Billy's Secret

By Gus Doiron

Rainbow Harbor Farm was much like the other farms one reads about, and may even have the good fortune to visit- large, rolling lush pastures, with its fenced in horses and cows able to wander almost as they desired, pigs and chickens in their appreciably smaller, albeit clean, pens. A farm where, animals seemed, if not downright happy, at least content among the freshly painted red barns and buildings where they lived.

The people that worked, or for a better term, lived this farm, were no different than those from other farms, either. They worked sunup to sundown, and days were filled with chores such as tending to the animals or garden, or baling hay, and everything in between.

Living a farmer's life was indeed busy and demanding, but for young Billy Thompson, it was never too busy to find new adventures. No matter how many eggs had to be collected, or fences needed mending, there was always some excitement hidden around the next corner.

As they sat around the massive oak supper table each night for their evening meal, Billy would tell his parents about most of his adventures he'd encounter, whether it was picking through rocks at the rock pile looking for snakes, or even seeing the odd bear outside the fencing along the pastures. And, as Billy's parents sat, with their hearty portions of vegetables and meat that all came from the farm , they would listen with great interest as he would recount most of his tales. Most.

There was, however, one adventure that young Billy had been part of, and was still being part of, that he didn't quite feel ready to share with anyone- not even his parents. It was an adventure that which Billy would take its secret to his grave. And, depending on Billy's company when his unknown heart condition made itself noticed, nobody may have ever known what his secret was.

As it would happen, Billy's father Herb was yet again tinkering with the old blue tractor, trying to rewire the starter. He was trying desperately to get it started, and pulled into the barn, before the overcast skies above him opened up. Herb had just gotten the wiring harness back in place, when he could feel the first tinkle of rain starting. He turned the ignition, and the tractor fired up. Despite the drops hitting his face, Herb smiled. "Let the rain come now," he said to nobody in particular. Soon, the tractor would be inside, as would he. It was a good day.

He was just about to put the tractor in gear, and get it inside, when Billy's favorite calf Anna, ran from around the corner of the barn, and came so close to the roaring tractor, that for

a moment, Herb thought the 500 lb black and white calf may run right into him. Normally, Herb would have simply drove right by the calf, ignoring her, but she seemed to be in such a frenzy, that, despite the rain, he decided to shut the tractor off so the calf could hear him holler at her.

That is when things got crazy.

Herb didn't even have a chance to open his mouth to shoo the animal away, when something happened that he never thought possible. She spoke. Hollered, actually.

"Billy's hurted!" Anna exclaimed with the novice English of a four year old child. "Come quick!"

Just exactly how Billy's young life ended that day, isn't the story we are going to talk about right now. In fact, if you look hard enough, you'll likely be able to read more on that in other articles that covered this whole incident. What we will talk about, is the attention that fell upon Anna, Billy's favorite pet, once the dust around Billy's death had settled.

It didn't take long for word to spread throughout the neighboring communities about the talking cow that lived on the Rainbow Harbor Farm. As nobody had ever heard of such an event before, (not even the local veterinarian) they felt compelled to come see this spectacle. And come see they did. Being a practical farmer, Herb figured out he could maybe make a few dollars on this. For weeks on end, as strangers would pull into the long winding driveway that led to the farm, they would be greeted by a large sign. It read, in sloppily printed, painted letters :

"Rainbow Harbor Farm, home of Anna, the Talking Calf- One question, One dollar"

The line ups were long, and questions never ceased. And, as the questions progressed, Anna's linguistic skills improved drastically, to the point that she became quite comfortable holding a conversation with pretty much anyone.

"What's your name?"

"Anna"

"Who named you?"

"Billy"

"What's your favorite color?"

"Oh, pink , for sure!"

"How does it feel to be famous?"

“To be honest, it’s actually quite embarrassing.”

It was during a radio interview with an extremely smooth talking reporter, whose plaid jacket and slicked back hair almost made him look and sound more like a used car salesman than anything else, that the question was posed to Anna. “What do you want to do with your future?”

“Ummm, I don’t really know. I’m pretty happy here, I guess.”

The reporter wouldn’t leave it at that. “Well, Anna, you are basically one of us. It would be a shame for you to waste your talents and skills just ambling around on this here farm. What do you like to do?”

“Ummm, I guess I like taking the really young new born calves and showing them the routine around the farm. It gives their mothers a break.”

“A teacher, you say. And why not? You’d make a great educator. And, it’d be a shame to waste your talents on these here farm animals. Why, they can’t even talk. Your talents would be much better spent teaching little kids, humans. You’re practically one of us, you know. I’m sure they’d love to have you. “

After that radio conversation, the public response was overwhelming, to say the least. Everybody who contacted the radio station was in huge favor of seeing Anna put into a position where her talents were more useful. Herb, who wasn’t quite sure if this really and truly was something for Anna, finally had to consent to allowing Anna to receive the training required to become a teacher’s assistant.

As the headmaster at the nearby teacher’s college had grown up on a farm, he had seen the complications a mature cow (for by now, Anna was basically all grown up) could provide for an indoor facility. He really didn’t think the change in construction needed to accommodate a fully grown bovine would justify having her go there there for just a year. (Plus, he secretly didn’t trust cows. Not one bit.) He was, however, willing to help arrange a correspondence course for her.

So it was arranged, and there were many nights that Herb would be in the stall with Anna, by candlelight, cramming calculus for the oral math exams or dangling participles for English. Coffee became one of her favorite treats, and she even tried one of Herb’s cigarettes one night as they burned the midnight oil. That cigarette, as Herb would later tell his friends, counted as two- her first and last. Which was a good thing, as a dangling cigarette out of a cow’s mouth does not mix with a loft of hay.

The school year went by, and finally, the big graduation day came. Countless members of the community, local dignitaries, and media were all on hand to commemorate the event. No one was prouder, or looked sharper, than Herb Thompson. Gone were his days of faded jean coveralls, and worn out rubber boots. He had made enough money through Anna to hire enough farm hands that he rarely got his new corduroy pants, and European fox lined shoes dirty. He had worked hard with Anna, and there seemed to be countless opportunities ahead.

Being as to how the celebration was on the farm, Herb had even arranged for Anna's mother, brother, and sister to be on hand. (Herb had told Anna that he had talked to her father, who resided at the rendering/retirement home, but he was simply too shy to come see the ceremony. Someday they would meet again, Herb assured her.) Being illiterate farm animals that couldn't even speak, Anna's family that was there seemed somewhat unaware of what was taking place, even as Anna had a celebratory blue ribbon put around her neck.

The checkered lined picnic tables were covered with an assortment of salads, hay, and dairy milk. There was even some ice cream on hand. (It was at this event that Anna had her first brain freeze.) Inside the large old farm house, was a cold supply of lemonade so sour that it was impossible to drink without your mouth puckering into an awful knot. The adults kept going in to get a refill, or use the washroom, but what they were really doing was secretly munching on double hamburgers. As they would walk out of the house and into the crowd, some would even have to be reminded to wipe the grease off their faces.

As the crowd started to dissipate, two extremely well dressed men walked up to Herb.

"Hello, Mr. Thompson, we are national supervisors with Mega Mega Fast Foods. The largest burger chain in the world. Can we have a word?" the taller and leaner of the two asked.

"If you can make it quick, boys, we have a lot of cleaning up to do."

"We've come to talk to you about the sale of your cow, Anna."

Herb put his hand up to stop the conversation. "Well, lads, you can stop right there. Anna ain't for sale."

This time, the shorter, stockier man tried to talk. "Mr. Thompson- Herb, if I may- for the right price, EVERYTHING is for sale. You just don't know it yet. "

"Well, see here, city slicker ONE and city slicker TWO, Anna AIN'T for sale. So, I strongly suggest you both jump into your little energy efficient smart car, and scram, before I go look for my pitchfork." Herb answered, as he turned his back and began to walk away.

“We‘ll be in touch.” He could hear one of them say as he made his way to the picnic tables.

About two weeks later, a long black limo quietly rolled up the driveway to the farm. It came early in the morning, so there were no visitors around yet. So shiny the morning sun glistened off it, the windows were tinted far too dark too see inside. Fortunately, Anna was out in the pasture, for the hood on the car had fastened to it a set of horns that must have once belonged to a giant bull. Herb had taken great precautions to shelter Anna from a lot of realities in the real world, and she certainly didn’t need to see that.

A short round man wearing a black velvet suit jumped out of the car, and had a cowboy hat on so big, that Herb bet he could fit a full ten gallons of lemonade in it. As he waddled over to Herb, Herb noticed his spurs jingling on his brown leather cowboy boots.

“Herb Thompson ,I presume? My name is Walter Viande, of Mega Mega Fast Foods.” He began as he reached out to shake Herb’s hand.

“Look, I’ve already talked to some of your people. Tell your boss that I’m not interested.”

“Herb, if I may. I AM the boss.”

“Well, good for you.” Herb answered sarcastically. “I really care. Anna is not for sale. She’s practically one of us. What do you want her for so much anyways? Having her on your posters won’t exactly boost your sales, when your customers think of her while trying to eat a hamburger. I mean, she’s practically one of us.”

“That, sir, is precisely why I’m here. I need to obtain that cow, and I assure you, allow her to retire with the dignity and grace she so well deserves, but out of the public eye. As she becomes more and more popular, I am, quite honestly, afraid that one single cow may quite honestly drive our humble little fast food restaurant chain into the ground. And we certainly can’t survive on only the sales of our filthy chicken burgers.” And with that, the short man spat on the ground. It was as if a man who had basically built up an empire on beef, didn’t want to drop his standards to lowly chickens.

“Let’s talk business. Soon, your cow will most likely be taken for government testing. That’s the reality of it. Sure, you’ll be given some token payment for her, but nowhere near what she’s worth. And it’s anyone’s guess, as to what pain and suffering she shall endure. Allowing her to come with me is a win-win for everybody involved. So, sir, what is your price.”

Herb had been afraid of the exact same thing, but this was the first time somebody had actually mentioned it. Well , the number for her is so big, I don't even know how to say it. Only write it."

"Ahhhh," Mr. Viande answered, with a smile on his face. "Well, then, write it we shall." And he beckoned his chauffeur out of the limo to come and use his back as a makeshift table. (For Mr. Viande had decided long ago that he himself was done bending over for people.)

Herb Thompson wrote for so long, that it appeared as if he were writing the alphabet on the piece of paper on the chauffer's back. Twice. He actually had to have two breaks, one to replace the pen that had dried out, and again, to have a drink of water that Mr. Viande had fetched for him from the limo.

Mr. Viande didn't even look at the scribbled number, as he folded the piece of paper, and placed it in his pocket. "That can be arranged," the burger mogul replied.

"Well , I still want to sleep on it, " Herb warned. He was still undecided, but in the past week, there had been some 'unforeseen developments' with Anna's career.

Starting her first week, everybody involved did their best to help Anna out. Since Anna was seen as an 'unusual case', her job placement was given special privileges and attention by the human resource staff at the school. This meant that to make up for her disadvantage of being a cow, they drafted up a policy that permitted one cow to be hired, ahead of other staff, as a teacher's assistant. And, since nobody had the foresight to see that Anna would have a difficult time writing on the chalkboard with her hooves, or even use a calculator without smashing it, they created a second policy to provide a teacher's assistant's assistant. Just to get Anna through the rough spots of the day.

There were, however, unfortunately some things that no assistant's assistant would be able to help her with. On the second day of school, Anna had been trying to play soccer baseball with the school kids during gym class. She tripped rounding third base, landing on a small boy, and breaking his leg.

Then, there were numerous times, that due to either bad hay or nerves, Anna would have uncontrollable bouts of diarrhea during class. Trying to sense when it was coming, or controlling it, were new things for Anna (if you ever see cows on a farm, you know what I mean). On the lucky days, Anna would make it to the hallway before having an embarrassing accident. But, that was only on the lucky days. The sight of seeing a desperate cow running down the hallway trying to make it on time to her specially modified bathroom stall was a sight to behold indeed.

Lastly, and perhaps among the most hurtful, by the end of the first week, Anna found that as she would enter the teacher's lounge on lunch break, some of the other teachers would pinch their noses, get up, and leave. They felt that not only was it unfair that Anna had beaten their friends at getting a job, but that she wasn't even able to do most of the work.

She was starting not to enjoy being a teacher's assistant.

Herb had this all on his mind, as he had talked to Mr. Viande. So, two days after their first encounter, he called up the business man, and made arrangements for the transaction to take place. Knowing how close Anna was to her family, Mr. Viande agreed to take them as part of the deal.

Moving day was a sad day indeed, and everybody was crying. As the transport truck rolled down the driveway, Anna looked back at the farm. The rolling pastures, where, what seemed like a lifetime ago, a young boy named Billy had taught her the alphabet, and what colors were. They would lie on their backs in that pasture for what seemed like hours, staring at the clouds, and chewing straw. She looked at the barns, where she had witnessed her sister, and many others being born. Wondering if she would ever be back to see it all again, her eyes welled up in more tears, and she closed her eyes.

Life on Mr. Viande's farm was nowhere as easy going or beautiful as the Rainbow Harbor Farm . It was busy, and dirty, and although Anna and her family had been put into their own fenced in area, it wasn't anywhere as big or nice as they were accustomed to. And, they were placed right alongside the massive holding area, where what seemed like hundreds of cattle struggled for personal space, not to mention food and water. The noise was nearly unbearable for a cow as pampered as Anna had been, but she dealt with it. Trucks would roll in, and take cattle away every few days. Other days, it would drop them off.

About three months into their stay, Anna awoke one morning to find her brother gone from their enclosure. Her mother and sister, quite agitated, seemed to know more than they let on, but they wouldn't tell Anna if they knew where he was. Anna even quietly sneaked open the latch to the gate, as Billy had long ago shown her how to do, and went among the large group of cattle that was beside them. Unfortunately, there was no sign of him.

Two weeks after that, Anna awoke to find both her sister and mother gone. She frantically let herself into the muddy enclose again, and began to holler for them. But with the loud mooing taking place from all of the other muddy animals, she would have to be right beside them to be heard. On the verge of tears, Anna searched on. As she went on, another, much older cow did something that stopped her dead in her tracks.

It spoke.

“I’m afraid they’re gone, dear.”

“You- you can talk .” Anna responded, completely shocked.

“Yep.”

“Why don’t you let people know?” Anna asked.

“What’s the point. We all end up in the same place. Whether we can talk or not, we , my dear girl, are on the wrong rung on the food chain ladder.”

“Where do you think my family went?” Anna wondered.

“Well, I’m not driving the truck that just left, but my money would be that they’re gone to the rendering plant.”

With that, Anna breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank goodness.” Herb had long ago explained what the term ‘rendering plant’ had meant, when Anna had overhead some of the farm hands talking about it long ago. He had even told her that her father was at this ‘somewhat of a retirement home.’

“But, my brother and sister are way too young to retire.”

The other cow looked at her sadly. “Honey, we are all way too young to, as you say, retire, but, what it all comes down to, is that humans are just not happy having a cheese pizza or boring potatoes by themselves. They need to have cows and pigs on it to make it satisfying. ”

“What are you talking about?” Anna asked, “People don’t eat us.” She was trying not to talk down to this older cow that didn't seem to know what it was talking of.

The old cow looked at her. ”Oh, they eat us alright. They make shoes out of our skin, and grind us up into itty bitty bits, then mash us back together , to barbecue, and put in between buns to eat. It’s not as if we’re one of them.”

“You’re a LIAR!” Anna was almost sick with disgust. And she ran away. Whatever bad hay this old cow had been into, she obviously didn’t know what she was talking about. As Anna ran, she noticed yet another truck parked near a gate, loading animals. “Maybe this one is going to the rendering farm!” she hoped.

Ignoring the fact that she was being rude, Anna pushed her way ahead of the other cattle, who seemed all too happy to be able to allow another cow to go ahead of them. She missed her family too much to be nervous, as she scrambled up the steel ramp into the back of

the truck. A cattle herder, who decided that maybe Anna was a bit too slow, or that maybe he should just test his electric cattle prod, decided to give her a zap as she went by.

Upon getting the shock , Anna jumped with a start, collected herself as she looked at him, and mooed, as she scrambled into the truck with the other animals.