"Hevy" Fences

Excerpted from
"Why They Call Him The Buffalo Doctor"
by Jean Cummings

Now the buffalo hobby became more expensive. We bought the hundred acres of "buffalo land," and with the purchase price we could have built a road out of five-cent postage stamps from here to the Little Big Horn. We christened our land the Rx Ranch, in deference to our neighbor, the hospital.

With the optimism only found in the innocent — or fools — we painted a ranch emblem on the front doors of my black car. We started with a background of a large, fleecy white cloud, and upon this we painted a brown buffalo. The cloud symbolized the ephemeral, dreamy character of our project. Because of our nonexistent artistic talent, the large brown buffalo resembled a fat camel with horns.

The local reaction to our announced enterprise was strictly Suppressed Smiles. We might have painted a unicorn on our car and announced we were going to breed unicorns. The citizens of Stanwood shook their heads and grinned. Their smiles said, "Some people sure have a weird sense of humor."

By publicly announcing we were starting a buffalo farm, we were going out on a limb in a big way. We'd exhausted all our leads and hadn't located even one scrawny buffalo for sale. Yet Bill is a great one for positive thinking, and his attitude was infectious. I found myself almost believing that someday we would have a herd of buffalo. That's faith. Of course a few elderly Indians still believe the buffalo will come back some day, and a lot of good their faith has done them.

The deed was signed, the Rx Ranch was ours. It awaited its fate — being turned into a buffalo stamping ground. Now we had to figure out what a self-respecting buffalo would want.

Grass. That was Number One, and we had plenty of that, it seemed. But it wasn't buffalo grass. What if buffalo ate only buffalo grass? This horrifying thought sent us collecting and researching Department of Agriculture bulletins. Our vocabularies became enlarged by learning that buffalo grass is really **Buchloe dactyloides**, and that it is a stoloniferous perennial grass, etc. We finally decided to stop worrying about it. If our buffalo were going to be Michigan buffalo, they'd have to learn to relish Michigan grass. We'd show them right from the start — they couldn't buffalo us!

Number Two on the list of buffalo needs was water, and the little creek meandering across the pasture would take care of their drinking needs nicely.

Number Three was trees for shade, and for rubbing and scratching against, and blessedly, enough trees were already growing there.

Those first three necessities were easy enough, but the fourth, and last, turned out to be a real problem. Number Four was a tight, strong enclosure to keep the buffalo confined to their stamping ground. Namely, a Superfence.

I knew absolutely nothing about building a fence, but a faint voice within me whispered that this was one of those Big Projects. Bill, with his infernal positive thinking, absolutely adores Big Projects, but I'm a footdragger from way back. My one Big Project was undertaken in childhood. I spent an entire summer behind our garage with a teaspoon, digging a hole to China. I had finally dug to the two-foot level when my father stepped into the hole one dark night. He filled in my Big Project with a few scoops of a spade, and I learned a lifelong lesson: "Don't tackle big jobs with a teaspoon" — or Do-it-yourself means doing something the hard way.

Oldtimers say a good fence should be horse-high, bull-strong, and pig-tight. Our fence had to be a Superfence — buffalo-high, buffalo-strong, and buffalo-tight. Bill decided to start by fencing in "only" fifty acres. Sort of a practice drill, he said. After some complicated arithmetic, we discovered this would be over a mile of fencing, and the cost of the new fencing materials would be over a thousand dollars, not counting labor.

Our whole project faltered temporarily while Bill reconnoitered. He finally decided that much of the old wire fencing lying about the pastures could be salvaged. The wooden posts were decayed and rotten, but the woven wire, though buried under years of accumulation of grass and leaves, seemed miraculously preserved.

Resurrecting a dead fence is a job no mortal should undertake. During election time you hear the term "grassroots" thrown about casually, but we learned there's nothing casual about grassroots. The prairie farmers learned how strong grassroots can be when they first tried to plow the virgin sod, and broke their plows. Our hotizontal, dead fence had been lying there so long the grass had grown attached to it — very attached.

Reviving the fence was real drudgery. It required no brains, just brute strength. Ten-year-old Bruce was strong enough to be an able hand. Volatile, Beth, through her continual striving to keep up with big brother and his cronies — and succeeding — was far sturdier than most eight-year-olds. Brenda was our problem. Our ranch work was a family projetc, and Brenda insisted that she be included in our family labors. Bill and I proposed that a three-year-old's greatest contribution could be running errands, but Brends felt demeaned by that sort of childish task.

"Run get this! Run get that!" she complained, "I want to help, too."

So she joined the rest of us as we lined up along a dozen feet of buried fence and grabbed hold of a bit of wire peeking through the grass. As Bill called the yo-heave-ho pep calls, we pulled. Usually, Brenda either stood on the wire or leaned against it. Thus, her "help" forced us to lift her weight along with the fence. We tugged and heaved to free the wire. First to give were our fingernails, then our jacket seams, and finally the grassroots creaked and tore. Up from its grave came twelve feet of wire fence. Then we moved on to the next twelve feet. When a long section of dead fence was loosened in this way, we rolled it up.

Bruce and Beth discovered that rolling the wire was fun, like pushing a snowball through wet snow and watching the ball grow larger and larger. As with making a giant snowball, the roll of wire eventually became too heavy for them to push farther.

As the children grunted and heaved those rolls of wire across the meadow, often they were rewarded with delightful treats of nature — a nest filled with big-eyed, nose-twitching baby rabbits, or a mother possum, her hairless babies clamped to her underside. Bruce and Beth were careful not to tamper with the wild animals they discovered. Through the code of a children's grapevine, rural youngsters at an early age learned that human interference upset the balance of nature.

However, once when they discovered a nest of pink, hairless field mice, the children couldn't resist. Apparently, they convinced themselves that the mother mouse had abandoned her babies. Upon arriving home, Bruce removed eight newborn mice from his pockets. An ardent detester of mice, I felt sure they'd never survive. Tenderly, for three weeks, the children administered to the baby mice, feeding them warm milk from a medicine dropper. Not a mouse succumbed. I thought it bizarre that in my basement and garage were traps set to catch invading rodents, while my children were nursing eight mice toward prolific maturity. The mice finally were declared mature enough for independence. On our next fence resurrecting detail, after carefully searching out their nest, Bruce released the pampered mice near their birthplace. From that time on, the children always worried about rolling heavy wire over one of "their" mice.

After weeks of pulling wire from matted grass, then rolling it up, our Rx Ranch was decorated with dozens of cumbersome rolls of wire fencing.

We gazed, misty-eyed, at these first products of our labor. With hands pressed into our aching backs, we consoled each other with how much money we were saving. After salvaging over half-a-mile of fencing, we gratefully put down our money and purchased the other half-mile of new fencing wire.

The posts for our Superfence had to be Superposts. Bill scouted the countryside, and finally, after much searching, wangled a good price from a nearby land clearance project and bought four hundred cedar posts.

These so-called posts didn't look at all like fence posts to me. They looked like logs. Each post was nine feet long, a foot thick, and covered with bark. Bill informed us that for every log to be transformed into a post, the bark had to be peeled off. This job was considered women's and children's work, while Bill went on to some of the heavier jobs of clearing brush and moving boulders.

We learned lots of things, the children and I, as we peeled those four hundred posts. On some, the bark peeled off neatly in nine-foot strips, as if from a banana. Others absolutely refused to give up their bark without a fight, and these we attacked with butcher knives and fingernails. We became wary of the logs with reddish tinged bark — those were the real toughies. We pushed them aside until the bitter end. During this bark-peeling period we were enjoying beautiful Indian-summer weather, and friends sometimes stopped by to chat and get a breath of fresh country air. I became crafty at hoodwinking a visitor into helping me turn a log, and before he or she realized it, they were busy peeling posts, and wondering how they could take their leave without appearing lazy and unhelpful. Not long after we'd finished the last post, we were informed by a passerby that there was an instrument called a postpeeler which would have prevented all our bruised and scraped knuckles. There's always someone who spreads The Word too late!

The next stage in the erection of Super-

fence was the digging of the holes to receive the posts. There was great urgency now because winter was approaching. The holes had to be dug before the ground froze. While the children and I were still peeling posts, Bill began this awesome project. A post-hole digger is a strange tool, sort of a hinged spade, and if you've never wielded one, there's no point in trying to describe the feel of it. Only if your muscles have knotted and throbbed from post-hole digging, could you possible understand. Now there's such a thing as digging post-holes by machine. There's a big attachment that goes on a tractor, the way a buttonhole attachment goes on a sewing machine. The tractor post-hole digger looks like a big screw and bores a post-sized hole in the ground. After the first few handmade post-holes, we decided we'd hire a farmer to machine-dig the holes for us, but a huge number had to be dug by hand, anyway. There were two swampy areas to cross, and a tractor couldn't get through these bogs. All those holes had to be dug by muscle power.

By no stretch of the imagination can I say that we made a game of post-hole digging, but a certain amount of suspense did add interest. Our Rx Ranch seemed to have a strange soil pattern, kind of a calico print. As we'd dig one post-hole, we'd be digging yellow clay soil, hard as concrete. Then the next hole, just twelve feet distant, might be pale sand. Every so often we'd dig into bright red soil — not common red clay, but rust-colored, sandy dirt. It didn't make the labors exactly fun, but our curiosity about what lay ahead kept us digging. It really got exciting after we found rainbow-hued oil slicks floating on the ground. With oil wells pumping twelve miles to the north of us, and eight miles south of us, we had our moment of wild glee. Then we remembered it takes tens of thousands of dollars to drill an oil well, and if it's dry — tough luck, Charlie! Our wildcatting impulses died a-borning. We picked up the post-hole digger and went back to work. But to this day when I get to wishing I had an automatic dishwasher or a new model stove, I remember that oily ground and wonder if our buffalo's hoofs are trampling over subterranean black liquid riches.

We needed lots of muscle power for our post-hole digging. One local teen-ager whose weight approached three hundred pounds dreamed of becoming a professional wrestler — one of those beefy performers who are one-quarter wrestler and three-quarters actor. The young man thought that digging post-holes would be an excellent way of developing shoulder muscles, and Bill quickly offered to help him train. For his professional gimmick, the boy would be called "Buffalo Bill," and he'd gain fame by his loud, guttural buffalo grunt when securing a hammerlock. He practiced the rasping grunt with each thrust of the post-hole digger. The deep sound echoed across the fields to the hospital, where the patients thought a wild boar was loose in the swamp. After a few days of this, the would-be wrestler decided post-hole digging was too strenuous a training regimen and went back to his bar bells.

We labored on, digging Superholes for our Superposts, and the weather grew frostier, threatening to freeze the ground solid. At last the farmer came with his miraculous tractor-powered post-hole digger. This machine did in one minute what had been taking us a half-hour of hard digging. It was enough to make you sit down and cry.

One more job had to be finished before the big freeze-up. The four hundred posts had to be distributed along the fence line and set into the holes; the dirt must be tamped back around them to make them firm and solid. We borrowed an old pickup truck, and Bill gave me a quick course in truck driving.

After loading the logs on the truck, Bill climbed atop the teetering pile. My driving instructions sounded simple: I was to drive **slowly** along the imaginary line where our Superfence was to be erected, a line at this stage marked only by gaping holes. I was supposed to stay close to the holes, but somehow the holes concealed themselves in the tall grass, and occasionally one of the truck wheels gouged into a gaping abyss. It's a good thing the truck's engine was so noisy. I think our marital relationship would have suffered it I could have heard everything Bill kept shouting from the back of the truck. I drove along grumbling under my breath that I never claimed to be a truckdriver.

The holes were spaced twelve feet apart and I was supposed to drive slowly enough for Bill to throw a huge post out every twelve feet. Now driving along slowly isn't supposed to be hard (as Bill kept informing me every few minutes), but there was a problem. I had been instructed **not** to put on the brakes; for if I did, Bill would go flying off his precarious log pile perch. Driving along slowly without braking was easy on flat stretches, but unfortunately our Superfence had to coil up and down a few hills. As the truck started down the first incline, it picked up speed, but Bill had said **not** to put on the brakes. The truck rolled faster and faster, and my view in the rear-view mirror showed Bill throwing the posts faster and faster. His frantic tossing movements reminded me of something out of the old jerky silent movies. When we reached the bottom of the first hill I collapsed against the steering wheel in wild laughter. Bill felt wild, too, but not from laughter.

I knew he was furious because he called me "Jean" five times. On one of our first dates Bill dubbed me "Pinkie" because of my red hair. I've been "Pinkie" ever since, except when I've irritated him. Then I become "Jean."

Since our marriage survived that afternoon, I believe it can survive anything. The only other divorce-stimulating episode I recall was the first time I cut Bill's hair. That was back during his internship days, when we'd try anything to save money. That first haircut took three hours, and we were both in tears during most of that time. We weathered that storm; in fact, I was soon doing a pretty professional barber job in twenty minutes. But Bill never gave me another chance with my truck driving.

After the posts were all distributed into the holes and standing upright, we had to tamp the dirt around them until they were as solid as telephone poles (and about as big, too). With broomsticks and steel rods we thumped and pounded until the last post was firmly set. The buffalo pasture was outlined now by the not-so-straight line of naked posts surrounding it. We breathed a big sigh at the completion of that task, for the freezing winds could come upon us. The attaching of the fence wire could continue even though the ground was frozen, if the snow just didn't get too deep.

We unrolled our salvaged woven wire along the back fence line, using our shiny new purchased wire for the edge of the pasture facing the road. This was partly for appearances, but mostly because the wire facing civilization had to be strongest.

We stretched the fencing wire by pulling it taut with our car, then pounding the U-shaped metal staples into the posts, securing the wire. Superfence was really shaping up.

We shaped up, too, during this time. Bill looked glorious with his bulging biceps, while I tried to hide mine in long-sleeved blouses. Even when camouflaged, my muscles gave me away, for I swiftly took thirty strokes off my golf score. Though the golf ball manufacturers never came, I was ready for them with my testimonial: "I owe it all to Superfence."

All that autumn as we built Superfence, people stopped by and asked what the fence was for.

"Buffalo," we'd answer, and they'd grin at our big joke and drive on.

By the time the fence really began to look like a buffalo fence, panic started to creep over us. Where in the name of William Cody were we going to get a herd of buffalo?

We practically had their home made for the buffalo, but it wasn't like building a birdhouse and waiting for the birds to show up. Buffalo weren't going to just show up, in spite of the old beliefs of the plains Indians. Evidently the wild Indians of the West didn't know much about the birds and bees, for when the buffalo herds became scarce in the wintertime, the Indians never worried. They knew the buffalo had just gone into huge caves in the South in an "underground country." Come spring, the buffalo would swarm out of the caves and return to the hunting grounds to provide sustenance to the Indians.

Unfortunately, Bill and I did know about the birds and bees, and we just couldn't subscribe to this faith. We were getting more and more uneasy. How were we to save face?

Here we had told everyone that our Superfence would soon be enclosing a herd of buffalo. We thought of conjuring up a herd of ghost buffalo, **a la Harvey**. We could pretend the buffalo were there, but only **we** could see them.

The Christmas season approached. Superfence was done, needing only two rows of barbed wire on top. We continued sending out letters inquiring about buffalo, following every possible lead, but with no results.

We finally gave up on letters and applications for buffalo from government-owned herds. They required bidders to be present at their auction corrals with cash and a stout truck, ready to haul away any buffalo won in the bidding. The hospital's struggles and the wintertime increase of sick people kept Bill running sixteen hours a day. We had no time to go traipsing off to Montana or Oklahoma to buffalo auctions.

We wrote to a private buffalo breeder who had a goodly number of animals, hoping he might sell us some. In a few weeks his answer came, scribbled hastily on the back of a corn and oats feed-bill on which the large amounts reminded me of the national budget. This breeder had quite a few buffalo, but none he wanted to sell. He carefully outlined the procedures we should go through to apply annually for buffalo from the government herds. We sighed wearily as we read this too-familiar

story, but chuckled when we read his P.S. It said, "Frankly, it's easier to adopt a baby."

An important afterthought struck him, though, for he added a P.P.S. Its very simplicity was ominous. Misspelled and in all capital letters, it said, "HEVY FENCES." We thought of Superfence and wondered just how heavy was "HEVY."

So often you just don't see things that are right under your nose. In a fit of childhood reminiscing I recalled an Iowan who raised buffalo just twenty miles from my home town. There returned a hazy memory of having seen grazing buffalo there along the highway to Mason City.

"Write to your father," Bill suggested immediately, "and find out if buffalo are still there."

I didn't really want to let my parents know Bill was trying to buy some buffalo. Even though we'd been married for thirteen years, like many protective parents, they weren't quite sure of this strange son-in-law from the reservation. He hadn't endeared himself to them any by taking me and their only grandchildren to the wild forests of Michigan.

However, I wrote to them requesting the name and address, and my father immediately replied that the man was no longer living, but his son continued the buffalo-raising tradition, and gave us his name and address. With little spirit we wrote another letter asking about buffalo for sale.

The absolutely unbelievable reply arrived the day after Christmas. We opened it listlessly, expecting another negative reply to our inquiry. After all our will-o'-the-wisps, the stationery looked authentic and impressive. In green ink the letterhead read, "Sherman Buffalo Farm, Nora Springs, Iowa." And beneath, the motto explained: "Breeder of Fine American bison." A picture of a shaggy buffalo bull added to the realism. This was obviously no phantom buffalo farm, but the real thing.

The letter began: "Received your letter inquiring about buffalo this morning. I believe I could fix you up with the kind and number of animals you want."

We could hardly believe it. Was it possible that at last we had found buffalo for sale? Ironically, after years of writing letters all over the North American continent, we'd found buffalo practically in the backyard of my home town.

Bill answered immediately, asking Mr. Sherman to put ten buffalo on lay-away for us. Nine heifers and one bull was the specific order. Many letters were exchanged, a price agreed upon, and the buffalo scheduled for shipment to us in late March. Mr. Sherman suggested that we get an extra bull. Buffalo bulls are nearly impossible to ship once they become mature, and if our one young bull didn't mature into a productive bull, we would be stuck with nine spinster heifers and lose a year or two while we shipped in another young bull and waited to see if he were productive. Mr. Sherman had been around buffalo most of his life, so we took his advice and increased our order to two adolescent bulls and nine heifers.

Activity really picked up. Superfence had to be finished, strong and ready.

Bill had what he thought was an excellent idea for testing the holding qualities of Superfence. As a boy growing up in Dakota he'd always had a herd of goats to tend. For years he'd been hinting strongly that our son could never grow to real manhood without caring for a goat herd. Now Bill saw his chance. It seems that goats are very good fence-testers. If there's any kind of hole or weak place, the curiosity of a goat soon seeks out that spot.

We drove through back country roads looking for goats, and finally one chilly Sunday afternoon we spotted a bearded nanny goat tied outside a small unpainted shack. The owner gladly exchanged the goat for a ten-dollar bill. Nannie climbed cheerfully into the back seat of our car. I drove, while Bill and the children sat with Nannie, petting her and talking soothingly. I think the attention was unnecessary, for Nannie took the ride calmly, as if she always took Sunday afternoon drives. I drove, red-faced and blushing, the ten miles to the ranch, trying to ignore the stares from passing cars.

Even without a goat passenger, our car was something to invite stares. Once it had been a beautiful, shining black sedan with white sidewall tires, but that was eleven years before. It was kind of a one-owner car, or at least a one-family car. My father had bought it new, then sold it to my brother, who sold it to us. They both had been fastidious owners. Not a scratch or rust spot marred its ebony finish. It stayed in fine shape so long as I just drove it to the store.

Then we bought the Rx Ranch and began building Superfence. The black car was our truck, our tractor, our bulldozer, and our fence-stretcher. It hurdled boulders and tree stumps, thickets and creeks. The back seat soon broke loose from the flooring, so we just removed it. That opened the whole trunk into the back seat area and was much better for cargo-hauling, though a bit drafty. After tearing out a few mufflers on rocks, Bill had the garage install a tractor-style exhaust pipe. The exhaust thrust straight up through the right front fender, and the muffler perched high on the pipe. When we stretched fence with the wire fastened to the door handles, they ripped off. The gas cap jiggled off somewhere, and we couldn't get a replacement for such an early-model car. Bill solved that problem with forthright farm ingenuity. He stuck a corncob in the hole. Gas station attendants always appeared startled when they reached for the gas cap.

After only a few months of farm labor the poor old sedan was reduced to an apparition. It still proudly sported the buffalo emblem on what was left of its front doors, and it was widely known and recognized as the "buffalo car." It wheezed and sputtered, but chugged on proudly, the perfect car for hauling goats.

We soon acquired an odorous billy goat and two other nanny goats to join our first Nannie in the buffalo pasture to pursue their job of fence-testing.

Superfence passed the goat-test. Not a single goat found a way to freedome.

The rest of the winter we shivered and froze as we put the finishing touches on Superfence. By the end of March the last gate was hung and all was in readiness. Bring on the buffalo!

Bev Pechan

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detail. "It's sort of like drawing with a brush," she says. "I'm a draw-er, not a painter." Most painters begin with the background and add detail in the foreground, Bev begins with her subject and adds background when necessary to complete an idea. "I love landscapes," she says, "but I can't paint them — I have to hurry to get to the good stuff!"

Good stuff is anything that has to do with people and how they lived, animals, and historical events. Last fall she completed the first series of pencil portraits of famous Quarter Horse sires — in all, she hopes to do six. That would mean researching and then accurately drawing sixty horses. Finding pictures and information on some of these horses has been most difficult, but some close friends and fellow historians have been most helpful. "One in particular," Bev says.

Writing has also been an important part of Bev's life and she has worked as a photographer — as assistant studio manager; art technician in a custom photo lab, and horse show photographer. "I put a lot of ears up!", she laughed. She still does retouching and correction work for some Rapid City studios and restoring old photos is a specialty with her. She has a sizeable collection of old photos and postcards used for reference and historical data . . . writing has been for newspapers and magazines as staff writer and free-lancer and she wants to do more of that.

There had been no more formal art training since the correspondence course, except for a seminar now and then. As a senior at Mahtomedi High School, Bev won a first place in the National Scholastic Art Competition and a summer session scholarship at the University of Oklahoma, which she could not accept. It was the first recognition for her art received, although her high school spending money came mostly from portraits commissioned of friends' horses and dogs. Later, when Bev began showing her iron-gray Saddlebred "Blue Moon," she began to attract larger commissions from stable owners and their patrons as well. When she married a short time later in 1957, all art work ceased. It wasn't until 1970 and the last child was three years old that Bev returned to her art and it was the lure of the West once more.

Currently, she is working on pen and ink sketches of buffalo — and especially buffalo with prairie dogs or magpies for companions, historical scenes, and always, horses. Much of her work today is geared to sales in gift shops, both as souvenirs and Western Art. She has a series of Plains Indian postcards with histories on the back that have been popular with foreign visitors. "There just hasn't been much representation of local history for the South Dakota tourist, and when they come here, they are interested," Bev says. "Custer and Wind Cave Parks are wonderful because you can see buffalo and other animals in their natural habitat . . . their size, power, and freedom to roam at will . . . I sense all this each time I begin to draw, I hope it shows."

This spring Bev will have her own studio in Keystone in the form of an old bunkhouse she is having moved there from the Badlands area. Her work is marketed under the name of Sagebrush Gallery, which will also be the name of the studio. It will be located just east of the downtown area and open to the public. Everyone is welcome . . . especially storytellers!"