

"Going after the cows" was one of our jobs when we were children. My sister and I often went together, and it was sometimes a fair distance and a bit of looking before we found the cattle. Our dad milked a dozen or so shorthorn cows those days--reds and roans, mostly. After evening milking the cows were often kept in a lot close to the barn, so we didn't usually have to search for them when it was time to do morning chores. But, in late afternoon, we might wander from the Speicher Hill to the Speicher Woods, around the Apple Tree Pond, and through the east pasture before we located the herd.

So, while we walked, we often devised various activities to amuse ourselves on the hike. Our mother had grown up with eight brothers, and she knew several tricks we used on each other and anyone else who was gullible enough to do what we suggested.

Timothy grass has a nice fuzzy top and a slim stem that can be pulled from the bottom portion of the plant. When timothy is newly headed out, the end of the stalk is very tender and tasty. We nibbled on them while we walked. But, timothy has another less positive use, too. Try this. Take two timothy stems and ask someone else to put them in his or her mouth, fuzzy end of one to the left and the other one to the right. This brings the stem ends outside the mouth on opposite sides from the fuzzy tops. If one pulls on both smooth ends--drawing them away from the mouth, the "lucky" volunteer gets a mouth full of timothy fuzz. Our mother taught us that.

She also showed us how, if we pulled the purple flower from a big bull thistle and chewed it, we could spit brown "tobacco juice." We did that, too, sometimes having contests for distance spitting.

Our main "game," though, was, I believe, of our own invention. We took turns leading each other. The person who was being led closed her eyes and depended on the leader to guide her. Of course, the leader had many interesting places to investigate. The number one choice, if it were available without going too far astray, was to lead the victim through a nice, fresh patty of cow manure. Thistles, ditches, stones, willow brush--all proved to be worthy goals. We followed willingly through such obstacles for only one reason--we knew that the next time the leader

would be the victim.

For a couple of years, I walked out to get the cows, but I rode home. No, there was not a pony with the cattle. Instead, there was Chub, a red steer I could ride. I don't remember how this started, but he carried me willingly, though he did dump me in the creek at least once.

The boggy place around the Apple Tree Pond was also habitat for peppermint, another edible of the area. And there were always clover blossoms to sample, wild strawberries in season, and in the Speicher Woods, a couple of gooseberry bushes. We sucked on basswood flowers, ate violets in the spring, and tasted sorrel and elder flowers.

I guess that going after the cows was primarily a time of learning about and appreciating the gifts of Mother Nature. We saw snakes and turtles, rabbits and birds, ate what we could find, looked at trees, smelled flowers, felt the textures of grasses, plants, and soil, and looked at the sky and the water. Most of the shorthorn cattle we have these days don't come to the barn for milking morning and night. Their calves do that job. But, when we check on them every few days, I still notice Nature in that same way. We have not reintroduced leading each other through cow manure, though.