

The Misfit Farmer's  
How to Fail at Farming  
Pocket Guide

By Stephen Bishop

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *How to Bid on Livestock like a Pro (or Semi-Pro)*

The sale barn, where livestock is bought, sold, and sometimes bartered in the parking lot, is your local hub for agricultural activity. It's a good place to connect with other farmers—just don't yawn or scratch your head because you might accidentally buy a cow. Such faux pas are common among newcomers to a stockyard.

As a child, perhaps you longed to be a professional sale-barn bidder. Or perhaps not. But in rural culture, it's nearly as common a dream job as a cowboy, county agent, or veterinarian. Even full-grown adults, while listening to an auctioneer jabber endlessly, have been known to daydream about life as a high-profile livestock trader. Unfortunately, daydreaming is a sure sign you're an amateur buyer. Professional buyers sit stoic in the crowd, impervious to the hypnotizing effect of an auctioneer's voice, bidding with nearly imperceptible winks, head nods,

and twitches. Rumor has it, the best sale-barn buyers can blink Morse code with their eyes.

Professional buyers are rock stars of rurality. After thundering into the parking lot with a livestock trailer capable of hauling a small herd of elephants, a professional moseys over to inspect the bovines while awestruck onlookers ask for autographs on bidding cards and advice on buying. The professional obliges, scribbling a pithy line like, “Buy low. Sell high—High Bid Hal.” Hal then enters the arena fashionably late and sits proudly in his reserved seat in direct line of sight of the auctioneer. Moments later, a murmur ripples through the crowd when Hal buys his first of many cows.

Of course, we all can't be as suave as High Bid Hal, but I've studied his behavior and gleaned some helpful tips on how to resemble a professional sale-barn bidder and strike fear in your bovine buying competition. Follow these tips, and you'll resemble a competent procurer of livestock in no time.

**Do your homework:** Don't arrive at the sale barn and start buying willy-nilly. Although professionals do this, buying willy-nilly is considered an advanced technique that takes many years to master. Instead, spend time at your stockyard studying the process. Also, learn the markings. Often cows will be marked with spray paint or a sticker. Different colors represent different things. For instance, a red dot might mean “steer” or a yellow dot might mean “confirmed pregnant.” Thus, a red and yellow

dot together would mean a confirmed pregnant steer, in which case you should buy that miraculous animal.

**Show no emotion:** Don't smile at the sale barn. Don't make eye contact with humans. Such behavior is considered a sign of weakness. It's best not to attempt jokes either, unless you're the auctioneer who will likely impersonate a stand-up comic before the sale starts. Whatever you do, don't laugh at the auctioneer's jokes. The auctioneer is merely trying to loosen up the crowd to encourage bidding. But if you've done your homework, you've heard these jokes before. Auctioneers rarely come up with new material.

**Walk the catwalk:** Supermodels say, "walking ain't easy." But strolling the catwalk is an essential job function for supermodels and sale-barn bidders alike. At a stockyard, the catwalk is the elevated walkway that allows you to view animals in the pens below. If you're a sale-barn novice, practice your walk at home, especially if you're afraid of heights. Many professional sale-barn bidders prefer a mosey, though you can try a saunter or amble. Advanced sale-barn stars will often have a trademark "hitch in their gitty-up" that sets their walk apart from amateurs (If you're a British farmer, please visit the Ministry of Silly Walks to search for trademarked hitches. America has no such regulatory body, so trademarked walks here mean nothing. If you don't like Monty Python, please disregard the previous joke).

**Have your bidding card ready:** Nothing says

amateur like fumbling to find your bidding card, which contains your all-important bidder identification number. Livestock sales are fast paced. For instance, a typical cattle sale might go as follows:

“A good steer, who’ll give me a dollar fifty—fifty cents, fifty cents, fifty cents? Alright, dollar forty, looking for forty, looking for forty, looking for forty to start. That’s a good steer now. Someone start it. thirty-five cents, thirty-five, thirty-five, thirty-five, looking for thirty-five cents. THIRTY-FIVE—top right corner! Now forty, looking for forty, huhmana huhmana forty, huhmana huhmana forty. FORTY over here! Now forty-five, forty-five, forty-five, forty-five, forty-five, forty-five, looking for forty-five, looking for forty-five, looking for forty-five. Now looking for forty-two. Down low, FORTY-TWO! Now forty-three, a dollar forty-three, dollar forty-three, dollar forty-three. That’s a good steer, good steer, good steer. Forty-three, looking for forty-three, huhmana huhmana huhmana forty-three. FORTY-THREE—top right! Now forty-four, forty-four, forty-four, forty-four, forty-four, huhmana huhmana forty-four looking for forty-four. Going once, going twice, sold FORTY-THREE! Top right corner!”

Though seemingly impossible, all this verbiage is uttered and the steer is sold in five seconds total. And the process is repeated instantaneously with another cow—if, that is, the previous buyer had his or her bidding card ready. If not, the whole auction comes to a jarring halt and people glare. Whatever you do, don’t get flustered and

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flash your card upside down—you'll be laughed out of the arena. Though speed is important, it's better to draw slow and shoot for accuracy than fall victim to vicious sale barn humor.

Having read these tips, you'll soon achieve stockyard stardom. If in doubt, just remember: buy low, sell high. It's that simple.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *How to Haggle on A Farm*

If you ever hear a farmer say “I’m just a poor dirt farmer,” you’re about to be bamboozled. Don’t fall for it. It’s a pity-play farmers use when haggling. Just last week, I had a farmer come up to me lamenting his agricultural status, trying to get a free hive of bees. He should have known better than to try that line on a poor struggling beekeeper with a bad back.

“Poor dirt farmer?” I said, “You grow hydroponically.” The farmer had recently jumped on the hydroponic bandwagon and left dirt behind, buying a fancy new greenhouse. The greenhouse had heated concrete floors for his grow pots, a computer-operated drip-irrigation system, and an automated self-rising trellis.

Despite all these feats of modern technology, the farmer was still down on his luck. This isn’t unheard of. We all know farmers with combines so big they need a

plane hangar to park in who still consider themselves poor dirt farmers. Frankly, it's like your momma always said, "you can't judge a farm by its combine." The farmer with the 2021 edition of the GPS-guided soybean destroyer with tracks like an army tank and a 80-foot cutting head may be closer to the verge of bankruptcy than the little old fella with the Gleaner circa 1978. You just never can tell. The same goes for farmers with fancy greenhouses.

"Can't you just bring a bee box over here and set it inside?" the farmer asked. "I got all sorts of strange-looking cukes. I've been trying everything, even tickling the cucumber blooms, but my fingers are too fat."

With no bees to properly pollinate his high-tech indoor greenhouse, his cukes looked like crooked-neck squash, albeit green and shriveled. It's really fitting that just when a man thinks he's triumphed over Mother Nature, and can grow food without dirt, he's brought back down to earth by bees. It happens to the best of us, even beekeepers. In fact, somehow last year I managed to grow a watermelon in a clogged up gutter. Upon noticing the feat, the next day I stepped on a bee barefooted and had to stop, drop, and roll back down to earth. Thus, I wasn't entirely insensitive to the farmer's plight and said,

"Well, I'm just a poor struggling beekeeper with a bad back. I can't just be toting bee hives every ole place and not getting recompense."

"What will it take?" he said. "My fingers have been cramping for days. I'm seeing cucumber blossoms in my

sleep.”

“Well, I do like pickles,” I said, “so maybe a heaping bucket of cukes will do.”

“Alright I reckon I can agree to a bucket of cucumbers,” he said.

“Five-gallon bucket?” I asked.

“Two two-gallon buckets,” he said.

“Heaping?” I asked.

“One heaping; one level,” he said.

“Alright,” I said, “deal.”

We shook on it, and there you have it, that’s how farm haggling is done. Of course, we both thought we’d gotten the better end of the deal. But, to be honest, it was a pretty fair trade: He gave me two buckets of his worst, most misshapen cukes. I gave him my meanest hive.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *How to Achieve Pet Status on a Farm*

Raising bottle dairy steers is not for the faint of heart. As purchasable animals, they rival only goldfish in price and ability to keel over. I've seen healthy day-old Jersey calves sell for less than five dollars at the sale barn. I've never seen a day-old Jersey bring more than fifty dollars, which is top of the market and still a reasonable value, considering some goldfish can sell for hundreds of dollars per piece. I guess koi is good eating, probably best fried with hushpuppies.

Dairy breeds, however, produce a bony carcass, so most of the big time cattlemen don't want anything to do with a Holstein steer, and they wouldn't be caught dead with a puny Jersey steer on their farm. "There is more meat on a big deer," they might say. These days cattlemen just want big beefy Angus cows. This may seem rather discriminatory, but it works out in favor of some dairy

steers. Many are destined for hobby farms where they live a life of leisure and get a lot of entertainment out of watching people play veterinarian. I think it's a well-known fact among dairy steers that the way to achieve pet status on a hobby farm is to get as close to death as possible without dying and then let the farmer nurse them back to health.

We've raised a lot of bottle calves over the years. The ones we remember the most are the ones we nearly lost and somehow doctored back to the living. Oftentimes, they're a little stunted afterwards, which works to their advantage cause they last longer on the farm. My philosophy with raising dairy steers is most of the work is upfront, so even if it takes longer to feed them out, it's still worth it to recoup the time spent bottle-feeding and doctoring. We grow our own grain and run it through the old hammermill, so we don't really have a shortage of feed.

Eventually, whenever we take the calves to the sale barn, the handlers always comment on how tame the steers are. "They're just big pets," I respond.

"I bet this one weighs over a 1,000 pounds. You should of brought it to the sale months ago," a handler once said.

"Yeah, this one one nearly died on us, and my wife got kind of attached to it." (*Pro-farming tip: always blame your spouse for poor farming decisions while in the presence of other farmers; it helps build rapport*).

"I understand," said the handler, "we once kept a

bottle calf for three years—didn't think it would make it past three weeks, to be honest."

After I unload, I always walk the catwalk to look at my steers one last time. It's kind of a sentimental thing I do because I'm attached, wait, I mean my wife is so attached to them. In fact, I know she'll ask about their well-being first thing when I get home, or at least second-thing. The first question she usually asks when I return home from the sale barn is, "How much did we make?"

Like I said, my wife is real attached to them.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *How to Fix Stuff on a Farm*

It has come to my attention that one of the main responsibilities of farming is putting things back together, sometimes known colloquially as fixing stuff, which leads to the other main responsibility of farming—finding stuff to fix stuff.

Finding stuff is a satisfying pastime, best enjoyed in the company of others. There's no greater pleasure than shouting across a scrapyard, "Hey, I think I found something!" Over the years, my wife's poppaw Lowry and I have spent many pleasant hours wandering the local scrapyard in search of the perfect piece of scrap. The chance to work in outdoor environs like a well-organized junk heap with birds chirping, heavy machinery roaring, and jagged metal gleaming is what draws many people to farming. It's also what draws many to people to the doctor's office for tetanus shots.

What also draws people to farming is a love of the land, and there's nothing like landing a quarter-inch wrench from the disaster area that is my tool shed. Sometimes I forget to lock my tool shed, and I'm pretty sure that's when my wife sneaks in there to play with my wrenches and forgets to put them back in their correct place, which is why I often find my pocket wrench clanging around in the dryer. Why my wife likes to put my pocket wrench in the dryer is beyond me. To be honest, she does a lot of strange things.

Once you find the tools and materials needed to put something back in working order, then you just need to remember how you took the thing apart. Truth be told, it's very simple to fix things, so to give the repair a sporting chance at failure, it's best to reference only mental notes from taking the thing apart. Writing down the order in which the thing was disassembled is considered cheating—unless, that is, the written notes are promptly lost, in which case they become fair game for the process of fixing stuff by way of finding stuff.

The final step after reassembly is to apply duct tape, JB Weld, or bailing twine. Then you can either call your neighbor to brag about your ingenuity and successful farm repair or, more likely, ask to borrow his equipment since your thing still isn't working

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *How to Handle a Ruined Crop*

There was a time in my life when I liked to discover stuff. Hate to say it, I'd actually get excited to learn new things. But as a farmer, I've become completely anti-discovery—and for good reason. Last year, for instance, I was driving down the road, eyes straight ahead, diligently trying not to discover anything, when I noticed something shadowy in the periphery. "Good gosh," I thought, "what now?" I tried to resist, knowing that, generally speaking, shadowy things are bad, but my willpower failed me once again: I turned my head to look.

"Holy smokes," I said, "my whole field is black." If only I hadn't looked, my crop would've still been green and vigorously growing, like it had been days earlier.

Most of what's written in this guide should be taken with a big block of red mineral salt, but you can absolutely trust the following piece of farming advice: if your crop

suddenly turns black, something is wrong, bad wrong. Your first instinct might lead you to think someone dropped a napalm bomb on you're crop, but that's unlikely. Probably, it's just a wrath of God-type incident involving pestilence or disease.

The best solution for a suddenly black crop is either a stout pipe wrench to the head or bottle of hard liquor down the hatch. Either one, when applied quickly enough, can cause a bout of amnesia that erases the discovery of the ruined crop, allowing you to reawaken in the blissful state of prediscovery. Hopefully, you scribbled a warning on your arm for when you reawaken, or else you're likely to go right back and rediscover the ruined crop, which can lead to a repeating pattern of pipe wrenches to the head and a severe headache.

And hopefully said warning wasn't something specific like, "Don't check milo crop because millions of sugarcane aphids are sucking the life out of it." Discovering a statement like that scribbled on your forearm can cause shock and leave you convulsing on the floor. Thus, concerning warning notes written on your personage, it's better to be rather vague and nonchalant. For instance, a sufficient arm warning might read, "No need to check milo crop. All is well. Everything green (If by chance you do check, keep pipe wrench handy)."

*P.S. another useful bit of farming advice: If you write the warning on your forehead, remember to write backwards so you*

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*can read it in a mirror. Also, if you want to grow a great pollinator plot, plant a field of milo for grain, let sugarcane aphids infest it, and every known species of stinging insect will descend on the field to suck up the honeydew.*

## CHAPTER SIX

### *How to Procrastinate on the Farm*

It's mid- March, and there's a farmer around here who hasn't harvested his soybeans yet. Yep, some people are already itching to plant corn, and he's still got soybeans standing on the stalk. It makes my heart brim with admiration of his hard work. He's merely four months behind, but to procrastinate such an essential task as harvesting your crop, you've really got to apply yourself to other pursuits.

For instance, one Saturday morning, just to get out of cleaning out the barn gutters, I decided to put new siding on our old farmhouse. Cleaning out the barn gutters is a tedious yearly task, but putting new siding on an old farmhouse is a once-in-a-lifetime monumental task that is challenging and gratifying. After five minutes of gratification, however, I remembered I needed to feed the cows, a matter of more pressing concern than cladding my

shelter. Thus, I went off to attend to the cow's health and well-being.

On the way down to the barn, I noticed the tractor tire was flat again. I had been meaning to buy a new set of front tires for five years. I went to start the air compressor. While waiting for the pressure to build, I cranked the tractor and let it run a while since I hadn't used it much in the winter. Good gosh, the fuel gage was nearing E. Truth be told, "accidentally" running a diesel tractor out of fuel is an excellent way to occupy your time. Personally, I've never bled a fuel line in faster than two hours and once or twice I've had it take all day. But mostly, I was starting to get hungry, so I decided to drive the tractor to the gas station down the road, the one with a grill and good cheeseburger basket, to refuel the tractor and my stomach in one efficient stop.

I decided on a leisurely pace, fifth gear, since it was a March winter day and I wasn't yet starving. On my way, I stopped by a neighbor's house to ogle his new hydraulic wood splitter. Ogling another's man equipment is an excellent way to kill time. However, it can be untasteful if you linger. Thus, after a mere hour chat with the neighbor, I promptly resumed my journey to the gas station.

The grill was bustling with talk. Upon some beckoning, I joined a table of old men to hear reports of all that had been accomplished throughout the countryside that morning. Luther Snodgrass had trapped a skunk overnight and released-in the vicinity of a county

commissioner's house, with whom he was ill-pleased, without getting caught or sprayed. Wilbur Dedham had spent the morning at a scrapyards searching for the perfect pieces of scrap metal pipes to weld together for a set of homemade monkey bars for his granddaughter. He wasn't successful with his search and was generally displeased with the selection of scrap metal pipes available these days.

By the time I finished listening to such reports and got home from refueling, it was nearly mid-afternoon and a great spell of fatigue descended upon me after I fed the cows, so much so I decided to go inside and watch a basketball game just to get my energy back up. It happened to be a real nail biter that went into double overtime, and by the time it was finished it was nearly dark outside, which meant all other tasks could be put off till tomorrow. Tomorrow, being Sunday, a day of rest as declared by God, I could safely procrastinate till Monday, which was a federal holiday--President's Day or Columbus Day or some other such federally-mandated call to rest, which, as a patriotic American, I felt obligated to observe by fishing.

Fishing, I believe, is one of the best ways to procrastinate on a farm.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *How to Solve The Farm Problem*

By George! I've done it. I've solved "The Farm Problem." Well, really my wife solved it after I asked her if she had seen a hammer recently.

"Which hammer?" she asked.

"Any hammer," I said, "The red one or the blue one or the neon green one." The latter was supposed to glow in the dark in case I ever lost it at night. However, I lost it during the day.

"No, the last time I saw a hammer it was lying somewhere," she advised.

I went to check all the usual places a pounding implement might lay, hang, or drop on my farm, but after an extensive search, I chalked up another casualty to the Bermuda triangle for hammers, tape measures, and quarter-inch wrenches that centers over our twenty acres.

The Farm Problem, you'll remember, is the fact that

farmers can't afford to farm. This problem has persisted for eons; in fact, some economists speculate it dates back to when the first nomads gave up hunting and gathering and decided to feed the world. And yet, my wife quickly solved it when I returned home with a new orange hammer from the hardware megastore. (Interestingly, I can't remember the location of a single hammer on my own farm, but I've memorized the aisle and bin number for all tools at the hardware store). Upon my arrival home with a new hammer, she said, "We'd have a lot more money if you'd stop buying the same tools over and over again."

"Oh contraire," I replied. "You're forgetting opportunity costs. By buying a new hammer, I save time searching for an old one—and time is money."

"Don't flatter yourself," she said, "I believe there's an inverse relationship between the time you spend trying to farm and the direction of our bank account."

"Hmpph," I said, "Just think about all that money we made selling homegrown tomatoes on the roadside stand. We even had a few Sacagawea coins in the honor box. Those'll be worth millions one day."

"What about that old rusty hammer-mill thing you bought," she asked, "can't you just make hammers in it?"

"No, absolutely not. A hammer mill does not make hammers. It grinds grain to smithereens so animals can get the full nutritional value of my homegrown oats, barley, and corn blend."

"They should call it a grain mill then, not a hammer

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mill," she said, "Furthermore, you should just put your tools in their proper place—that would solve the whole farm problem."

And there you have it. Farm problem solved.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *How to be a Virtuous Farmer*

Nobody ever said an ill word against Hal Stone, at least initially. Hal was just a meager produce farmer trying to survive. Of course, the whole community knew he was slinging pea stone with his fertilizer spreader to mimic the damage of a hail storm. What really led to the downfall of Hal's reputation in the farming community was his honesty. Once caught by the insurance adjuster, Hal spilled the beans on all the other farmers doing the same, at which point everybody realized Hal was the worst kind of farmer, an honest one.

Though once considered a virtue in some circles, honesty was long ago abandoned by farmers as a vestige from nomadic days. Certainly, honesty isn't conducive to proper agricultural exaggeration. Formerly, agricultural exaggeration was taught through rote memorization of tables. Take, for instance, a farmer who grew eighty

bushels of corn per acre. He could simply remember his corn exaggeration table and safely inflate the number to ninety-five bushels per acre in casual conversation, with no worry of a double-take. The other participants in the conversation were likely also educated in exaggeration and knew to mentally deflate the number back to eighty bushels, with no need to openly acknowledge the embellishment. Indeed, everybody understood the etiquette of conversational exaggeration. Of course, farmers had to memorize many exaggeration tables—for farm size, head of cattle, rain gauge readings, tractor horsepower, and hay bales put up, just to name a few. Occasionally careless errors occurred when a farmer mixed up tables and uttered something like “I put up six inches of rain in the barn yesterday.” Now, however, with the lack of emphasis on learning tables, errors have greatly increased. Modern-day apps and exaggeration calculators were created to prevent such errors, but have also had the unintended consequence of increasing pressure on farmers. In fact, this pressure is often noticeable in the form of a furrowed brow and face beaded with sweat. This condition usually appears in the middle of a conversation, as a farmer, in need of a proper exaggeration rate, attempts to work a smartphone.

Though honesty is not essential, other virtues are still required to farm, including patience, perseverance, resourcefulness, and a good work ethic. Though merely lacking in most of these, I was completely deficient in the

most important virtue, a big bank account, which meant I was a wretched farmer at best. Still, I tried to increase my moral capacity to farm by thoughtfully bribing the farm loan agent. Unfortunately, when I saw the pile of watermelons and cantaloupes on the floor behind the loan agent's desk, I knew immediately I had miscalculated by relying on old agricultural bribe tables. Apparently, the going bribe rate for a new tractor loan had increased with inflation and was now substantially more than a brown bag of homegrown tomatoes.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *How to Fail at Farming*

“Do you spray?” the first woman asked and seemingly every one thereafter. To be honest, I didn’t have much experience at that point in my life with women asking about my spraying habits. So I just answered, “Yes,” which seemed to be a complete turn-off to many potential buyers. I was selling organic strawberries, or at least trying to. And I hadn’t sprayed nasty synthetic chemicals, just pleasant organic chemicals like copper and BT, a natural bacteria (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) that causes caterpillars stomachs to implode. I tried to explain as much to my potential customers, but most of them started impersonating Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*.

“You sprayed them with a bacteria?” they asked.

“Yeah, it’s all organic,” I assured.

“Ugh, *golum! golum!* Let me keep looking,” they would say. “I might be back.”

They always forgot to come back. Mostly, they wandered over to another booth, where a conventional farmer in a cowboy hat was also selling strawberries. In response to the spray question, that farmer just smiled and said, "Yes, mam. We just sprinkle a little Sevin dust. It's safer than sugar on your cornflakes." Strangely, they smiled back at the farmer, opened their pocketbooks, and handed over cash to him. Apparently, from afar I was witnessing the mysterious transaction of selling, in which people willingly relinquish money for an item of perceived value.

"Why are they buying from him?" I asked Natalie who had stopped by the farmer's market to visit me. To make me feel better, she said the conventional farmer looked like the Marlboro man and that the slow sales likely had nothing to do with my salesmanship strategy, just my looks. Still, it didn't make sense. I was being honest, telling the truth, being transparent. My strawberries were organic. I was supposed to sell out in an hour and be home by 9 AM. The evening before, I had spent hours picking gallons of strawberries. That morning I had gotten up early and headed to the farmer's market to sell wholesome berries to the masses and attempt standing upright again. Instead, after spending all morning at the market, I actually took home several gallons, unsold.

That wasn't the plan. My whole future was in organic strawberries. That night, after my dismal performance at the market, I was so distraught that I

dreamed I was trying to sell Natalie a gallon of strawberries (to which she responded, "Do you spray?").

Selling these organic strawberries was a big deal; I had a lot to prove. Lowry had allowed me to plant a meager quarter-acre strawberry patch to start my organic farming empire, though he was skeptical of the whole organic farming routine. Anytime, I brought up my organic farming ideas, he started to get visibly twitchy. Personally, he was a big believer in non-organic materials, specifically Sevin dust, 10-10-10, and DDT--yes, DDT. As a teenager, he used to dust cotton for .15 cents an acre using a mule-drawn cotton duster, a cloud of DDT trailing behind him. He had fond memories of dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane.

Me: (*moseying over to Lowry*) I'd like to try growing organic strawberries.

Lowry: (*lip twitching a little*) You cain't grow nothing organically. It'll get up eat up with bugs. I tell ya, nothing used to work as good as ole DDT. I used to dust the whole neighborhood's cotton for 15 cent an acre. I'd git to the end of the row and turn right back through the cloud of dust. It did a job on the bo' weevil, and I'm still here, no worse the wear. I probably breathed in more DDT than anybody around."

Me: "Yeah, but it nearly caused bald eagles to go extinct."

Lowry: (*still twitching*) "Extinct?! In 1950, the bo' weevil nearly caused cotton farmers to go extinct. You ain't

never seen it that bad.”

Me: “But nowadays people want organic food. You can make more money on it.” (*I figured if I couldn't appeal to Lowry's environmental sensibilities, I could at least appeal to his reverence of the almighty dollar*).

Lowry: “Alright, I reckon you can try a strawberry patch.”

Thus, if my organic strawberries didn't sell, my assertion that people wanted organic food, that they would pay high-dollar for it, would be unfounded. The very foundation for my dream of living the farm life off of a few acres of organic produce would be shaken to its very core. From Thoreau to Small Farm Entrepreneurship to experimenting with chickens, I had spent much time cultivating this dream. In fact, before finding a full-time job at the agriculture office, I had been volunteering on an organic farm one-day a week. I was a WWOOFer, which stands for Willing Worker on an Organic Farm. Now a lot of people have had horror stories about WWOOFing, in which they sign up to work on an organic farm to gain farming experience and then realize their farming mentor is cuckoo for cocoa puffs. But the farm I volunteered on was legit (I mean it wasn't a cult or anything) and the owners, a young husband and wife combo, were definitely true believers in organic production and good at it. Plus, they weren't militant big ag bashers either. They were just idealistic humanities majors, like me, who had jumped out

on a limb and started a farm. And as of this writing, they are still farming full-time, organically and against all odds. May their kind prosper and number increase.

In my case, as exemplified by my attempt at strawberries, I was finding growing organic produce wasn't as hard as selling it. Strawberries were a ticking time bomb. If not sold quickly, they would implode to mush. Eventually, I found another organic family at the farmer's market who made jams; if they would help me pick my strawberries during the week, then I would sell them the berries at a wholesale price. By the time my last strawberries were picked, I had barely broke even—if I didn't account for time.

Still, I didn't give up.

After my strawberry debacle, I convinced Lowry and myself, under pain of twitching, that organic tomatoes were my future. Tomatoes had a more forgiving shelf life, I argued, plus they could be picked early and allowed to ripen, requiring only two pickings per week instead of three or four with strawberries. Twice a week in July, I was picking five-hundred tomato plants that I had started and babied under a grow light in our only closet, raised to adolescents under a cold frame, planted in biodegradable plastic, and watched grow into good, productive members of the garden.

Instead of selling at the farmers' market, I converted an old trailer into something that resembled a roadside

stand or paddywagon. Every morning I hauled the stand into the front yard with the tractor, then piled up fresh tomatoes, and departed for work. A coffee can was the self-serve cash register, which Lowry would walk over and check periodically throughout the day.

While doing so, Lowry began noticing pecked tomatoes. He did reconnaissance and discovered a rogue mockingbird was alighting on the stand and attacking tomatoes indiscriminately. Whenever the scoundrel landed, Lowry would yell, wave his hands, and run maniacally toward the mockingbird. One passing car saw this routine and felt compelled to help scare the bird by swerving and honking. Eventually, the wise mockingbird only began alighting to ruin tomatoes whenever Lowry was absent. He frequently sat on a powerline watching for his opportunity, singing something that sounded a lot like Lowry yelling.

After the mockingbird's taunting, Lowry said this situation called for a stakeout. He decided to sit all day in a lawn chair beside the tomato stand—with a bb gun across his lap. "That mockingbird's really ruining sales," he proclaimed, "people aren't stopping because of all the holes in the tomatoes." I agreed, but wasn't sure if he meant the holes from the mockingbird or bbs.

Furthermore, after several days of guarding the stand, Lowry still hadn't defeated his nemesis. One day, I came home from work to find him sleeping in the lawn chair, now with a 12 gauge. Neighbors were starting to show

concern.

One neighbor asked, "Are you having problems with people stealing from the honor stand? Is that why Lowry is guarding it?"

"No, a mockingbird is pecking the tomatoes," I explained.

The next day I came home to find that neighbor, in full camouflage, and Lowry both guarding the tomato stand with shotguns. Yet to dispatch the mockingbird, they had killed tomato sales, stone dead.

Or, at least, that's what I told myself. Likely, my price had something to do with slow sales. I thought my organic tomatoes deserved \$2 per pound. However, most rural folks were acutely aware that local grocery stores were selling tomatoes for \$1.49 per pound, a fifty-one cent savings per pound over my red globes. I was beginning to feel like people didn't value my wholesome organic produce as much as I did.

Still, I didn't give up.

After my strawberry debacle, I convinced Lowry and myself, under pain of twitching, that organic collards, yes, collards were my future. In eastern North Carolina, where I grew up, collards were a hot commodity around Thanksgiving and New Year's. In my hometown, a man sold collards from his truck at a gas station and did quite the business. He sold collards in bundles, and customers examined each leaf as if at an old-timey tobacco auction

before making their choice. Nobody sold collards at our local market in Western North Carolina, so it was a prime opportunity to establish a niche.

I set out 1,000 collard transplants, sacrificed about a quarter of them to cabbage loopers (Loopers could inflict a lot of damage before Bt caused their stomachs imploded), and picked the good leaves and bundled them on a Friday night. The next morning, at the farmers' market, I set up my booth and waited to rake in the cash. However, customers hardly looked at my collards, much less examined them. I had collards bundled neatly and piled high on the table. Supposedly, the saying is "pile them high and watch 'em fly" as abundant piles of produce draw people's attention. But my collards sat—except for the ones that literally flew, parachuting down due to periodic wind gusts. In my excitement preparing for market on that cold and windy fall morning, I forgot my coat. By mid-morning, my disappointment must have been apparent even through my shivers. One old lady, pity on her face, came over to examine my offerings.

"Tough day?" she said.

"Yeah,"

"Well, your collards look really nice. Do you spray?" she said.

"Yes, mam, I spray Bt."

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's about like Sevin dust. It keeps the caterpillars off them," I said.

“Well, if it’s as safe as Sevin dust, then that’s alright,” she said.

“Yes, mam, it’s safe.”

“Alright, I’ll buy two bundles.”

In the history of farming, I’m sure there’s been many unscrupulous characters who have sold regular conventional produce under the auspices of organic to make a sale or get a higher price. But I may be the only one who has tried it the other way round. By the days’ end, I was passing off organic produce as Sevin-dust sprinkled, or its equivalent, just to make a sale. It was too complicated to explain what Bt was. Sevin had name recognition and the reputation as a safe product. For generations, people had dusted their dogs and cats in it to help with ticks. If it was safe enough for their pets, it was safe enough for their produce.

Overall, that Saturday, I made \$45 and paid a \$15 booth fee. It took me two hours to pick and bundle collards after work on the Friday night before and six hours of work on the day of the market. It only took a few minutes to give away perfectly good collards to neighbors when I returned home. Lowry mentioned, “We never ate many collards around here growing up—mostly turnip greens.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that earlier?” I asked.

“A w, you wouldn’t have listened anyway,” he said. “You were too caught up in all that organic stuff.” To Lowry, organic farming was mostly hogwash. To Lowry

and many rural folks, the word *organic* carried connotations of hippies and liberals, not safe and wholesome. Sevin, on the other hand, was safe, wholesome, and as American as apple pie.

Eventually, Lowry would encourage us to plant oats and milo, to grind our own feed for cows, pigs, and chickens, to more or less recreate the self-sufficient farm of his youth, which was closer, minus the cotton and DDT, to the organic ideal than he realized. So long as we didn't use that word, we were alright.

There's lot of ways to fail at farming, as evidenced above, but there's only two ways to truly fail, and that's to quit or die in a horrible farming accident. Full disclosure, over the years, I've come close to doing both. Yet something keeps drawing me back, year after year, to farming. I'm starting to think, as the old timers say, I've got "farming in my blood." To be honest, my doctor has suspects I've got the incorrigible condition in my blood, too, which is the whole reason for the regimen of tetanus shots.

## CHAPTER TEN

### *The End*

To quote the great humor writer Patrick McManus,  
“Never write a list of anything that consists of ten items.  
Invariably you will run out of steam at item nine.”