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# “IOWA COW WAR” REVISITED

Robert P. Blomme\*

Bovine tuberculosis (TB) is almost nonexistent in the United States today due to an aggressive eradication effort begun earlier this century. Today we recognize the public health concerns associated with drinking milk from tubercular cows. However, those concerns were not so apparent at the early point of eradication efforts and our profession had an uphill battle carrying out the testing of cattle within the United States.

For many years I have been intrigued by stories I've heard concerning testing of cattle for TB and brucellosis. Growing up on a southeastern Iowa farm, we had vaccinations, castrations and worming duties to do to our cattle every fall. While the veterinarian was performing these chores, talk often turned to stories about mandatory testing for TB or brucellosis in the "old days". Many stories were told amongst the neighbors of herds which were so wild that restraint was nearly impossible. Another favorite story was of a neighbor who requested no help from others when the vet was to test his cattle. Instead, this man had his high tempered Angus cows charge him while it was the veterinarian's job to close the headgate upon the cow as she chased the man through the chute. I later learned that this man actually led his cows through the chute and into the headgate with an ear of corn and therefore the veterinarian's timing need not be so critical. Nevertheless, it was always a good story.

Several years ago I learned of additional problems involving the mandatory testing of cattle for TB in 1931. This conflict centered around the southeastern Iowa town of Tipton and resulted in the National Guard having to be called in to put down the rebellion. This "cow war" always interested me, yet I never took time to follow up my curiosity.

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TB had been a problem in Iowa cattle long before eradication efforts were approved in 1929. In fact in 1894 the state veterinarian of Iowa indicated that TB was the number one problem with which his office had to contend. Several factors concerning TB made it a disease whereby people did not appreciate its danger. The long incubation period hindered eradication efforts, and a lengthy span between infection and the onset of clinical signs many times prevented tracing the source of exposure. Many prominent people in the medical profession did not believe it was transmissible to humans, certainly not through the milk supply. Even Robert Koch, who did much of the early work on TB, did not believe it was transmissible to man via animals. It has been said that the veterinary profession was twenty years ahead of the medical profession in acknowledging the public health concern of TB transmission to children by contaminated milk.

In 1929, the Iowa General Assembly made TB eradication in Iowa cattle the law. State approved veterinarians were to inject the tuberculin antigen under the tailhead. Seventy-two hours later the veterinarian was to return and inspect the injection site to see if the animals reacted to the antigen. Reactors showed swelling due to their harboring of TB. These reactor cattle were condemned to slaughter and an indemnity was to be paid the farmer. The slaughter value of the reactor was subtracted from the appraised value. The federal government paid  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the difference to the farmer, the state of Iowa paid  $\frac{1}{3}$ , and the farmer picked up the last  $\frac{1}{3}$ . In 1930, the average salvage value of a TB reactor was \$42.11. The average appraised value was \$89.01 for this same year. Thus the difference of \$46.90 was split into thirds.

Testing proceeded without problems throughout most of the state. Some areas offered resistance to testing and these areas took their cases in court.

Ultimately, the Iowa Supreme Court ruled that the testing was lawful and thwarted farmers who presented the petition before the court.

The area of strongest resistance was centered around Cedar County in the southeastern corner of Iowa. State officers were well aware of this and left the area for last. The Cedar County farmers were well organized. Many were members of the Farmers Union, well known for its former leader, Milo Reno. Also, J.W. Lenker from Wilton Junction headed a group called the Farmer's Protective Association. This organization was made up of farmers in the Cedar County area, and was not a statewide organization.

Misinformation was being spread in southeastern Iowa by Norman Baker, owner of KTNT radio station of Muscatine. Mr. Baker verbally assaulted the medical and veterinary professions, Iowa politicians, farm magazines and state universities while fanning the flames of rebellion in Cedar County. He repeatedly spoke out against the TB testing, stating that it aborted cows and dropped their milk production. Passive resistance was used throughout early 1931 to prevent testing of cattle in Cedar County. Five farms had pickets set up to resist testing of animals. Whenever veterinarians arrived to test at any one of these five farms, word was spread via the rural telephone for all resisters to gather at that farm. In such a way the five picket farms of E.C. Mitchell, Anton Schroeder, George Walton, William C. Butterbrodt and J.W. Lenker were able to resist testing of their animals.

On Monday, March 9, 1931 over 500 protestors gathered at the Mitchell farm south of Tipton. Four days prior, veterinarians had attempted testing of Mitchell's cattle, and the 500 farmers expected the state to try again Monday morning. However, state veterinarians and twenty police officers from Cedar and neighboring county sheriff departments went to Butterbrodt's farm northeast of Tipton. Upon hearing this, the protestors went to Butterbrodt's farm to meet the veterinarians and peace officers. By the time all protestors arrived, the crowd numbered close to 1,000 people. Order was maintained, yet no reading of tuberculin test results took place before the state attorney general commanded his men to leave.

The Cedar County farmers were again heard from on March 19th when busses and trains were chartered to Des Moines. They joined other Iowa farmers in marching on the Statehouse in protest of the mandatory TB testing law. The public hear-

ing initially slated for 7 p.m. was moved to 1 p.m. due to the more than 1500 people in attendance. More than 500 of these came from the Cedar County area.

Arguments were presented doubting the reliability of the TB test, as well as the ability of the organism to be passed through the milk. The farmers considered the testing program an infringement upon their rights and the mandatory slaughter of reactor cattle as an attempt by the government, packers and veterinarians to profit at the farmers' expense. Governor Dan Turner, a longtime friend of the Iowa Farmers Union organization, made his feelings known by stating "There can be no selection or differentiation made in the laws that are to be enforced."<sup>1</sup> He therefore made it clear he intended to uphold the mandatory testing law. The Iowa General Assembly was behind Gov. Turner even after the massive demonstration.

Cedar County again made headlines when state veterinarian Dr. Peter Malcolm was thrown off of E.C. Mitchell's farm Friday, April 10, 1931. Mr. Mitchell had allowed vets to inject the tuberculin antigen into his 12 cattle on Tuesday, April 7, yet when they returned late Friday afternoon to read the test, trouble erupted. Several local and state officials accompanied Dr. Malcolm that afternoon to read the 12 test results. However, 75 protesting farmers met them on the Mitchell farmstead. When the officials herded the 12 animals into the barn, state agent Earl Gaughenbaugh asked the farmers to leave the premises peacefully. Upon examining the cattle, one was identified as being a reactor. At that point the protestors tried stampeding the animals before the remaining tests were completed. Dr. Malcolm tried convincing the protestors to allow continued testing but was ordered off the premises. Two individuals, with Mitchell's approval, forcibly threw Malcolm off the place. Assistant Attorney General Oral Swift was threatened to be thrown into a horse tank. He did sustain cuts from being pushed into a barbed wire fence but was able to avoid taking the bath. According to Malcolm, Mitchell told him that he allowed the veterinarians to test the cattle only to "lead them on". After this incident, officials requested that Gov. Turner send the National Guard to allow the tests be read.

Saturday brought much discussion in both camps. Two Muscatine newspaper men tried to get a story Saturday at the Mitchell farm, but were accosted by the farmers. Press men as well as other strangers were regarded with suspicion, therefore

no interviews with protesting farmers were ever obtained. The *Des Moines Register and Tribune* obtained air photographs of the Mitchell farm showing autos parked around the barn so as to prevent the state officials or militia from driving cattle in to read the test.

Dr. Peter Malcolm wanted to read the tests on those 12 cattle on Monday at the latest. After that day the results would be invalid and the cattle would need to be tested several months later for an accurate assessment of their health status. Gov. Turner, on Saturday, met with Milo Reno, long-time leader of the Farmers Union in Iowa. Milo Reno served as a go-between with the protestors and Governor Turner. Mr. Reno planned to meet with the Cedar County farmers in Tipton the next day, Sunday, April 12th. A compromise was to be attempted before the state reverted to calling in the National Guard. Mr. Reno appeared to be an excellent choice as intermediary since he was a leader in the Farmers Union, of which many Cedar County farmers were active participants. Likewise, he had a good working relationship with Gov. Turner as evidenced by Gov. Turner being labelled the only politician worthy to give a keynote address to the Farmers Union later in the year.

Ultimately, it was decided that the governor would meet with a committee of protestors under the condition that E.C. Mitchell's 12 cattle were inspected before 5 p.m. on Monday, April 13th.

Mitchell's cattle were inspected without incident Monday morning and one bull was identified as a reactor. That afternoon Gov. Turner met with protest representatives in Iowa City. That evening, Gov. Turner left the meeting in Iowa City indicating that progress had been made, yet few details were released. He did, however, make known to the press that he was unbending on enforcement of the testing law.

On Monday morning National Guard units had been assembled at Cedar Rapids but were sent home before noon.

The W.C. Butterbrodt farm served as an assembly point for 500 farmers on Tuesday, April 14th. The "committee of fifteen" which met with Gov. Turner the day before, outlined to the group the results of Monday's meeting.

Testing would continue if:

- 1) Accredited veterinarians of their own choosing were allowed to administer the test.
- 2) All state forces and agents in the county be removed.

- 3) The governor attempt to force voting upon a bill in committee calling for optional testing of cattle.

The farmers also wanted it known that they still considered the test unreliable and an infringement upon their rights as property owners.

Gov. Turner's official statement differed in tone from the protestors but agreed to the first 2 points. He pointed out that the legislative bill for optional testing was out of his hands, and they should look to their elected representative for help.

At this stage many thought the conflict was over and rebellion from Herbert Hoover's county of birth would be avoided in future editions of the nation's newspapers. However, minor skirmishes continued throughout the summer. Veterinarians were driven off the farms of Arthur Fogg, William Hogan and William C. Butterbrodt.

Cedar County again made national headlines when 63 state agents and police officers were repulsed from J.W. Lenker's farm with clubs, pitchforks and mud volleys from 400 farmers. Agents and deputies assembled at the courthouse in Tipton after noon on Monday, September 21st. Farmers got wind of the plans and met in town as well. When the state officials left the courthouse to go to Lenker's farm, the protesting farmers followed them there. Tear gas was used to disperse the crowd, yet proved largely ineffective. Many agents were injured, and car windows smashed as farmers retaliated with force. Dr. Malcolm went to Lenker's farm after state officials withdrew and was treated roughly by the farmers. Apparently his suitcase and briefcase were stolen and "his hat jerked from his head."<sup>2</sup> He retreated to his car to avoid physical injury. Farmers punctured his tires, slashed the gas line and filled his radiator with mud as reported by the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*.

Gov. Turner, reached in Washington, D.C. Monday night, was outraged. He immediately declared martial law in Cedar County and requested 1800 troops sent there under the command of Brigadier General Park A. Findley. This comprised 1/3 of the Iowa National Guard manpower. Camp was to be set up at the Tipton fairgrounds. Special trains brought supplies and troops on Tuesday. All men were to be in Tipton by Tuesday noon, yet most arrived in the afternoon. Gov. Turner stated Monday night that "If we don't have law and order we haven't got anything. The tuberculin test law is the plain law of the state and will be carried through. We are not going to let up a bit."<sup>3</sup>

J.W. Lenker, on the other hand, stated via telephone Monday night, "We won't submit to that steal until we have to."<sup>4</sup> Lenker refused to give details of what occurred on his farm that day.

On Tuesday evening several of the key protestors, including Lenker, conferred with General Findley at Camp Moffitt in Tipton. The protestors told General Findley that they would not offer any resistance and the guardsmen were welcome on their farms. To this Findley replied, "When they said we would be welcome at their farms, I suggested that we might arrive about mealtime."<sup>5</sup>

Testing began Thursday, September 24th at the J.W. Lenker farm. National guardsmen blockaded roads on three sides of Lenker's farm and entered with Dr. Malcolm and five other veterinarians. Lenker's cattle were not present and he informed the officials that they had been sold. Unable to produce a bill of sale, he was arrested by the militia. Testing continued throughout the county with machine gun outposts set up at crossroads and national guardsmen escorting 22 veterinary teams to any herds needing testing. Veterinarians were recruited throughout the state to expedite the testing process.

Lenker was charged with contempt of court and sent to the Men's Reformatory at Anamosa on Friday, September 25. The following day he posted \$10,000 bond and was released.

Within a week 10,000 cattle were tested without incident and Cedar County's testing was completed.

Calling in the National Guard was an expensive effort for the state of Iowa. It was estimated in a *Des Moines Register* article that transportation to and from Tipton, and maintaining camp for one week would cost the state \$35,000. Camp expense was estimated to run at \$2500 a day. Undoubtedly, without the National Guard units present, TB testing would have been delayed additional months or years in Cedar County.

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4. "Martial Law in Cedar County; Turner Calls 1,800 Guardsmen" *Des Moines Register*, 22 Sept. 1931, p. 3.
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