

Fences are facts of farm life that are seldom far from our minds. Whether they are intended to keep animals out of a particular area or confined to a specific plot, they perform a vital service on most farms. Coe Creek is no exception.

The first fences in this part of the world were either split rail constructions or stump fences. One can still see vestiges of those stump barriers in some places.

But, the fences I remember as being the main source of animal control were made of woven wire and/or barbed wire. For cattle, barbed wire worked fine as long as it was kept tight and was more than just a strand or two. Anyone who has caught an arm or leg in a barbed wire fence knows how it can rip the skin. It was a deterrent to cows that would have liked access to the oat or cornfield.

For sheep, though, barbed wire wasn't very effective. The wool caught in the barbs, soon cushioning their sharp points and allowing animals to make an escape route—or, more likely, a way in to an area that looked more appealing, that old “the grass is greener on the other side of the fence” theory.

Woven wire was the fence of choice for sheep. And, it worked very well. We still build woven wire fences where we want permanent barriers, though not along the road. Snowplows have a way of throwing drifts far enough to cover fences and eventually damage or collapse them in a snow winter.

In the 1950s, my dad bought the first electric fence energizer. Fences for cattle became much easier to build and more effective—most of the time. The first electric fences I remember consisted of one smooth wire that was powered and one barbed wire. The barbed wire was the lower one, and it was stapled to the wooden posts. The upper wire was smooth and fastened to the fence posts with white porcelain insulators.

This fencer wasn't very strong, but as long as it was not “shorted out” by vegetation, a broken wire, or some other defect, it kept cattle confined. As kids, we “tested” the fence with blades of grass. If there was no hindrance to the power, it could give the tester a good jolt, but nothing that was scary as long as we knew what was coming. Sometimes, a line of us would hold hands as the person closest to the fence placed the grass on the wire. We all got the shock, and it was a popular treatment for visiting city cousins who did not know what to expect.

When the fence was not working, though, the cattle seemed to sense it, and we were sometimes forced to herd cows to keep them out of the oat field while our father searched for the problem with the fence.

Later, fencers became more effective, and we came to depend entirely on energized wires to control cattle.

With sheep, woven wire was the only method that worked until the advent of high tensile wire and high voltage, low amperage energizers. With enough lines of wire, it was possible to keep sheep in a pasture with smooth wires. We have still some of that fence in use.

But, the real technological advance that made sheep control a lot easier and much more secure was the invention of the portable electric netting. Working like the old woven wire fences, it did not have open spaces large enough for a sheep to crawl or walk through. And, if she tried, she would get a shock that would change the ovine mind in a hurry.

There are a lot of advantages to this fencing. It is truly portable, and one person can easily walk across the field with a bundle under each arm. Each section of netting is 164 feet long, and the sections can be tied together quickly. The “fence posts” are spiked stakes that can be pushed easily into the ground. It takes probably ten minutes to set up one section of fencing. And, when the sheep are moved to another area, the fence can be quickly and easily taken up and moved, as well.

We use the electric netting for other purposes, too. We often make “night paddocks” to keep the sheep in a small area over night in order to concentrate their fertilizing in a particular area. The night paddocks also aid in predator control.

And, then, there is the garden. We have a high fence around the vegetable patch that keeps deer and usually rabbits away. But, when the sweet corn is nearly ready, a day or so away from prime, the raccoons usually decide to have their share—and that usually amounts to nearly 100 per cent of the almost ready to eat corn. But, they don't like to get their little noses and paws on that electric netting, so it has become the most effective way we know to keep some sweet corn for ourselves. We just borrow a few sections of sheep fence for a couple of weeks.

Although the methods of fencing for livestock control have changed and expanded over the decades, the basic principle still

rules. We want to keep livestock off the roads, confined to our own property, out of the garden, in the pastures, out of the hayfields, and out of trouble. I still have the most fondness for a good woven wire fence, but the electric netting has made life easier for both us and the sheep flock.