

Mr. Bull the Steer

Adapted from Harry Walker's (1909-1995) story in Bitter Sweet June 1979

Mr. Bull The Steer, with a ring in his nose, joined the two dry cows and three heifers for the May drive from Stow Corner up the valley. Driving several cattle along a country road was not an easy job. They venture into gaps in stone walls and into dooryards and gardens if they can. Ben or I ran ahead of them every time we neared a house, to protect the owner's lawn and vegetables from our animals.

We reached the Royce barnyard by eleven o'clock. There we rested for half an hour and ate sandwiches of ham and eggs Mom had put up. Then we turned our now-less-frisky cattle into the Royce pasture and guided them up the rocky logging road to our much higher pasture.

Once a week for the rest of the summer Dad would harness Jerry to the wagon and drive up to the Royce place, usually accompanied by one or more of us kids, and walk up to the pasture with a quart of rock salt in a wooden measure. He would bang on the gate with a stick and call, "So, boss! So boss!" The cattle would come thundering down the grassy slope with bobbing heads and flying tails to the salting place. There they would crunch eagerly on the granules of salt we dropped by handfuls into several salting spots soon clear of grass killed by the salt. We would talk to them and rub the heads and backs of those tame enough to let us.

One Sunday in July, Sim, Ben, and I all went with Dad to the mountain pasture. We weren't allowed to fish on the Sabbath and we had nothing better to do on that warm sunny day. When we reached the pasture Dad banged on the wooden gate as usual and called to the cattle. Soon the two cows and the three heifers pranced down to where we waited by the salt drops. "Hey, where's Mr. Bull The Steer?" I wondered aloud.

Soon our steer appeared from behind some gray birch bushes. He walked halfway down and then stopped and stared at us. We all stared back at him. Something was wrong with Mr. Bull. Very wrong. His nose looked like a big pin cushion. Dad groaned aloud. "Oh, no! Hedgehog quills!"

Our steer came closer, walking a bit unsteadily. The hollows in front of his hip bones were deeper than I'd ever seen them, indicating that he hadn't eaten for a day or two. "Oh, boy, is he hurting," Sim observed.

"Let's catch him," I said. "We can surround him and grab his ring." But Mr. Bull was smart, sensing what we were up to. He loped easily between Dad and Ben and again took up stand by the spruce tree. "It's no use," Sim cursed.

"Oh, I'll catch him myself," I blurted. "He trusts me." After all, Mr. Bull and I did have a sort of rapport. "Yeah, go ahead and catch him," Ben dared me.

I moved slowly toward Mr. Bull, speaking his name softly over and over, holding a red apple out so he could see it. His ears perked up and he held his head higher. I took a bite of the apple so he could smell it. His tongue flicked out and back. I inched toward him and he opened his mouth. I started my final move to give him the fruit and slip my index finger up inside his ring. Then, at the crucial moment, the apple touched one of the quills in his upper lip. That was enough! He swung away from me and gave his head a toss – and a minor miracle happened! The ring flipped up – and right over the end of one of the dead branches of the tree beside him. No trees have stiffer or stronger dead

branches than a spruce. Mr. Bull was now standing quite still, held by the limb thrust inside his ring.

“Well, now, this is swell!” I crowed happily as I stepped up and seized the ring. “Come on boy!” I led him down to the others. “Of all the dumb luck!” Sim exclaimed. Dad gave me a slap on the back and his hand joined mine on the ring. “Good work, Sonny.” I felt like the king of the hill. Dad didn't hand out praise often.

We led our steer down to the Royce place without incident. Dad put Jerry's halter on Mr. Bull and tied the halter rope tightly to the rear axle of our wagon. Minutes later we were heading south for Stow Corner.

A mile down the road by the Charles farm, we met a lean, whiskered man driving a horse and buggy. “It's Ernie Andrews, the trapper,” Sim observed. “I bet he'll want to stop and talk. He always does.” Sim was right. Andrews stopped his horse and held up a hand to halt us as we drew about even with his buggy. Dad reined Jerry up and said, “Hello, Ernie, how's things with you?”

Ernie said, “Fine, Will.” Then he reached down behind the buggy's dasher. “I bet you ain't never seen one of these varmints.” He held up the darndest thing I'd ever seen. It was the hide, or pelt, of a big cat at least four feet long. The four of us stared in breathless awe at the strange thing.

Then, with no warning, we were all thrown violently forward. My face hit the back of the front seat. Dad and Sim were almost pitched out.

“He's getting away! He's loose,” Ernie yelled. In the moment of pain and confusion I pictured Ernie's savage creature leaping toward us with slashing claws and snarling jaws. The “screech” of tortured wire being pulled hard against other metal shocked our ears. Ernie's voice came again: “He went right through! He's with the others!”

The four of us in the wagon began to realize what had happened. Mr. Bull was no longer hitched to the rear axle. He was in the Charles pasture mingling happily with the cows. “Gosh, I'm sorry, Will,” Ernie apologized. “I had no idea he'd do that if I showed you this pelt.” “What the heck is that darned thing?” Sim asked. “It's a Canada lynx,” Ernie explained. “I got him up on Mt. Eastman.” Mr. Bull had taken one good look when Ernie held up the lynx pelt and thrown himself backward, snapping the halter rope. Ernie apologized again, clucked to his old horse and moved on.

Dad hitched Jerry to a fence stake. “What rotten luck. We've got to catch him again and we can't expect a miracle this time.” The stocky owner of the farm was coming toward us through the pasture. Dad spoke, “Hello, Fred. We just added a steer to your herd.” Fred chuckled. “I bet he met a quill pig up in your high pasture.” Dad told the story. Fred wiped the sweat from his red face. “Why don't we drive my cows and him into my tieup? We'll hitch him in a stall and I have a pair of pincers you can use on those quills.” It was an easy matter. Ten minutes later Dad was pulling out the quills. Ben counted the quills as Dad dropped them on the floor, but lost count in the sixties. At last all the wicked little needles were out. Mr. Bull the Steer shook his head again and again and licked his nose with a long, writhing tongue.

“He looks hollow and hungry,” Fred observed. “Why don't you leave him here for a day?” Dad said that would be great. The next afternoon we rode up the valley, stopping at Fred's to pick up our steer. We led him up to our pasture. He was looking more normal, and even pranced a bit as he rejoined his bovine companions.