



# *Across the Fence*

By Howard Sherpe

## Night Lights

I have some vivid images from my days of growing up on the farm, especially the barn, where we spent so many hours, morning and night. The image of my father, Hans, standing in the barn door after the evening milking was finished, was the memory for this story. I can see him standing there, but can only imagine what he was thinking.

Hans stood in the open barn door looking out into the darkness of the night. The last cow had been milked and ushered out the door. He could see her udder swing gently from side to side as she hurried across the barnyard and headed down the lane to join the other cows in the pasture, where they would spend the night. As she walked quickly down the lane leading to the pasture, her dark outline was barely visible, and she seemed to be swallowed up by the night. As she disappeared everything became quiet.

The sudden stillness of the night was in sharp contrast to the symphony of sound that had enveloped the barn only a short time before. The loud noise of the vacuum pump motor that provided suction for the milking machines; the jangling of the stanchions as cows stretched, trying to pilfer feed from a neighboring cow who was a slower eater; the occasional soft mooing of a cow; the voices of hungry calves; the clanking of milk pails; the banging of a milk can lid against another lid to remove a cover that was on too tight. All this was in accompaniment to the country music from the local radio station playing in the background.

The twenty-two cows were now gone and spending the evening in the

pasture until morning, when they would return, and the whole process would be repeated. Hans had carried the last of the milk cans into the milk house, where they were stored in the cold water cooler for the milk hauler to pick up in the morning.

Now all was silent except for several cats arguing over a puddle of spilled milk. Soon they too fell silent as they busied themselves in getting their share of the milk before the others drank it all.

Hans closed the bottom half of the barn door leading to the cow yard, and placed the hook in the latch. His dog jumped up, put his front paws against the door, and joined him in looking out into the night. Hans crossed his large, muscular arms, placed them on top of the door, and rested his weight on them as he peered out into the night. He was a large man and his frame almost filled the door, blocking the light from the barn as it tried to escape and join the cows outside. The lights from neighboring barns in the distance were a welcome reminder that other farmers were also busy with the evening chores. They were like lights from ships afloat in the sea against the night sky, surrounded by millions of smaller lights from star ships stretching out in all directions.

One by one, the lights in neighboring barns went out as the farmers finished the day's work. As yard lights went on, he knew they were headed from the barn to the house. When the lights went out, he knew they were safely inside for the evening. Then only the soft glow from distant farmhouses could be seen. It signaled the end of another busy day. A day that had

been filled with sights and sounds, with possibilities and problems, was now slowing down and preparing to rest.

Only the crickets in the fields beyond the barnyard broke the silence of the evening. Their chorus of music filled the air with the music of the night. It belonged out there in the dark, along with the shadows and the distant lights that were now almost gone. Soon the only lights would be those of the distant stars. The dark sky was filled with millions of stars, as they can only be seen in the country sky, far from the glare of city lights blocking their majesty. They seemed to twinkle in time with the musical chorus being sung by the crickets. The peace and serenity of the moment was the perfect way to end another busy day.

Hans left the door, crossed to the other side of the barn and turned out the light. The dog followed him. He didn't bother turning on the yard light, preferring the darkness of the night, and the light from the stars, which seemed to surround and envelope him as he closed and bolted the lower half of the barn door.

He turned and headed through the quiet night toward the house, which was silhouetted against the night sky. Halfway to the house, he stopped and looked back up at the sky. After another hectic, busy day, a peacefulness came over him, when he took a few moments to observe the majesty and wonder of it all.

As he turned and continued walking toward the house in the darkness, the soft light from the windows was like a beacon in a lighthouse, welcoming a weary traveler home.