The Meateaters

CHUCK REDMAN

(continued from previous issue)

CHAPTER 6

"On behalf of the city of Kearney, the heart of the greatest livestock raising and meat-packing area in the world, I wish to welcome all you young ladies as participants in the Nebraska Beef Queen Pageant. Kearney is extremely proud to host the Pageant again this year. It's a feather in our cap as appreciators of all the hard work that your Pageant represents, and as strong supporters of the beef industry in Nebraska. . . ."

The girls, and the pageant officials who were with them on this visit to the beef packing plant, clapped at the Mayor's opening remarks. The Mayor paused, his mouth open, smiling almost flirtatiously. His gesture was frozen in obvious eagerness to jump into his next sentence, like a stand-up comic on stage.

" . . . Of course, we're all glad we live upwind of the stockyards and not downwind!"

His one-liner was successful, sending laughter among the girls, all of whom were familiar with the unmistakable smell of cattle feedlots. As the Mayor spoke on, wrapping up his brief welcoming speech, Gail's eyes wandered to the faces of another audience that watched and listened attentively from behind the Mayor. The Mayor spoke from the outside steps of a wooden stile that climbed to the top of a stout board fence; that fence enclosed the packing company's feedlot; and inside the lot, forming a rough semi-circle several yards from the Mayor's back, were a dozen or more of the nearest

Jim Harter, Animals: 1419
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New York: Dover, 1979

cattle in the large, congested feedlot, their massive bodies huddled in rapt attention to the speaker's presence. Gail looked at their big brown eyes staring curiously at the Mayor's back or staring out over the fence at their group gathered in the roadway. She couldn't help seeing in their astounded faces the faces of several of the animals she had raised from calves, or helped to raise, on her father's farm. Like Daisy, for instance.

Daisy was a cow that Gail had raised and fattened herself as a 4-H project when she was quite young. She exhibited Daisy at the county fair and won a ribbon based on Daisy's size and quality. And, as was the tradition, Gail received an inflated bid from a local merchant to buy Daisy, the animal to be immediately resold through an agent to a meat company. Daisy was to be bought by the owner of Pearl's Dress Shop of Kearney, which would receive appropriate mention in the newspaper and on the radio. Gail, of course, understood very little about the business end of the transaction. Or its ramifications. The day after Daisy was taken away by the purchasing agent from her stall at the fairgrounds, Gail wrote a note to the owner of the dress shop. She enclosed a snapshot of

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herself standing beside, and dwarfed by, brown-eyed Daisy.

"Dear Mr. Garland," the note read, "this is a picture of me and Daisy when she was only seven months old. I love Daisy very much, and I hope you will take good care of her. I will miss her very much. Would I be able to come and visit her sometimes? I hope so. Give her a big hug for me. Your friend, Gail Shreve."

Shaking thoughts of Daisy from her head, however, Gail noticed that these animals stood in a filthy mire, that the whole feedlot was covered with a mire of mud and excrement, and that the mixture was splashed onto much of the animals' legs and undersides.

The sound of clapping around her drew Gail's attention back to the stile from which the Mayor had spoken just as he stepped down, and a younger man, better dressed, stepped up on the stile and faced them. He was the head of the beef company and was the man who had welcomed them to the plant initially before introducing the Mayor. He explained briefly his position as head of the beef company and that the beef company was actually just a division of a very large food corporation. He then turned the platform over to his plant manager, a middle-aged man with a comfortable manner and a Western twang, to detail for the girls the entire slaughtering and production process used at the plant and in operation at that very moment.

"Well," the plant manager began, "we've got a plant here which is probably about typical of beef packing plants around the country. We're about average in size for this area—we receive about twenty-one hundred cattle a day and process that many each day. We think we do a pretty good job. Now, they're delivered to us by truck, about 30-40 head in a truck. And they're delivered right into this feedlot here. Now . . ."

He glanced over his left shoulder for a split second into the feedlot behind him and swung his left hand in that direction, pointing like a pistol.

" . . . each animal has to be weighted. And, of course, that's how we figure how much we owe the producers, or the middleman, whichever the case may be. There's something else that goes on while the animals are here in this lot area. You can see that man over

there with the white hat on. Well, he's a federal inspector, and his job is to check the animals for possible disease or . . . or physical defect, anything that might affect the quality or safeness of the product when it reaches the stores. This is all based on federal regulations. The federal government really regulates the meat industry. Now, there are federal inspectors located throughout the plant, checking on the product all the way through to packaging. Each animal and each piece of meat has to pass through this federal inspection for us to sell it. OK, so that brings us to where the cattle are sent up into the plant itself. Now, we're not going to take you inside for a tour, because a group this large, there just isn't room on the kill floor for so many people to be shown through. We just have real narrow aisles in there, and you're all dressed so nice, I wouldn't want you to get your nice dresses all messed up."

He smiled, and the girls giggled with traces of self-consciousness.

"Also," he added, "it's not too pretty a sight, at least if you're not used to it, and a lot of girls would just as soon not see it. So, I'll continue to tell you about what goes on inside from here, and you can ask me any questions about it you want. OK, the cattle you see here are more or less driven up this ramp over here, which goes into the plant itself. They're driven up in a steady line, one right after another, as you can see. The ramp is really a big inclined trough; so, there's basically no place for them to go but up the ramp. One interesting fact here is that, if the animals are excited, this sends more blood into their muscles, which is not desirable for the meat. So, we try to keep them fairly calm, if possible, when we have them here in the feedlot and when we get them going up the ramp."

Gail could see the tight single file of cattle plodding up the troughway in the corner of the feedlot adjacent to the plant building. One worker in a white coat and hardhat stood on a platform next to the troughway, lashing the cattle with a short whip, whipping the huge animals on like tired racehorses up the congested ramp. Gail saw the steady line of cattle disappearing at the top of the ramp into a dark opening in the building. Metallic cranking sounds punctuated with frequent yells, human yells, came from inside that part of the building.

The plant manager continued, "OK, the ramp goes on into the plant there, and, oh, twenty feet or so inside the building, the ramp leads into a device called the 'restrainer.' One by one, each animal is put into a restrainer, and the restrainer closes around him real tight, and he is moved along in the restrainer to the next stage.

"Now," the plant manager proceeded, a big smile emerging on his face, "once an animal escaped. Somehow or other got loose, jumped over the side of the trough--was probably never tightly secured in the restrainer or something--and all we know is he jumped down to the floor there below and started running all around the kill floor. Run all through the plant, down the aisles, up the aisles, all through the whole cutting area. He went crazy. Nobody could catch him or stop him or nothing.

"Finally, he chortled, "he runs into the lunchroom! And there we finally get him cornered, got a high-powered rifle on him, and shot him. . . . We keep a gun up by the restrainer just in case we need it. So, you can see what can happen when one of these big animals gets loose, and I've only seen it happen like this once. But once he is securely in the restrainer, there shouldn't be any problems.

"OK, now, the next stage is where the animal is stunned. He is moved along, in the restrainer, to where a worker stands, and this worker will stun the animal by one of several methods. Sometimes it is done with an electric shock; sometimes it is just done with a club; the method we have generally been using here in this plant is basically your lobotomy. A big needle, about two, two and a half inches long, is inserted straight down into the animal's brain. This is to kill the nerve center. After the nerve center is killed, the animal should feel no pain. Now, the animal is still alive, however, and probably conscious. You will see them move their legs and their heads, and their eyes might very well be open. But we feel this is mostly reflex on the part of the animals. OK, the next thing that happens is putting shackles on their feet. After they are given their lobotomy, shackles are put on their hind feet. That is all one man does is place the shackles on. The shackles are at the end of heavy chains, which are hooked up to our overhead conveyor system. From this point, in fact from the restrainer, the whole

process is very automated. O.K., once the shackles are on, the animal is carried along by the overhead conveyer, and he is hanging, of course, upside down by his hind feet. He is then moved along to the next stage, where his throat is cut. We have one man that does this, and this is done so that as much blood as possible will be allowed to flow out of the animal, at that spot. This is to eliminate most of the blood from the meat that you buy in the store. The part of the throat that must be cut is called the 'aorta.' Now, like I say, the animal is alive up to now, and it is the throat-cutting that actually kills him.

"Well, next the animals--and they're still hanging by the feet--are swung around to the main processing floor. Gradually the hide is stripped off, and certain organs or parts are cut away from the carcass and processed separately, as by-products, for instance. All this occurs by means of the overhead conveyer, which moves the hanging carcasses through the plant from one worker to the next. Each worker has a very specific job to do. One person's job, for example, might be to sever the hide around the legs and the rump and to pull the hide down to the belly. The next person in the assembly line would perform some other very specific task. Eventually, all the parts that become by-products are cut away and go their separate ways within the plant. And the main meat part of the carcass continues on to what we call 'fabrication.' 'Fabrication' is just a word for cutting the carcass into all the familiar cuts of beef. Roasts and steaks--all the various cuts of beef you see in the stores. Then each cut of beef is sealed in plastic, and they're ready to be sold to one of our customers, which are mostly the big grocery outfits like Safeway or Hinky Dinky. OK . . ."

The plant manager continued speaking, nearing the end of his verbal tour, but Gail abruptly ceased her listening when she felt a sudden stab of pain in her right eye. "Damn," she thought. "Not now, for damn's sake!"

CHAPTER 7

The Nebraska plains had seen an amazing transformation since their dust-bowl days, decades earlier. Much of the state was now irrigated like a huge garden, especially along the Platte Valley, the "backbone" of

the state. Irrigation and other measures would prevent a recurrence of the dust-bowl syndrome and had maximized the productivity of the richly fertile soil. Nevertheless, Nebraska was still "blessed" with more than its share of transient dust. The incomparable Nebraska sunsets are often attributed to this relatively high concentration of dust particles blown about by the famed Nebraska wind. Just such a wind and just such a particle of dust had now successfully conspired to enter Gail's right eye, with the wrongful intention of inflicting great physical suffering upon her. And she knew very well, as a contact lens wearer and a veteran of countless "contact attacks," that she had indeed contracted a piece of dust in her eye, underneath her right lens.

"Christ!" Tears flooded her right eye, and she blinked it frantically. It hurt extremely. She would have to wash it out. Self-conscious of how her face looked with a tear-laden, half-closed right eye, Gail approached Mrs. Glenn, the pageant coordinator, and asked if she knew where the women's restroom was. Mrs. Glenn approached the young company head who stood listening in front and whispered to him. He pointed to a metal door on the side of the plant building and whispered a few brief directions. Mrs. Glenn returned to where Gail stood futilely massaging her sore eye, pointed out the metal door, and repeated the directions she had received. Tears spilling down profusely, Gail walked straight for the nominated door, more by pained sense of direction than by sight, and entered the building. She walked through what she had been told would be the lunchroom. All she knew was the sharp pain in her eye; she didn't see, or care about, the crude benches and tables or the vending machines that together comprised the plant lunchroom. She mounted the stairs at the end of the lunchroom and turned to her right down the wide concourse as she had been told to do. She hardly saw where she was walking, her eye hurt so much. The restrooms were supposed to be on the left. The blurry sight of a door marked "WOMEN" only a couple feet down a dim hallway appeared to her on the left. Gail turned into the hallway and pushed open the door to the women's room.

(continued in the next issue)

Evaluating Animal Research

A REVIEW OF ANDREW ROWAN'S
OF MICE, MODELS, AND MEN:
A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF ANIMAL RESEARCH
(Albany: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1984)

LILLY-MARLENE RUSSOW
Purdue University

The past ten years of debate about animal research have made at least one thing clear: progress in this field, indeed, good arguments about the issue, will require a blending of scientific acumen and philosophical sophistication. Philosophy without science is empty; one cannot, for example, draw specific conclusions from the harm principle unless one has a clear and objective understanding of whether a situation causes harm. If the subject is an animal, intuitions and analogies with human suffering can be seriously misleading; a scientific study involving the animal's physiology and ethology can be much more successful in making such determinations. Contrariwise, science without philosophy is blind; a description of the history of a test, its strengths and weaknesses, and the numbers of animals involved, does not, by itself, generate a conclusion about animal welfare.

Early works, such as Singer's Animal Liberation, provide a sustained development of the philosophical arguments but are viewed with suspicion by the scientific community because (to cite the most respectable reason) his ignorance about animals shines through many of his specific complaints. The work of Dallas Pratt provides a great deal of hard data about the scientific merit of many common laboratory procedures but lacks the general framework within which ethical judgments about those procedures can be deduced and defended. Andrew Rowan's new book, Of Mice,

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