

Good neighbors make good fences

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—“There’s a boy in our front yard,” Melissa observed as we sipped coffee early on Saturday morning just before leaving for a workout.

“What kind of boy?” I asked.

“A boy-boy.”

We hadn’t had a boy in our front yard since 2003 when Molly left for college, and I ran off the miscreants she left behind.

So I looked.

A neighbor’s 600-pound Angus steer was munching grass on the wrong side of the fence in the winter dimness.

“Manure!” I said expletively.

To get the boy back where he belonged, we would have to drive him across a cold, deep, mucky stream, through an unfamiliar gate, along a hardtop road that was lined with gustatory temptations and spooky wind chimes, and then, finally, into a threatening cul-de-sac with an open gate.

The chance success was about the same as the number of times heads appears in a coin flip.

Not much fun lay ahead. “Manure!” I repeated expletively.

And while I’m on this subject:

It is arguable that the British Empire was founded on sheep manure.

As the idea of private property rights replaced feudalism in the 1400s, lands of the King (granted for use to nobles) that had formerly been worked by serfs as a commons were gradually transformed into rent-paying tenancies as the nobles changed from vassals to landowners. Once land became private property, it was divided, agglomerated, bought, sold and leased.

The new landowners enclosed rural England with fences so that sheep manure could be concentrated in small paddocks instead of being spread thinly over a large area. Livestock barriers allowed sheep manure to create fertile pastures, which, in turn, led to more and better sheep, which, in turn, created wealth for English landowners.

Populations in Western Europe were quickly increasing in the 15th and 16th Centuries. They provided a market for English wool that was exported to Antwerp where it was made into cloth. The wool trade helped turn

England from economically stagnant feudalism to growth-oriented, trade-based, state-sponsored mercantilism—and a colonial empire.

Manure became synonymous with the idea of improvement. In 1561, a Calvinist essay proclaimed: “The word of God if it light upon a soul manured with the hand of the heavenly spirit, it will bee most fruitful.”

Times have changed. Today, we use manure as an expletive.

After ruminating about mercantilism, I noticed the steer had come over with a girlfriend who apparently had a thing for eunuchs. The couple was hard at work converting our grass into improvements that were piling up next to the driver’s side of my car.

As I put on my boots, it started to rain. Then it started to sleet. Then it started to do whatever comes after sleet. Nothing is more fun than to drive skittish cattle where they don’t want to go in an ice storm.

When livestock get themselves on the wrong side of a fence, it’s commonly understood around here that their owner should make things right reasonably soon. (When we first moved here 30 years ago, a bull of unknown residence turned up in our pasture during a drought when both grass and water were scarce. I put the word out after a week of patience that if this bull was not off my grass by that afternoon, I was going to turn him into hamburger. The owner, who was not a neighbor, sneaked in within two hours and hauled his freeloader home without stopping by. This was poor form, and it’s never happened again.)

Everyone involved in resorting livestock gets amped up a bit until the renegades are settled back where they’re supposed to be.

Melissa had to leave for an appointment. (I’m not suggesting that she knowingly sets hair-dos and things of that sort for exactly those time slots when cattle have scheduled themselves for running around like headless chickens.)

Eventually, the owner and I did the job with the help of three vehicles, a bucket of grain, a 42-page game plan and about three dozen oaths that I kept to myself so that the cattle would not take offense.

With cold rivulets dripping down the back of my neck, I tacked up the two mashed-down sections of woven-wire fence where the rogues had jumped. I am at a loss to explain why the grass looked greener to them on our side of the fence...on a moonless night.

Robert Frost wrote “Mending Wall” in 1914, a poem that recounts a conversation he has with his tradition-bound New Hampshire neighbor as

they walk their respective sides of a stone-wall boundary in the spring, resetting rocks that winter upheavals and rabbit hunters had dislodged.

Frost had no objection to maintaining a boundary wall when cattle were kept on one or both sides.

But he wonders why this wall is needed between the neighbor's pine trees and his own orchard, whose apple trees, Frost claims, will "...never get across and eat the cones under his pines."

The neighbor's reply echoes a well-known 17th-Century proverb: "Good fences make good neighbors."

But Frost believes that unnecessary fences are...unnecessary. Nonetheless, he builds his share so that the entire load of pointless work will not fall on his neighbor who doesn't want to free himself of the habit.

I've found that good fences make good neighbors as long as both parties share equally in the labor and expense of building and maintaining them. Otherwise, an unrepaired fence become a nagging grievance.

Frost believes that good neighbors make good fences, necessary or not.

I read The Good Good Pig by Sy Montgomery this week. It's the story of a runt barrow who grows to 750 pounds, lives like a king for 14 years and dies in his sleep.

He becomes Ms. Montgomery's best friend, confidante and soul mate.

While this charming pig is housed in a "nominal" pen, it escapes at will to root up neighboring lawns, snack in neighboring gardens, manure where it pleases and wander the community. The local constable in the author's small New Hampshire town, its fire department and patient neighbors put up with this inconsiderate behavior (hers, not the pig's).

The idea of constructing an escape-proof pen never seems to raise its ugly head. A simple electric fence -- one strand powered by four flashlight batteries -- would have done the trick. A couple of nose rings would have stopped the digging and rooting without affecting the pig's ability to graze and forage.

Ms. Montgomery would never install a nose ring in her soul mate or zap him for wanting to cast aside the chains of captivity. This is what happens when a human thinks of an animal as a higher form of people.

I like pigs and have raised several over the years. They are smart, ingenious, personable, loyal, curious, verbal, friendly, tidy and happy.

But it never occurred to me to let one run free when it suited him. A 750-pound pig is half again larger than a fully grown male lion. No matter how gentle or tame, he would be a danger to himself and others. Free-range pig farms have fences for reasons of safety and control.

Some historians believe that Wall Street acquired its name when Dutch colonists built a barrier across lower Manhattan to keep their free-roaming pigs south of their field crops that lay north of it. After England seized the New Amsterdam colony in 1664, pigs ran free in New York City until the mid-19th Century. They flourished on the staggering amount of garbage and excrement (both animal and human) they found free for the taking in the streets of all neighborhoods. New York City finally decided to pen pigs for reasons of sanitation, aesthetics and safety.

Had I been her neighbor, I would not have been patient with Ms. Montgomery's tolerance for allowing her pig show up in my front yard, year after year. I might have said something about her lack of responsibility being a form of piggish greed.

With livestock, fences are built to keep yours in and others out.

With people, it's often the same.

Walls built to keep others out eventually fail in small ways and large. The Great Wall of China, Hadrian's Wall, the Maginot Line, Israel's West Bank Barrier and the American Border Fence with Mexico are examples of what I think are initial successes and long-term defensive failures. People are even smarter than pigs in defeating walls.

Those fences built to contain within -- the Berlin Wall, the Iron Curtain -- fail because people, just like Ms. Montgomery's pig, don't like being locked up.

In Frost's time, "mending" a wall meant making it functional for the benefit of both parties.

Since then, "mending fences" came to mean either doing something to advance your own interest or patching up a lapsed relationship for that end.

Mending a fence should, I think, revert to its Frostian meaning of doing something for mutual benefit even when it's not entirely necessary.

I intend to take up this fence matter with our recent visitors. I will propose couples-therapy with the goal of increasing their satisfaction with life over there.

I have not yet figured out how best to talk to the steer about sex, or the girl either.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant, columnist and author of **How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property**, available at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his columns are posted. His latest books -- **Maple-leaf Rags, Snowy Mountain Breakdown, Blue Grass**

Notes and **Land Matters** -- are available through his website. He writes a bimonthly column for BackHome Magazine.

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