

Safety Watch: Broadcaster shares run-in with steer that broke her hand

By Stephanie Leonard Mar 9, 2019



Susan Littlefield of Surprise, Neb., shared her safety story with Telling the Story Project. Her Australian shepherd Winchester wasn't with her the day a steer smashed her hand.

Photo courtesy Risto Rautiainen

It was a surprise in Surprise (Nebraska), but not the welcome kind: Susan Littlefield's afternoon chores culminated with a smashed hand.

Littlefield, a veteran farm broadcaster and Network Farm Director for KVRN Rural Radio Network out of Lexington, is no stranger to doing safety stories, but this time, the story is personal.

Littlefield's family raises Columbia sheep, chickens, and a handful of cattle on their 20-acre farm southeast of Surprise. During Thanksgiving week 2017, Littlefield and her daughter handled chores while her husband and their boys were in Wisconsin deer hunting.

Her son's final instructions before departing on their trip: "Whatever you do, Mom, don't let the steers out."

That fateful afternoon, Littlefield went to feed steers in a fenced pasture adjacent to the barn and sheep lot. The routine path was from the bin, through the ewes' lot, then through two 8-foot panels used as gates to separate the sheep from a lot holding three Jersey steers.

"For some reason, the dogs weren't with me," she remembers, referring to her Maremma, Australian Shepherd and Blue Heeler that always accompany her. "This time they must have got distracted by a rabbit or a squirrel.

"So I went in, set the two buckets down, and reached back to get the gate. As I went to grab it, here comes that one steer, running full force. And he'd gotten out before, so he saw the open gate as an opportunity. The last time he got out, it took us 45 minutes to get him back in."

She recalls the cascading thoughts of a split second: "I'm home by myself. ... I am not chasing this steer. ... I don't have time for this!"

As she pulled the panel closed, the steer's head crashed into her hand, slamming it and the panel against two set T-posts.

The blow knocked her to the ground in a corner with an electric fence above her — "not the place to be grabbing ahold of!"

What seemed like an eternity with the 1,300-pound beef standing on her calf and thigh muscles lasted maybe a minute, she estimates. She feared he'd start butting her head.

But then, maybe thanks to the dogs that came running after hearing her scream, the would-be runagate turned and walked away.

“I got up, dusted myself off, might have said a few choice words, and I finished feeding,” she remembers, before going inside to ice her hand to control the pain.

“It’s funny the things that go through your mind in the moment,” she says. Littlefield, who’s also a rural firefighter and EMT, wondered if her daughter would come home to find her there on the ground, and if she’d have to call 911 to have her own colleagues come get her.

Afterwards, “I sat out under the windmill and thought, ‘How stupid ... why? Why didn’t I just let him out? Why did I think I had to close that gate?’ because the other gate was closed. After the fact, you think about that, but you don’t think of it during that time.”

Littlefield tried to ignore the pain, figuring the injury was “just a sprain.” But two weeks later, she had shooting pains up her arm and was unable to write. At that point, she went to the doctor. X-rays revealed thumb fractures. He sent her to an orthopedic surgeon.

By Christmas, she had a cast from the tip of her thumb to just below the elbow. She went through two cast changes, followed by a month in a splint and physical therapy.

But pain that was at times astronomical just didn’t dissipate, and her hand kept swelling.

In late March, she underwent surgery to remove the crushed basal joint and restore thumb mobility, using a tendon graft taken from her forearm to substitute for the damaged joint and torn ligament.



Surgery reconstructed a working thumb.

Photo courtesy Risto Rautiainen

In typically stoic farmer fashion, she tried to downplay her injury to herself and others. She missed just a day of work — for surgery — and was able to keep her cast off camera until she had a morning TV gig at a different studio and didn't realize the camera had a shot of her casted arm resting on the counter.

“Before I got off the air, my phone was buzzing. People messaging me, ‘What did you do, why are you in a cast?’”

It forced her to come clean about what happened.

But playing down her injury as “just a livestock injury” or “a small injury” didn't work with producers who set her straight about the other possible outcomes: “You could've lost your hand ... or your life.”

A year later, she continues work to improve mobility but won't regain the level of function prior to her injury. She can't write for extended periods. Opening a jar with the

right hand is impossible without the hard base of a thumb joint.

Littlefield understands how easy it is to become complacent again now that she's had a year continuing chores without further mishaps, and she emphasizes how important it is to make changes to ensure the occurrence and opportunities for injuries don't recur.

She jokes that “the other guy ended up in a body bag in a deputy's freezer” — referring to the steer ending up in a butcher's paper package that went to the local deputy. She and her husband didn't accept the risk of her kids being hurt by it, knowing their injuries would likely be worse than hers.

She changed the feeding routine, now using a different gate at the other end of the lot, one that closes automatically.

“And I make sure the dogs, at least one of the dogs, is with me at all times,” she says.

A good rule of thumb.

Susan Littlefield's story is part of Telling the Story Project (www.tellingthestoryproject.org).

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