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Calf Note #79 – A Story about Pepe

Science, technology, business and profits. These are the buzzwords of modern animal agriculture. If we can't be profitable in our business, then we should think about doing something else. We spend more and more time poring over balance sheets, computer printouts and indicators of our overall profitability that we sometimes lose sight of one of the most important reasons we work with animals in the first place. This was brought home to me a couple of years ago at a dairy in California and I relearned a very important message, thanks to a real gentlemen who cared.

I'll call him Pepe. He's an older Mexican gentlemen, probably in his late '50's with gray hair and a little bit of a beard. He knows calves. You see, Pepe has worked on this particular dairy for more than 15 years. And during those 15 years, the dairy has produced more than 200,000 calves. Pepe works 12 hour shifts, six days a week, so he's see a lot of them born and he knows more about their care than most anyone.

I first met Pepe several years ago during a trip to the dairy while traveling with a salesman from APC. Pepe didn't say anything to us. He doesn't speak more than a couple of words of English, and my Spanish is too poor to allow us to really communicate. But he had a way with calves. Quiet, and careful, yet purposeful. Pepe didn't waste any movement and went about his business of caring for the calves with an efficiency that only comes with years of practice. He was so good that you really didn't know he was there. Everything just got done.

At the beginning of 2000, I again had the chance to visit the dairy. I brought a group of Iowa State University students with me from Ames and we spent about five days at the dairy doing some research. Our shifts coincided with those of the workers – which were 12 hours per day. My first few shifts were with Pepe. Although we couldn't talk because of our language differences, it quickly became clear that Pepe truly and deeply cared for the calves in his charge. When a calf was born, it was quickly taken to the processing area, dried, treated with iodine and then put into an elevated metal stall fitted with a heat lamp. Pepe's job was to process the calves, feed each of them one gallon colostrum (which was checked with a colostrometer), and keep them warm and dry. Pepe performed all of these duties with little difficulty, even leaving from time to time to collect, test and retrieve colostrum from the milking parlor for later feedings.

The place was always spotless. When he had a free moment, Pepe – who knew that bacteria and viruses were the enemy – was constantly cleaning, rinsing and washing down. He wasn't going to lose one of his babies. One of his 100,000 babies! Pepe always checked the calves, fed them if they were hungry, checked the heat lamps – calves should never be too hot and never too cold. Raise the lamp, or lower the lamp. Add another lamp. Whatever it took to keep the calves comfortable. At the end of the shift, each calf was checked before Pepe left. Was it OK? Clean, dry and was its stomach full? If so, Pepe was happy. Today, a dozen more new lives brought into this world. And because of Pepe, they'd have a very good chance of survival.

However, the event I want to describe was the birth of a bull calf in the early afternoon during the third day of our visit. This poor calf was terribly malformed. While it was alive at birth, it certainly wouldn't be for very long. The calf had a tremendous hernia at its umbilical cord. In addition, the calf had a fifth leg. It was small, undeveloped and non-functional, but it was clearly a leg, attached immediately to the right of the calf's tail. The leg hung lifeless like a second tail (the calf had a normally formed tail in addition to the leg) and it didn't appear to have either nervous or muscular control. The cow was also in pretty tough shape. An old cow, she had been around a while, but she quickly came down with milk fever and was unable to stand.

Most of us had never seen anything like this, so the decision was made to contact the farm manager to determine what to do. It was quite likely that the calf wouldn't live long, and the most humane thing to do would be to put the poor calf out of its misery. However, this decision had to be made by the manager, who wouldn't be back at the farm for at least a couple of hours.

The most efficient course of action would be to put the calf in a pen and leave it alone until the manager returned from town. There were other, more important things that needed to be done on the farm. And, since there were calves being born all the time (some days more than 30 calves born), there was certainly plenty to do. Calves that needed pulling. Floors that needed washing. Cows that could be pushed up in the milking parlor. But Pepe wouldn't have any of it. He tended to the five-legged calf. It's hernia was carefully wrapped with cloth. It was ever so carefully placed into a pen with a heat lamp and it rested on burlap sacks. It couldn't stand to suckle colostrum and really wasn't strong enough to suckle much anyway. It didn't matter to Pepe. He crawled into the pen with the calf and gently encouraged it, talked to it, stroked it and worked with it. Pepe used the magic he learned over his many years of feeding calves to get this calf to drink. And it did. Slowly at first, but then more aggressively and heartily, until it finished the entire amount that Pepe had offered. It took about 40 minutes for the calf to drink – with Pepe crouched over him the whole time. As the calf finally emptied the bottle, Pepe slowly and painfully stood up. He slowly stretched his back, looked up to the ceiling, took a deep breath, and said quietly and not to anyone in particular “bueno”. He had accomplished his task. He had worked his magic. The calf's life, as short as it would be, would be one of contentment. Pepe had done his job. With a slow step out of the pen, Pepe walked out of the barn to work out the kinks in his back and to fetch some more calves that had just been born. It was back to work for Pepe.

My students and I were astounded. We'd been in the calf barn during the delivery and birth and watched the events unfold. We also had things to do. Our research project had to be managed – calves had to be processed, colostrum collected, and samples of blood and colostrum collected, processed and stored. But we couldn't stop watching Pepe and “his” calf. I have worked with calves as a researcher and a scientist for over 20 years, but I had never seen anything like that. It was a clear reminder of why we care for animals. This gentleman took time out of his very busy day to look after an animal that would shortly die. There was nothing about business, profits or efficiency here. Pepe loved his animals. Even after 15 years and thousand upon thousands of calves, he still cared about each and every one of them. It would be very easy to become callused to events so long and so many. But Pepe was not. He still cared.

The farm manager arrived about two hours later. We all gathered around the pen to discuss the situation with the farm manager as soon as he walked into the barn. Everyone wanted to see the five legged calf. Was it still alive? Would the leg move? Was the hernia treatable? Unfortunately,

however, the calf had died a few minutes earlier. Lou, the farm manager, asked if the calf had been fed. Pepe quietly nodded. With a knowing eye, Lou smiled at Pepe and said “Good. Thanks.” And he left to more urgent business. There was a farm to run. Money to make. Expenses to reduce.

Several of my students commented later about the calf. A couple didn’t understand what Pepe was doing or why he was spending so much of his time with the “five legged calf”. It was going to die soon enough anyway, right? Was he just interested in playing with this “attraction”? Didn’t he have better things to do? But other students saw what happened and understood. A couple of them shook Pepe’s hand as we left to go back to Iowa. I don’t know if he understood why these young kids from out of state were so intent on thanking him. After all, he was just doing his job.

I doubt that Pepe will ever read this or understand the impact he had on the young people that watched him that day. But he taught all of us an important lesson. We got into the business of animal agriculture for the animals. It IS necessary to be efficient and profitable. Without profit, our business can’t continue. But as we race around our busy lives, let’s not forget that we are responsible for the lives of the animals we raise. We do this job because we love it. Thanks, Pepe, for that reminder.

Written by Dr. Jim Quigley (30 December, 2001).
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