

This story was written as a result of my pal, Paul's, insistence.

Electric Fences

Dear Larry, Lori, Cindy, Sandi, and Randy,

Today is one of those picture-perfect early May mornings and I am at a peaceful place called Holcomb Rock, beside the James River. Jim is busy snapping pictures and I am sitting here, listening to the water flowing over the dam. My memories are flowing, too, as I remember things from so many years ago.

Electric fences have been used for years to make farm animals more inclined to behave themselves and stay where the farmers prefer. Energized wires, supported by insulators attached to posts, strung around a pasture, do a fine job of keeping the critters honest but trouble starts when one of the wires breaks or a wet weed shorts out the insulator. At that point, truly the "grass is greener on the other side of the fence", much to the farmer's dismay.

Early spring has always been a time of discovery as young livestock are released for the first time into lush pastures. They soon discover the charged wires and, eventually, learn to respect them. Such was the case when I was a little kid in Northern Illinois. In 1954, our federal government, as a step to protect our country against foreign bombers, began installing radar towers. One of these towers was built about eight miles from my birthplace. A common Sunday afternoon event for the locals was to drive slowly by the fenced-in site and watch as armed guards snapped to attention. Soon the government began flying huge bombers at various altitudes to test the radar capabilities. The locals were intrigued by all the planes until some of the bombers began flying low, barely above rooftops, for the testing. A monster plane with ear-deafening noise, just above a pasture of skittish heifers, tended to scare the living patooey out of those animals and they took off across the countryside, paying no mind to a couple of skinny little wires stretched around their pastures. To say the least, the farmers had a royal mess and complaints were voiced. Those low-flying planes also dropped long strands of extra wide tinsel as part of the testing and we often found the glittering pieces in our fields. In time, the testing was completed, perhaps hurried along by the locals' heated persuasion. Peace was restored to the pastures of German Valley.

Dad's fences were powered by a glass-covered unit which hung on the south wall, inside our barn. As long as the little light inside was flashing, you knew all was well with the fence and it was working properly. I know I have written about this before but, as Jim sometimes tells me,

“I know I’ve told you about this before but I’d kind of like to hear it again myself.” In 1953 my parents gave me a BB gun for Christmas. The purpose was to eradicate a swarm of pesky sparrows in the hen house. I had fun pretending to be a “great white hunter” until the day I went sparrow hunting in Dad’s barn. Mom came into the barn at chore time that evening, just in time to see Dad raise straight up off his milking stool when he spotted the shattered glass fencer globe. “Now, Folkert, don’t you dare say a word to her. It was all your idea to buy her that darned gun in the first place!” I never tried to shoot sparrows in that barn again. (A couple of years ago Jim picked up one of Mom’s diaries and the book flipped open to her entries for late December 1953.

December 26 entry: Linda is shooting sparrows.

December 29 entry: We went to Freeport today. Linda got 13 packs of bee bees.

December 30 entry: Folkert saw the first damage that the BB gun did...a hole through the fencer globe.)

Years passed and I became a farm wife on Florence Road. Electric fences were an integral part of that operation. All hog pastures were lined with pig-high fences and it was a daily job to pull weeds off those fences and search for shorted wires before the pigs discovered their avenue of freedom. They actually seemed to smell it when the fence was not working. Often deer ran into and knocked down the fences overnight. Weed killer was sprayed under the fence lines but the wet grass still raised havoc with our efforts. Your dad had the fences divided into circuits and had an elaborate test board on the granary wall and that helped greatly. Your Grampa Faist was a good one for testing fences. He grabbed hold of the wire with one hand and placed his other hand on the bare ground. “Oh, it just tickles a little bit,” he said. I tried that JUST ONCE.

Fence feeder circuits were strung all over the farmyard and in hog pens. One humid summer day we were sorting hogs and I came up under an overhead wire. It knocked me flat. There wasn’t much harmony in our home the rest of that day. (Years ago a lady from Central Illinois wrote a monthly column for a farm publication. Her readers grieved with her when she wrote that her children had been running barefoot in the dew-drenched grass and her daughter accidentally ran into an electric fence. Little Mary Ann’s heart stopped and she died.)

Another rainy, humid summer day we were trying to persuade some sows to go into the farrowing barn. I tried to block the path of one sow but she got her nose between my knees and “that was all she wrote”. The old girl and I made phenomenal time, barreling across the hog lot. Problem was that she was heading east and I was straddling her back, facing west. She stopped just short of the fence. I did not. How many of you have ever experienced the delights of sitting on your farside ---- in a water puddle -- on a drizzly, hot summer afternoon

---- atop a functioning electric fence ? I don't recommend it! You can bet on another day of disharmony on Florence Road as we repaired the bloomin' fence.

Now, do you remember me mentioning my pal, Paul? He tells of answering Nature's call one day, creating a fluid arc with a live electric fence. That tale gives new meaning to the term "touch and go". To hear Paul tell it, it wasn't a pretty thing.

Many more years passed and I became a Lynchburg city-slicker. Cindy gave me a marvelous platform bird feeder and Freddie attached it to the side of the duplex so I could just open a window and replenish it with seeds, crushed-up chips, Bugles, cereal, bits of dried fruit and whatever else I thought those birds might enjoy. It was great fun until the squirrels and coons discovered the new banquet facility. Even red pepper-laced hamburger did not deter those varmints and they gobbled up all the birdfeed. Randy came to visit and we found a local farm store which carried electric fencer units. Ah, vengeance was mine! He helped me fashion a miniature circuit around the perimeter of the foot-square platform. I did not want to shock the birds so the plan was to only activate the fence when the unwanted guests were present. The squirrels soon learned to crawl up on the window sill for a quick check to see if I was near the electrical plug. If I was close by, they were model fellows and swiftly left the area. If I was not visible, they gave the "all clear" alert and the birdseed was history. OK, time for plan B, which consisted of a twenty five foot long cord with a remote on/off switch. I stood in the kitchen, watching in a mirror, and when a squirrel was half way over the innocent wire, I hit the magic button and lit up that little bugger. Ever see a squirrel do a six foot back flip? One day a marauding cat got "the treatment", too. Don't you just know his tail became very fluffy? It took a while to hose off the bird feeder after that little episode. Usually, I left the unit plugged in after dark and often heard commotions in the middle of the night when the coons arrived.

Then Jim and I got married and he became co-owner of the remote switch. One day he was home from work and I called him. He was chuckling and told me of the antics that were happening there. The squirrels had not counted on somebody being home during the day so they were unpleasantly surprised when he hit the magic switch and ruffled their fur. I half expected to find a committee of squirrels at the end of our street that evening, each carrying a picket sign, denouncing Jim.

In December 2002 Jim and I moved from the duplex and the well-used platform stayed behind but the fencer unit is safely tucked away in the storage room at our new home. Those deer had best be careful if they get too busy in my cute little garden out back. I still remember how to fire-up that "zapper."

