



Tales of a Country Veterinarian

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Author of FIELDS AND PASTURES NEW

## OF THE FLOCK

Tales of a Country Veterinarian

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Field and Pastures New: My First Year as a Country Vet

### Dedication

This book is for the people of Choctaw County, Alabama. The first day my family and I set foot on your soil, you welcomed us with your genuine hospitality, accepted us as we were, and entrusted us with the health care of your pets, hunting dogs, and livestock. But I never cared much for your monkeys and snakes.

And in memory of a very special man, Mr. W. R. Lanier, and his family. He was not only a good client, he was also my friend, my advisor, and one of my biggest supporters. He gave much of himself to the betterment of Choctaw County.

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#### Introduction

The voice on the two-way radio crackled out the late wintry night message into the warmth of the pickup cab.

"Fresh cow down, bloated, prolapsed uterus. They want you as soon as possible!"

As Jan's voice slowly recited directions to the scene of the emergency, I wondered aloud if this would be a DOA trip, and if not, which one of the problems I should attack first. Should I try to sit the cow up and see if she debloated by belching off the gas, or should I immediately go ahead and pass a stomach tube?

It would be tough trying to put a prolapse back into a bloated cow, down and stretched out in the icy mud. Perhaps I should give her some calcium gluconate intravenously immediately, if she had milk fever, and then concern myself with the secondary problems. To make matters worse, it was one of those cold and pitch-black nights that make ungloved fingers ache and long for the warmth of a roaring fire, or at least the warmth of a pickup truck's defroster vent. I wondered if any of those cold weather vets in Wisconsin had ever cleaned, manipulated, and replaced a bovine uterus while wearing gloves and coats. I surmised they had not.

Roaring down the gravel road, I spotted the light in the driveway too late and ran past the turn. As I reversed the vehicle, I could see a cloaked figure moving toward the road, frantically waving a kerosene lantern. As I drew closer, I realized the lantern waver was a young woman. Two little boys bundled up in

their heavy winter coats and wearing their red checkered caps, their earflaps pulled down below their earlobes, were hanging on to her tattered coattail, and both were crying.

"Brownie's dyin'!" one of them blurted out between sobs and sniffles.

A quick patient history revealed that Brownie, the family milk cow, had delivered a fine heifer calf that morning. Late that afternoon they observed nothing amiss, but when they saw her about nine P.M., she was down.

As my flashlight beamed over the prostrate bovine figure, my first thought was that she was beyond help. She was dangerously rotund from bloat, and from her rear parts there flowed a seemingly endless quantity of reddish-brown, inside-out uterus that blended in with the half-frozen mud, which made crunchy noises as I stalked around, deciding exactly what to do first.

Turning my attention to her head, I discovered that she did have an eye wink reflex and was breathing. Assuming milk fever, I delayed any further exam and hustled to the idling truck for stomach tube, calcium, IV set, and needle. The warm bottle of calcium that I retrieved from atop the instrument panel felt good to my tingling hands.

As the three family members huddled together and watched helplessly, I passed the stomach tube, relieved the gas, and then started the calcium flowing into her jugular vein.

"Could you two young doctors hold this bottle for me while the medicine goes into Brownie?" I asked.

Both boys charged toward the cow and carefully took the bottle from my hand. As they took turns holding it aloft with their ragged gloves, I offered instructions on how to regulate the flow of the solution into the cow. Then I took a deep breath, stripped off my shirt, knelt in the muck, and attempted to clean

up the prolapse as best I could. Cleaning a mud-, blood-, ice-, and debris-covered prolapsed uterus is not easy, as anyone who has tried it can attest. There is never enough water or clean drapes or old raincoats or whatever. But I eventually got the mass acceptably clean, and after much stuffing, pushing, and straining, finally had the thing properly inverted into its original position. I ran to the truck and warmed my hands, which I was sure were approaching frostbite status.

When I returned, Brownie had emerged from her near-coma state and was making attempts to get upright. Finally, we sat her up, cow fashion, and she burped off more gas, then answered two calls of nature. The boys went to the spring and brought two pails of water that I used to wash the icicles and other material from my arms.

As I cleaned up, the young woman explained that her husband worked the night shift at the textile mill in town and tried to farm a little on the side during the daytime. Brownie was their only cow, and she furnished milk for not only their family but for relatives down the road, as well. Everyone had plenty of milk to drink and butter for their bread. The family was poor, and Brownie was not only an important food producer, but also a friend.

As I stepped back through the gate to see if Brownie could get up, I closed my eyes and said a quick prayer. This family needed this cow! I stuck my knees into her ribs and yelled. Nothing happened. A second try was equally unsuccessful. On the third try, she shakily got up on her knees and rear end, like cows do, and rested there briefly before standing the rest of the way up.

As we watched her with lantern and flashlight, she started cautiously taking some steps toward the water bucket. She drank, then walked with confidence toward the hayrack. She looked great at the moment,

but I was letting the possibility of a relapse nag at me. Even so, I realized I wasn't quite as cold as before.

After some discussion about milking out, feeding, and housing, I said goodbye and started for the truck. Suddenly, the older of the two boys rushed up, hugged my leg, and said, "Thanks, mister, for makin' Brownie well!"

Driving home that night I had this feeling of exuberance. Perhaps it was the toasty truck interior that was making me tingle all over or maybe it was the feeling that I had done something good and important. I knew it wasn't earthshaking or even worthy of mention on the back page of the weekly newspaper, but I knew that simple act would make a difference for at least a couple of families, and a lot of the area residents would hear about the cow that rose from the dead.

The practice did grow in Brownie's area, and I passed the farm many times after that night. If I saw the boys playing in the yard, I would honk the horn and they would rush to the edge of the road and wave until I was around the curve and out of sight. I also saw Brownie grazing contentedly in the small pasture beside the road, and each time I remembered that cold night, struggling with her life. Then I'd have that good feeling all over again. As far as I know, she was never sick again.

Even though the practice of veterinary medicine has changed a great deal over the years, every veterinarian needs a case like this from time to time to recharge his or her mental batteries. Fortunately, we don't have as many of these cases as in years past. Perhaps farm veterinarians make a greater contribution today by assisting owners in preventing diseases and improving the overall health of the herd or flock. But I know that I became a veterinarian because of the Brownies of the world.

When I was working with Brownie, little did I know that a few months later one of her neighbors would take great pride in constructing my veterinary clinic building, and at a very reasonable cost. A veterinarian never knows how his or her actions or a simple kindness will be repaid a hundredfold.

# A FRIEND OF THE FLOCK

## One



Choctaw County is a friendly place. My family and I had moved there in the fall of 1963 with a goal of setting up a veterinary practice and becoming valued members of the community. We were surprised at how the residents of the town of Butler had greeted us and how they had gone out of their way to make us feel welcome. In just a few weeks we had been invited to various community events and asked to attend social functions at the homes of clients, neighbors, and local leaders. The First Methodist Church and Pastor Hastings had quickly found committee assignments for both Jan and me. We had been accepted for who we were, almost as if we were natives of the area. No one asked about our pedigrees, political affiliation, or motives for being there. Like them, we were happy to be there and appreciative of that opportunity. After a few months, Choctaw County had become our home.

By May 1964 we had more calls for veterinary work than we could handle. The program drawing blood samples and testing the thousands of cows in the county for brucellosis was in full swing, which meant that I was running Choctaw's dusty county roads almost every day except Sunday. I politely refused to test cows on that day. Of course, I took care of emergencies and followed up treatments on sick patients as necessary, and there were always people who showed up on Sunday afternoons with

their pets at my small, makeshift, garage animal receiving area, because that was the most convenient time for them.

In spite of the success of our practice, we desperately needed a nice clinic building, not only for the convenience of our clients and the proper treatment of their pets, but for our convenience as well. Clients who brought their companion animals to the house without an appointment were always disappointed when Jan told them that I would be in the country for several more hours. We needed a place where they could leave their animals in comfort and safety, and I could take care of them when I came in. Jan and I both were constantly looking and talking with the locals about available sites. It happened one afternoon in late May when I returned from a farm call in the southern part of the county.

"You've bought what?" I exclaimed, five seconds after I walked in the back door.

"A lot," Jan replied.

"A lot of what?"

"You know, a lot. A piece of land where we'll build our veterinary clinic," she declared.

"Did you pay for it?"

She nodded her head affirmatively. I was so surprised that I forgot to ask where it was located.

"What with? I didn't know we had any money!"

I had been busy working with the county's animals and their owners for almost a year, trying to establish the practice while Jan took care of the books, the daily bank deposits, those silly quarterly reports the IRS demanded, and other worrisome business matters in addition to her full-time duties of caring for Tom, who was five, and Lisa, almost four. Unfortunately, like so many other veterinarians, I didn't like the rigmarole of the business part of practicing. I wanted to doctor the animals and let somebody else take care of all that other stuff. But I knew that Jan couldn't take care of all the nonveterinary matters by herself and that it was not yet possible for our newly established small-town veterinary practice to hire additional help. I knew that I would be writing business checks, dealing with drug com-

pany representatives, and ordering drugs and equipment on a daily basis.

A veterinary clinic is a privately owned operation and must be run in a businesslike manner if it is to succeed. Unlike the West Alabama Regional Hospital and other hospitals for humans, there were no taxpayer funds involved in building or operating such a venture. Most veterinarians I had met were easy marks for people who had a litter of kittens that needed homes or had picked up a stray dog along the roadside, and since there were no animal shelters in most small towns back then, the veterinary clinic seemed to be a natural place to dump these unfortunate animals.

"I know Doc loves animals and he'll take these kittens in," was the oft-repeated phrase. But I had seen and heard of veterinarians who ran their clinics in such a manner, and the care and feeding of a kennel full of nonpaying strays was an additional expense, which they had to pay for by increasing the fees of the clients who did pay. The majority of my clients in Choctaw County thought their veterinary bills were already way too expensive and would not have appreciated higher fees in order to pay for the sorriness of irresponsible animal owners. I vowed that my clinic wouldn't become the county home for unwanted pets and that if I found myself in financial difficulty it would be for some other reason. At the time, I didn't realize how hard it was going to be to refuse to take in cute kittens, puppies, fawns that folks thought were lost from their mamas, and countless other injured or helpless animals who somehow found themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time.

"Well, I've been putting a few dollars aside because I knew that an opportunity like this was going to present itself soon," Jan said. Either Jan's extrasensory perception is highly developed or she has an amazing faith in the future. She is always uttering positive slogans such as "Just be patient, things will work out" or "I've got a feeling that the time is right for this," and she is usually right.

"Now tell me about it. What happened? Why didn't you call me on the two-way?"

"I tried to, about three o'clock, but you must have been away from the truck or out of range. Speed called and said that when people had heard about the availability of the lot they were calling and lined up wanting it. But he wanted us to have first refusal on it, so I had to make a decision right then. I just knew that you would want me to go ahead with it."

"Why was he even selling it?"

"Seems it belonged to someone out at Lisman who had planned to build a house on it, but due to some family problem they decided to build closer to home. The lot has even been graded, so there's very little site preparation necessary. Speed even told me about a reputable builder who specializes in small block buildings, if that's what you are sure you want." She was talking just like a contractor, but I was unaware that she had any previous building experience. Perhaps women are just born with the nest-building gene and it comes naturally.

I knew exactly how I wanted my clinic building to look. I had drawn the plans on notebook paper over and over while "studying" in veterinary school. It would be of simple concrete block construction, with the blocks stacked, not staggered, a flattopped roof, and dimensions of approximately forty feet by twenty feet. Naturally, Jan's building genes told her that a building of only eight hundred square feet was much too small and that I would not be satisfied with such a "peewee" building. But I knew what I needed and I didn't want to waste a lot of time tromping around in a big, sprawling clinic. Besides, if I needed more space I could easily add more room later. She disagreed, of course, but we had agreed that the clinic was going to be my baby and the new house she had planned would be hers. I shuddered to think what she could do once turned loose to plan an entire house!

The clinic entrance would be on the right side and would open into a large waiting room, with a counter and reception area on the left. A short hallway led to the examination room, on the left, then farther down, to the bathroom and a darkroom. On the right was the pharmacy and lab, and just beyond was the surgery. The hallway gave way to the kennel room, which was a

mirror image of the waiting room. The back door was on the left side, and I would park there, leaving the front for client and visitor parking. I had it all planned.

Mr. Speed Whitted, local wealthy businessman, hardware store owner, and exceptional dog lover, had been one of our best clients, supporters, and advisors. His pack of deer hunting dogs and nonhunting basset hound house pals was constantly in need of veterinary service, and my temporary clinic arrangement was unsuitable for some of the treatments and surgical procedures they needed. I frequently referred cases to my colleagues over in Meridian, some thirty-five miles to the west, where more modern animal hospital facilities were available. On several occasions Speed had expressed an interest in finding a way to help us build a proper animal clinic. Actually, he had offered to build a clinic building for us before we even moved to the town of Butler, but I refused his kind offer, primarily because I was uncertain whether a practice would survive there. I didn't want to be saddled with a new building and a mortgage that local business wouldn't support.

But in the past several months, numerous clients had inquired as to when the new clinic was going to be built. Even Carney Sam Jenkins, local homemade veterinarian, taxidermist, gifted seer, and trusted dirt road philosopher had been on to me about it, because he was bragging to his clients and friends about how he was "training me to take over his practice" when he retired, and how he was helping me to properly design the new first-class facility.

"Wish you'd hurry up and get that fancy building for all these here poodle dogs," he exclaimed one day at the barbershop. He was in the third chair, which was Chappell's station. Neither Chappell nor Carney Sam could hear very well, so it was cheap entertainment to watch and listen to their loud discourse. "I still got people all the time comin' up to the shop leanin' on the horn, wantin' me to give their dog a dose of somethin'. They just