

Two-Headed Calf by Dan Buchanan

One of the most exciting and interesting events for a young farmer to witness is the birth of a calf. During my years on the farm I was lucky to assist at the birth of many calves, some relatively simple and some more difficult. Another task related to this came about when a cow gave birth to her calf during the day in a pasture field and someone had to go out to the field and bring both mother and calf safely into the barn. At our farm we had a routine for this job which included my grandfather, Lloyd Ames, coming up to the farm after supper with the jeep and taking me with him to the field where I had earlier spied the cow and calf. It was well established that I should never approach the cow with a newborn calf in the field but should note the location and concentrate on making sure all the other cows were at the barn ready for milking.

One warm summer day a cow that I knew to be “due” was not with the group in the field close to the lane and when I looked across at the field west of the swale where they had spent the day, I could see the white markings of a cow as it stood by the far fence line. I thought I could see the white speck of a calf lying out in the field so I assumed the cow and calf were fine until we could retrieve them after supper.

At the normal time, grandfather’s orange Willie’s Jeep stopped at the road, I hopped into the passenger side and off we went. We had a precise routine we followed from here on. I recounted what I knew about the cow and calf to grandfather and he asked a few questions as we drove over the hill and turned into the gate by the swale. I jumped out and opened the gate, swung it shut after the Jeep went through and then hooked the gate, catching up to the Jeep as grandfather crawled along waiting for me to get in.

We drove down the dirt trail, over the dam at the pond and up to the gate into the pasture field. Just inside the gate, grandfather stopped the Jeep and said I should head over toward the cow and calf while he inspected a section of rail fence up at the north west corner of the field. I was not to go too close and be careful of the cow since they can be aggressive if they think their calf is in danger. We would meet near the calf and make plans from there.

My thirteen-year-old legs carried me across the ankle-high alfalfa and timothy, leaping over the ditch that ran down the middle of the field for drainage and across to where I started to see the cow more clearly. She was annoyed, as I could tell by her bawling and snorting at the ground. I could see the calf out some distance from the fence where she stood and wondered why she wasn’t standing over the calf as cows often will.

As I closed to within a few dozen yards of the calf, something pulled me up short. It looked odd. There seemed to be a white and black snout pointing at an angle into the sky. Oh no, I’ll bet he’s broken his neck at birth. I heard the Jeep nearing the scene to my right and I bounded over to talk it over with grandfather. He had noticed something unusual as well and he told me to step up on the running board and hang on as he drove closer.

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The Jeep stopped and the engine was turned off. The cow snorted and bellowed over by the fence as grandfather and I walked slowly to the still white and black body in the grass. Then suddenly, it's tail twitched up and flailed around for a few seconds before landing back in the grass. We stopped and looked at each other and I said "Well, it's alive at least". Grandfather didn't say anything. We walked closer and came around the side where the calf's nose was pointing skyward. I froze. Grandfather said something I won't repeat here.

As we knelt down at the head of the calf we could clearly see that this calf had one nose pointing up into the soft night air and one resting under the grass on the ground. Grandfather gently lifted the neck and the two heads become obvious. He looked at me and I looked at him. "Have you ever seen anything like that?" I said. "No, but I've heard of it happening ... somewhere in the States, I think, years ago."

At this point the cow came closer and seemed to show more interest so we kicked into our routine again. Grandfather brought the jeep around and backed up to the calf's head. Or heads, I guess. I distracted the cow long enough for grandfather to get a rope on the calf and fasten one end of it under the seat inside the jeep. I took my place inside the jeep and pulled the rope as grandfather picked up the calf and lay it in the back of the jeep. It was a bit more awkward than usual because the calf was so top heavy. He could move his neck but the heads were so heavy that he had no control over them.

After some struggles we managed to tie the calf securely in the jeep with its hind legs out the back, clearly obvious to the cow who was coming around with interest by this time. Then we both got back into the jeep and grandfather slowly drove across the field with the cow following behind, sniffing the calf and bawling her displeasure. We drove all the way up the lane to the barn in this manner and when we got there, we left the cow locked in the lane and took the calf to the barn.



Normally we would have put a newborn calf in one of the empty stalls in the inner part of the barn but grandfather thought we should put this one right up front in the large open pen on the south end of the barn. At the first opportunity I ran to the house and fetched dad, stammering along the way, trying to tell him what we had found. His response was a disbelieving "What? What?"

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We brought the cow into the barn and tried to make the calf comfortable in some straw but mostly we stood and gaped at it, wondering what on earth we were seeing. Nothing like this had ever happened around here before although, like grandfather, dad had heard of it somewhere in the States. It was a marvel and a wonder. Dad and grandfather checked the calf closely and came to the conclusion that it was normal except for the fact that its head was divided just behind the two inner eyes that stared opaquely at each other only a couple of inches apart. In fact, it would not be right to call it a two-headed calf, it was really a two-faced calf.



Dad was concerned that the calf might be hungry since it could not lift its head to nurse. He found a syringe and filled it with some milk from the cooler. It was still fairly warm because this evening's milking had just been completed. We tried to feed the calf by holding one of its heads up and squirting milk from the syringe down into the gullet. For the most part, the milk ran out on the floor. We eventually figured out that only one face had a complete tongue and gullet attached and, once we fed the right mouth, some milk made its way into the calf's empty stomach.

The next couple of days were a blur. Word got around quickly and neighbours dropped in to take a look all through the day and into the evening. My brother Lloyd and I were designated as caretakers for the calf since dad and grandfather had lots of work to do. We told and retold the story to every amazed visitor. Mr. Austin from Wooler came by and took several pictures which he reproduced for us. Over the next few weeks we sold them to anyone who wanted to pay \$0.50.

While it was an exciting time, especially for a couple of farm kids, the final outcome was not in doubt. The calf lived for less than a week and its body was taken to Guelph Agriculture School where parts of it still soak in glass jars on a shelf with other scientific novelties. And, of course, I never went to the field to fetch a newborn calf with quite the same casual approach. The image of that white snout pointing skyward out of the grass stays with me to this day.