

## **BeefTalk 513: A Herd of Cows Is a Group of Individuals**

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Animals are individuals. A group of animals is a commingled set of individuals. At no time do the individual animals actually become a component of a group. That is a fundamental principle that those who engage in animal husbandry come to understand.

This point is very important. While care may be applied to the group to accommodate the individuals, the treatment of the group is the only means to access individual animals.

When the individual is very difficult to locate and care for within the group, group care becomes the method of care for the individual. This is a complicated concept because as the industry expands the group, commonly called a herd or flock, the default can become the herd or flock. Individual animals become a variable or data point within daily managerial routines.

In many respects, the beef industry can become trapped between caring for the group and caring for the individual. Obviously, least-cost care attempts to place value on groups versus individuals and leads to discussions of percentage of morbidity and mortality.

Individual animal care still is the underlying principle to group economics. Unfortunately the principle can be lost in the daily shuffle. Producers and those who work with animals need to remind themselves that individual care is the key.

Last week, a phone call from my brother reminded me of how much an industry can change. He said a tornado had hit the barn. The direct hit may have helped the tornado skip over the shop and house, but the barn was destroyed.

At such moments, one reflects and recalls the importance of the old barn. Those reflections generate a pattern of change that is sometimes good and sometimes bad. I can remember Dad noting how the neighbors walked 100 miles to bring back a cow.

At the turn of the 20th century, there was no large-scale production. Every cow, as well as everything else, was critical to survival. The loss of a cow meant failure, not reduced income. Individual care was the norm.

Tall, hip-roofed barns allowed for the maximum individual care of the animals needed to survive. Winter was not easy, nor was survival assured.

The layout of our barn was not that much different than others. As one entered, there was a small grain bin and stanchions for 12 cows. A space was left open so three additional stanchions could be added in the future.

A manure gutter behind the 12 cows allowed for daily cleaning. At the end of the 12 stanchions was a walkway to allow access to the front of the cows.

The cows were pitched hay through a hole in the hay mow. On the other side of the walk were two pens for loose cattle that also could be fed along with the cows.

The loose cattle would be two or three replacement heifers and possibly a butcher steer. The other side of the barn held two calf pens for the younger calves and allowed for pail feeding if needed.

Right after the calf pens were the horse stalls that were big enough for a team and a riding horse. A large grain bin was in the northwest corner, and the barn had additional space for the bull and a couple of miscellaneous cattle.

As time went on, the back of the barn was the first to experience the conversion from individual penning to grouping. About one-third of the barn was converted to a large pen, but the stanchions, horse stalls and calf pens remained.

The cows were maintained in stanchions until pole barns started to be introduced. At that point, cattle were managed more as a herd. Much less individual attention was given to an individual cow, which started the current practice of cattle production.

While it is only memory, I never will forget the nightly routine of placing cows in stanchions one by one, individual by individual. Every cow had a name. All the animals were accounted for every day.

Times have changed and so has the barn, but the cows have not. They still are individuals.

May you find all your ear tags.

Your comments are always welcome at <http://www.BeefTalk.com>.

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