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Give them guns—and doughnuts, too

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—In spring an old man's fancy turns resignedly to thoughts of fencing.

The issue, as it is in many of life's duties, is about imposing a measure of pretend control over matters that prefer either chaos or freedom, take your pick.

Fences domesticated livestock. They also domesticated humans. I believe we got the short end of this stick. I prefer hunting or even gathering to making fence.

Europeans brought livestock to North America—cattle, horses, pigs, goats and sheep. The fences they required and the property rights they expressed steadily turned open Native American land into demarcated, European-style farms. Fences and rights produced cash for those with good dirt and a knack for the business side of things.

Fences established ownership and, presumably, control. They announced the division of land into smaller and smaller parcels.

Property law fenced ownership in and fenced non-ownership out. Wealth was measured by how much acreage you counted within your lines.

I'm always amazed by how much fencing defines America, how much capital and time is invested in it, and how central the concept of fence-in/fence-out is to our system of law and our economic philosophy.

There was a time in America when we had fewer people, simpler technologies and less understanding of how one thing affects others—when you could pretty much do what you wanted within the fenced boundaries of land you owned. That day has passed.

Fences no longer keep everything within, or the concerns of others out. The Commons has reappeared, spreading over fenced-in ownership—sometimes for better, sometimes not.

All of my rambling is, of course, only an excuse to avoid dealing with the practical issue facing me this week: unfencing.

The inevitable fate of all fences -- and people, too -- is to fall apart over time. Even stone fences, neatly piled five feet high, have a way of splaying back onto their ancestral homelands when no one is watching. If fences are not tended, they die. Many fences I tend die anyway

I am a legend in my own living room for the ingenious schemes I've devised to keep mostly dead fences on the lowest level of life support for the longest times.

One tactic involves patching over disintegrating woven-wire fence with odd pieces of older, slightly less disintegrated woven-wire fence scavenged from dismembered fences of yore.

Any hole can be patched in this manner. And that patch can be patched in the same way. And all those following. I have fences that are now in the sixth generation of patches. The original wire disappeared when Jackson ran for president—Andy, not Jesse.

At some point, however, even I realize there's nothing left to patch to. The wire has become so brittle with age that it breaks to the touch, or just vanishes. When this occurs, I rely on the illusion of a fence to keep cattle from running down to Blue Grass and ransacking the bank. Cattle are quicker to see through illusions than most people.

I started dismantling about 1,000 feet of illusion about a week ago. It had been pretending to be what it once was for at least 15 years. Even keeping up appearances was no longer possible. I take down no fence before well after its time.

There is a quick way to remove cattle fence. It requires a large bulldozer to push down and pile up all of the steel wire, stakes and posts into giant wads that are then left in the field to vanish over the next century. A thousand excellent reasons exist to do the job in this fast, efficient and cost-effective way. Had I gone to business school, I would know how to apply each of these reasons in the low-tech fields in which I now work.

The other way to take down fence is by hand—pulling out fence staples one by one, stake by stake, collecting them in a bucket rather than dropping them on the ground, recoiling still useable barbed wire, rolling up still useable lengths of woven wire for future patching, pulling out eight-foot-long line stakes and the stouter corner posts from their three-foot-deep holes, recycling wood and wire, and leaving a clean alley for making new fence.

This is labor-intensive tedium that goes slowly, no matter how fast you are at these “unskilled” skills. Unfencing provides unencumbered time to think about the next semi-mindless-but-semi-needed farm task I can squeeze for a column.

Unfencing like most simple jobs always invokes the Law of Unanticipated Things that Need to be Done Before You Can Do What You Originally Intended to Do.

Before I can begin new fencing, three giant locust trees have to be cut and cleaned up after I failed to persuade them to relocate to Florida in their retirement. One predated the American Civil War, an always recent conflict in Virginia. Many believe that exchange of opinions was fought over the meaning of fence lines and property rights.

I would not have cared about time spent converting big, locust biomass into small, locust biomass, except that cattle are due to arrive, and it would be better if I had the new fence up. I don't think I can persuade a new bunch of steers that no fence has the same mojo of illusion as the old fence.

The always-present conspiracy against getting farm projects done on time once again triumphed when April showers persisted, turning the greening sod into a muddy bog.

Eventually, of course, the pasture will dry enough to let me finish unfencing the old fence that wasn't anymore and make the new fence. I can then replace an honest illusion with a different reality waiting to be compromised.

Neighbor Carl says I'm gaining on the unfencing. He and neighbor Joe will help me pound in the stakes and unfurl the 660-foot-long rolls of high-tensile, woven-wire fence that should keep the livestock where they're supposed to be, except if they decide to roll down to Blue Grass for a Coke and some Little Debbie Cosmic Brownies.

No fence -- no matter how new, how high, how strong or how expensive -- can defeat someone determined to break in, or out. Why is this so hard to understand?

How exactly did beef cattle manage to get people to do all this work so that they can eat, drink and not hit a lick? Or did we do this to ourselves as part of our cosmic bargain with them, which ended the days when both livestock and people ran free?

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