All of us wanted to be farmers when it came time to head for college that fall. Leonard thought long and

hard about it and finally decided to stay on the farm. He was struck by lightning and killed a few years later.

Ward, Ronnie and I, along with John Martin, another high school FFA buddy, headed off to the University that fall to major in agriculture. With the necessities of life packed in old suitcases and this time piloting a 1938 Chevy, we again ascended on that college town destined to be ag scholars and successful men.

Ward and Ronnie stayed a year before low academic achievement and other interests lured them home. Ward joined the Air Force, where he played basketball for four years. He finally did return to the ag college, then to veterinary school and a successful career as a large animal vet.

Ronnie chose married life to the rigors of a college campus and took up employment as a cow tester in the Dairy Herd Improvement program.

John and I stuck it out through four years of livestock pavilions and college classrooms and the eventual ag degrees that were our tickets to employment as extension agents.

Out of all the farm boys and would-be farmers in that postwar vo-ag class, not more than one of them stayed on the farm. Maybe it was the time, perhaps more the location, that caused our farming demise. Since we all lived in or around a growing city, it was only logical that farms were gobbled up for housing developments and shopping centers and that opportunities to get into farming were scarce. Or maybe it was the economics of that time that made it difficult.

That was a time when farming wasn't very profitable and prospects weren't very bright. So we found jobs close to farming that offered some financial security.

Our old ag teacher John Kirby - he went right on teaching agriculture and coaching livestock teams, telling all of them about the team back in 1951 that went all the way to the American Royal and brought back the prize.

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