



# Seeing strange lights in the night

*By Eric Peterson*

It was a dark and stormy night at the outskirts of town. I wasn't sure why I awoke, but I soon noticed a flash of light through the bedroom window. I lay there waiting for the rumble of thunder, but it didn't come.

As the light continued to flash and flicker, it occurred to me thunderstorms are rare this time of year – really rare. So it was with a mix of curiosity and confusion I got up and peered out the window. I could make out a bright light flashing about in the open space across the road. Something was up!

Turns out, it is calving time. "My" open space is another man's pasture. After an awkward call to the sheriff, I learned my rancher neighbor goes out and checks every pregnant heifer every two hours, 24 hours a day! The flash I saw was a powerful spotlight he uses at night to carefully inspect the heifers.

The next day, I made it a point to introduce myself to my neighbor at the pasture gate. He turned out to be named Charlie and was a nice fellow, very patient with all my curiosity about all the agriculture activities I just discovered were happening right there in the neighborhood. He even cleared out a spot on the seat of the pickup and let me ride along. Apologizing for the clutter in his truck, he explained he had ear tags and markers to identify each calf to its mother, bottles and syringes to administer vaccines to the baby calves, and equipment, tools, and supplies to help a heifer that might be having difficulty with her first birth.

Seeing this dash full of notes and tools, it was obvious I was being invited into the man's office!

Charlie talked to me about the life circle that happens in agriculture. This cycle was very apparent to me as we eased the truck through the expectant mothers and the new mommas



and their babies. But he went on to explain the whole year for himself and some of his fellow ranchers and farmers. Spring is the time when everything begins. Ranchers are calving – a task I could attest is a 24/7 job. He laughed and explained his farmer buddies also would be doing some 24/7 jobs, putting up their hay later in the summer.

It was easy for me to understand the calving thing, but when I asked Charlie why a farmer (who deals with inanimate soil and plants) would need to work around the clock, he explained it was important to get the hay put up quickly to avoid rain and to preserve quality. We all prize fresh food, I guess!

It seems there are only certain portions of the day – mostly at night – when the humidity and moisture content of the hay is “right” to preserve quality. Charlie assured me that, later in the summer when I got a whiff of that rich, earthy, sweet smell of hay in the evening, I could count on seeing lights and maybe hearing machinery working way into the night.

As Charlie explained the circle of life farmers and ranchers live and nurture, I began to understand they would be out there in the agricultural

lands doing different tasks year-round. In the spring, they are preparing for new life. I saw baby calves, and I also understood farmers would be tilling the soil and preparing seedbeds for the new crops they would plant.

Charlie explained they would also soon be turning water into the irrigation ditches and starting sprinkler systems to provide water that is critical to their crops and pasture productivity.

Different times of the year would find them working with different kinds of equipment, performing different important tasks at all hours. Ranchers would move cattle to summer pastures, and farmers would tend their growing crops. In the fall – the time of harvest – the cattle would be brought home. Some would be shipped to market, and most of the expectant mother cows would spend the winter near the ranch – often being fed every day. Farmers would spend long days with big equipment and big trucks hauling the fruits of their year’s work to storage or market.



When our conversation was about over and we were returning to the gate, I proposed that I shared a lot with Charlie and his colleagues in production agriculture. I share the open spaces and the night with men and women tending their livestock and crops. I share the roads with big, slow equipment, and cattle drives. Sometimes, I share noise from cows or equipment, sometimes dust and sometimes smells. But, most importantly, I now share an appreciation for the work of my rancher and farmer neighbors and know they aren’t interested in aggravating me – they are only doing their job of riding herd on the circle of life they work with year-round.

Charlie laughed and said, “Heck, I’ll even share some dirty hands and britches with ya! I’ll call you when we have our brandin’ party!”

I went away happy to have met a new friend and neighbor whose work is different than the rest of us in the neighborhood but important to all of us. And I guess I also had something else to think about – who is in whose backyard?

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