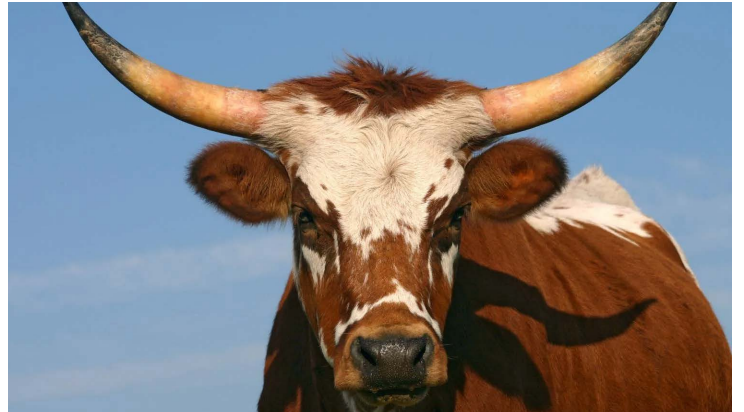




Touching Off a Stampede

September 12, 2022



In the old days of surveying, it was common practice to fill out a crew with a “warm body”—anyone who could follow directions and hold a rod would suffice. One of those guys who was assigned to my crew was a young man by the name of Chris.

Since Chris was from the populated shore town of Somerset, New Jersey, he didn’t know very much about cattle. I grew up next to my great-uncle’s farm, where the Holstein cows would graze in the pasture. I knew the difference between a bull and a cow. There weren’t any steers on that farm, but I knew that they were excitable but about as harmless as a cow.

One day Chris and I were sent to do a topographic survey nearby where a retirement village was expanding and they needed a survey of the area and a topographic map for engineering design. When we got to the site, we realized it was a pasture full of Black Angus steers. Chris immediately expressed his anxiety over going into that fenced pasture. I told him that we could walk into that area and I'd show him that the steers weren't hostile.

He kept insisting some of them were bulls. I ascertained that they were not and assured him we would not be charged. Anyone familiar with steers knows that they are a bit excitable and curious, so they followed us around and got close at times. When we moved toward them, they scampered about like puppies. Chris was still scared and protested against the idea of going into that field with the steers.

I went to the front desk at the retirement home and asked if the steers could be moved. They called the farmer and I spoke to him on the phone. He sounded a bit miffed that we were bothering him about this. I told him we were a bit worried about the cattle and he scoffed at me and said, "They're only steers, they won't hurt you." I explained that they got a little too close to comfort and he said to just wave our arms, or stomp the ground to disperse them and get them away from us. I thanked him and felt like we had our answer, so I told Chris not to worry; he had a 25-foot fiberglass rod and he could use it to poke at them and keep them away.

This process worked as we took some shots along a stream but the steers kept getting closer and crowding around Chris. He got upset and eventually yelled and poked at them but they kept coming back. Then he got really mad and swung the rod over his head while running toward them to move them completely away from his area of work. Well, that started an almost hilarious stampede.

They ran at full speed up the hill toward a small loafing shed that was there for some shelter. The funniest part was the whole herd of about 20 ran into the shed as I tried to understand how they were all fitting inside of this shed. As the last one entered the shed, the first one exited just as fast and the whole herd was coming back out at full speed! This made both of us laugh and so Chris ran at them again and started whooping to keep the whole stampede going!

As we stood there laughing, we heard a truck pulling up to the side of the fence in the adjoining hayfield. The farmer got out of the truck and began yelling at us to get over there. We ran over to him and found out he was very angry!

He started yelling at Chris for scaring his steers and then laughing at them. Then he said, “You think it’s funny to see them run around? You’d laugh if they broke through the fence and broke their necks too.” Then it was Chris’ turn to get mad and he told the farmer, “You don’t know me, you don’t know what I would do.” I pleaded for everyone to calm down. I was happy there was a fence between us and the farmer because he gripped the wire between the barbs and looked like he was trying to pull it down. Chris explained that he was scared of the cattle because he didn’t grow up around them, and I reminded the farmer I had requested that he move them to another field and then he calmed down. We all apologized to each other and in the end, I thought he was going to invite us over for dinner.

This is the type of experience that makes surveying such an interesting profession. It’s hard to explain, but it’s exciting to have a new adventure each day.

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