

Years ago, long before I was born, my father sometimes showed steers at the West Michigan Fat Stock Show in Grand Rapids. One year, his Shorthorn steer won the reserve champion prize. I am not sure which one it was. We have pictures of a white steer, and I understand that he also raised a red calf for the show. But, the most interesting picture of that pastime is of a roan Shorthorn calf held by my cousin, Rex.

I had two cousins who grew up here with my grandparents. They were raised pretty much like younger brothers of my father and his siblings. Both boys lost their mothers when they were very small. Ross was just two when his mother died of something that at the time was called “pernicious anemia,” perhaps leukemia today. Rex’s mother died when he was three in the influenza epidemic after World War I. Since these cousins were so much older than the rest of us, they seemed always more like uncles than cousins, and we treated them as such.

Rex, when he was little, apparently spent a lot of time with my dad. And, when at least one of the steers was displayed at the stock show, Rex showed him. Dad always said that the judges, seeing this small boy in the hightop boots leading the big steer, probably were more generous with their assessment of the animal than they would have been if Dad had shown it himself.

The picture that was in an old album shows one of the steers long before it was ready for the show. But, it is very interesting to look at the little boy. I remember hearing that Rex was quite proud of his hightops. Though, it seems from this picture that at this time, they had already had a lot of wear. His sweater and shirt didn’t quite stay put, and his belt was haphazardly fastened. Rex obviously had a haircut that Grandma or someone else at home had done. But, the smile on his face also shows that he was pretty happy to be part of this steer training regimen.

I look at this picture sometimes, and of others of Ross, and think how lucky these two boys were to have a family of grandparents, aunts, and uncles to raise them. Not all children who lose parents are so lucky.

