

The cow war

Seventy years before the current livestock epidemic, enraged farmers in southern Iowa used clubs, gas pipes, rubber hoses, and tree limbs to attack officials and vets sent to test their herds. They threw stones, dirt, even pumpkins, manhandled officials, and damaged their cars. It was one of a series of incidents in what became known as the cow war.

This war of September 1931 was described in detail by George Mills in his book *One Armed Bandits* (Mid-Prairie Books, 1997). It was precipitated not by prions or foot and mouth viruses but by bovine tuberculosis, which had been greatly hemmed in after many states made testing of livestock compulsory. Farmers were compensated for cattle that had to be slaughtered and generally supported the programme.

Against testing, during the hard times of the early 1930s, was a small minority of farmers, many of German and Irish descent who were opposed to "outside influences." They argued that tuberculin testing was unreliable, caused cows to abort, produced deformed calves, or infected them with tuberculosis. They tried to fight compulsory testing in the courts, but lost. They were further inflamed by the incendiary radio broadcasts of a cancer quack who railed against authorities, corporations, vivisectionists, vaccinationists, and organised medicine.

Protests began in early 1931. Petitions were signed, rallies held, and officials prevented from entering farms. Farmers blocked roads, threatening and striking vets, splattering them with eggs, water, and "contents of chamber pots." When one farmer was arrested in a small town, the crowds attacked the jail and freed him. At last the governor called out the troops; and soldiers advancing with drawn bayonets came to support the teams testing the herds.

By October most cattle had been tested; and the war petered out in November. It had claimed only one serious casualty, a soldier who shot himself in the stomach while cleaning his gun but who recovered. Two ringleaders were sentenced to three years in jail, but were released after 40 days.

Widespread testing of herds has continued; and most states are now bovine-tuberculosis free. Only around El Paso, in Texas, does the disease survive, suspected to originate from dairies in Mexico; and also in northern Michigan, where some 1500 cows have had to be destroyed in recent years.