



Outside the evening is a heavy darkness, with wet, sticky flakes of snow tumbling from the murky black overhead. By the millions, flakes have cascaded over the fields and farmstead, mixing and melding into a clinging, oozing slush. It's impossible to scrape, heavy to shovel, difficult to traverse.

Only more is to come, with the promise that the accumulating mess will then harden into a ragged, waffled surface, as temperatures plummet.

On such a night, few things offer greater appeal than the warmth that reaches out from the yellow haze of the farmhouse windows. Like beacons, they hint of coziness and shelter, imploring us to leave the murkiness of a rendezvous with popcorn and hot chocolate.

But, no. It cannot yet be. For the lights of another haven demand our attention, a series of bright, white squares, marking the confines of the cow barn.

And, to people who truly love cows, this shelter is almost as comforting as the security of the house, banked in its steady woodstove warmth.

During warmer months, even the airiest dairy barn can be confining and stuffy, in spite of doors and windows thrown wide open and fans humming.

But, on a snowy winter night, a barn is a place of peaceful friendliness. In ours mix the familiar odors of fresh sawdust bedding, hay, fermented fragrances of haylage and high moisture corn, and the enticing, "peanutty" aroma of roasted soybeans.

The cows rise slowly to their feet, some reluctant to lift their great bulk for the bothersome purpose of milking when they'd rather nap. Others seem anxious to get the business over with for the real drawing attraction, chow time.

Just the presence of a familiar figure at the distant end of the barn, from where the various feedstuffs arrive, sets up a chorus of impatient bawling.

Our work pace slowed by the adverse weather, the tasks of sweeping feed alleys and feeding hay are enjoyable opportunities to chat with herd pets, to stop to scratch behind the ears of a special favorite. Following the feeder on barn rounds goes a rag-tag crowd of fall kittens. Leaping from bale to bale, they chase the ends of baler twine, jump in feed storage buckets, roll and tumble in mock meanness to each other and just generally manage to be affectionately underfoot.

I find a deep sense of satisfaction, and of purpose, in surveying a row of contented black and white heads, noisily chewing hay with the same self-satisfied look as that of a gourmet nibbling caviar and truffles.

Barns can sometimes be places of burdens, of worry, of too much work and too little time. But, on a snowy winter evening, the milking complete and the cattle settling down, contentment doesn't stop at the cows.

This is why farmers endure. This is why they rise early and retire late and try to work 20-hours-worth of work in between.

And it's why a large majority, in spite of buyout temptations, dropping prices and continuing cash flow crunches, will continue to get up each morning and head for the dairy barn.



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