

FROM DREAMS TO REALITY

By

Dr. Florian Ledermann

Yesterday was another very busy day with hoards of urban people drawn by the craving to see things that we all take for granted on the farm. Yes, it's fair time again and the great Minnesota get-together unfolds.

Last night at the Miracle of Birth Center started out fairly routine. The FFA young adults quickly cleaned, fed, and bedded the many expectant mothers and made sure all the newborns were going to be comfortable for the night. I volunteered for night floor duty which means at least one of us veterinarians gets to sleep with the animals on the floor so as to "keep watch by night" of any suspect laboring females.

Cow #2424 was due yesterday but didn't deliver. Instead she carried on most of the day entertaining the crowd with her antics. She must have been a show animal because she has those strange actions that makes you think she craves attention. She would walk up to us and then pass by so closely as to roll us along the gates with her big belly. Then turn around and gaze at us for our reaction.

I chose to lie on the air mattress on my sleeping bag very close to her pen (inches) so I could observe her calving progress as we knew she was holding off until the crowd disappeared. All the lights were off except for a few heat lamps in the sow stalls and chick incubators. When the animals settle down in the dark and the noises outside dissipate as midnight approaches and passes, it is

almost mystical in the large people-less barn. You hear the normal sounds of heavy breathing and grunts, the occasional bellow or blat, the squealing of nursing piglets, and the restlessness of the laboring sow. It is a unique experience that reminded me of childhood days on the farm during the many hours of barn time, especially in the dark of winter.

After a few nights of the night watch, your mind and senses gets tuned to recognize abnormal sounds....like serious repeated labor grunts. It jars you from your dreams and you bound to your feet in search of possible trouble....just like veterinarians are supposed to do.

I slept soundly the first hour and then somehow awoke to see #2424 just staring at me a mere foot from me against the pen gates. She wanted to be close I guess because she could have been anywhere in the huge maternity stall. An hour later I stirred and could see she had repositioned and put her butt near my face and I could smell the distinct aroma of uterine fluids. She was delivering so I watched as she easily popped out a beautiful heifer calf without an audible sound. It was like, see I can do this and I don't need all these people watching except my veterinarian. She jumped up and did the mother thing of licking and bonding.

A little later I awoke again and just peeked over the deep straw and mother and baby were both just staring at me just a couple of feet away. I thought to my self, I love cows. And you know, they really do love us humans also. I fell back to sleep with a sense of everything is wonderful about life.

This morning after checking out everything with my colleagues, I strolled down to my favorite breakfast cove just outside the dairy barn and sat drinking coffee in the crisp early morning air. The

huge draft horses were already out on the street but only a few stray early bird fairgoers in view. The rhythmic cloppety-clop of their heavy steel-shoed hooves on the concrete street was almost musical and magical. Again I thought, does it get any better than this?

But tonight seems different. We had a wonderful day of births and tremendous crowds again. The questions that any first-grade farm kid could answer were in abundance. But then there was the interaction with some curious city slicker that made you feel you were really helping people to understand that milk doesn't really come from the store. It comes from a lot of work and dedication of our dairy farmers together with it's joys and disappointments...a reflection of life itself. We are only seeing the miracle of birth here but there is sickness, disease and death also. We need to appreciate agriculture more in this country or we could loose it.

I settled into my usual spot after volunteering one last night to take floor duty. I got into my favorite snoring position so that I could wake myself up occasionally to check on the laborers (I didn't trust my senses for some reason tonight). I'm in a deep rehm sleep with wild crazy dreams. I hear the clippety-clop of the horses come and go which fits perfectly in my dream...but there is a strange rhythm now and sometimes it stops and appears close and then far off. Why is this? My subconscious mind asks. And then there is a hot moist breath in my ear and I'm tempted to say "But honey, I am so tired...it really has been a long day!" Then I realize that this breath has the force of a hurricane...so much so, that I'm startled from my dream because there is also torrential rain from this storm. But it feels more like saliva running down my cheek!

I open my eyes and there is a dark silhouette in the gigantic shape of a cow's head just inches from me towering over my body. A huge bellar is emitted as this beast quickly realizes I am alive and it scares the hibijibis out of me and her. She races off in a panic. It is #1919 on the loose in the birthing center. Some tired staff worker forgot to check her gate latch before bedtime...yah, that someone was me.

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