



# Angus Stakes

► by *Shauna Rose Hermel*, editor

## Caretakers of the herd

*One of the things I treasure about growing up on the farm is the relationship it allowed me to build with the animals. Whether working with show heifers (while on the showstring and years later), the sows and baby pigs, dogs, horses, or the wildlife we once in a while had a chance to come into close contact, I loved getting to know their personalities, thought processes and behaviors — natural and learned.*

### Amazing creatures

One's appreciation for these old cows grows watching them year after year adapt to the environment and take care of their calves through drought or blizzard, lush grass or slim pickings. They are amazing animals.

Watching their herd behaviors and their individual behaviors is fascinating. For instance, if you have a water source that allows it, the herd will come to water together, but if the water supply is limited by a slow well, they will come to water one by one in a sequence that often stays the same day after day and is timed like clockwork.

Just as fascinating are the cliques that form within a herd. Like teenagers in high school, cows will hang out with their buddies.

Cows are just as unique in their behavior as humans when they are about to give birth and through those first few weeks of their calf's/child's life. Some are dotting, while some are more independent. Some are private and some like a nursemaid. Proximity of predators and the extensiveness of the environment make a huge difference in a cow's attitude and her actions.

To a large extent, your success as a

cattleman depends on being able to read what those cows are telling you so you can adjust your management to meet your herd's needs.

It's not hard to tell when a cow is dissatisfied. She tells you. Not in English like in a Walt Disney movie, but she tells you just the same — in her body posture, her movement, her vocalizations, her eating patterns.

Being able to understand this behavior isn't something you're born with or get by watching a video or a documentary on television (even a good one). It takes time watching and trying to understand.

Maybe that's why agriculture is more of a lifestyle than a career. It takes a love of animals to commit a lifetime to their care.

### Who decides?

I guess that's why it is a little hard for me to swallow when a member of an animal rights group who has never committed the time to understanding an animal's actual needs wants to set rules for how livestock producers should raise their livestock.

I understand why the commercials

featuring sad little faces of puppies and kittens pull at viewers' heart strings. I also understand that without knowing the context of the image, we really don't know much about it. Maverick, our 15-year-old American Eskimo, gets that look every time we take him to our veterinarian for a checkup. That forlorn face, while moving, is not an indication of abuse — in fact, quite the opposite. It reminds you of a 5-year-old in a dentist's chair, doesn't it?

To protect the welfare of our herds, it is imperative our legislators understand that for livestock to receive the best care, those who understand their care should be making the decisions — not someone who sympathizes with a picture but who has no context. Good intentions do not equal knowledgeable care.

### Our obligation

When you make a living tending livestock, you do owe them a commitment to their care and well-being. That means taking every opportunity to learn how to understand and better meet their needs. If you're truly a cattleman, you never want to stop learning.

One of the organizations I admire most is the Beef Cattle Institute (BCI) at Kansas State University. It takes into consideration that, as livestock producers, we need to constantly learn how we can take better care of our stock, we need to set the bar of what care should be provided, and we need to communicate that to the public at large. BCI hosts several events and training modules that I hope you will take time to investigate. Learn more at <http://beefcattleinstitute.org> or visit BCI's Facebook page at <http://on.fb.me/Q1EZ6w>.

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