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The Case of the Cardiac Embolus
(A true short story, a mystery)

By D. L. Casswell, DVM

Editor's Note: Dr. Casswell is a 1937 graduate of ISU. He submitted the following account of an incident which occurred in the school year 1936–1937.

An iron ball, perfectly imbedded in the right ventricle of the heart, was found in a farm-butchered steer. The heart had been removed whole and set aside during the butchering.

Placed in refrigeration, it was a number of days before the farmer was ready to use it. When preparing the heart for household use his knife struck something very hard. Cutting on around the center exposed a steel ball approximately two inches in diameter, neatly filling the right ventricle. The surrounding tissues had shaped themselves to the "embolus."

Astounded at finding such an unusual object in such an unlikely place, the farmer decided to present his find as a phenomenal "believe it or not." He brought the specimen to the Iowa State University veterinary college to show off; a truly remarkable discovery, a beef animal that had lived and thrived with an iron ball in its heart!

In the pathology section, to which the farmer was directed, a group of students gathered to await Dr. Benbrook, the department head. As students none of us made much comment about the heart and its contents, but we did note the seriousness of the farmer and were anxious to hear Dr. Benbrook's explanation. It was not long before he appeared and was ushered through the student group to see this "freak of nature." After a moment's studied glance, and in his characteristic assured manner, Dr. Benbrook said, "Oh, yeah!" and hurried on about his business.

We students soon dispersed, leaving the farmer alone with his heart. We thought nothing more about it until, a few days later, we learned that he was going to sue the state of Iowa and the veterinary college for the insulting manner in which he had been treated when presenting his extraordinary find.

Well, to make a short story even shorter, no lawsuit developed, but an apology came from the farmer. We learned that he had subsequently discovered how the iron ball got into the steer's heart. It was due to a chain of circumstances. The farmer had done the butchering outdoors near his yard gate. When eviscerating the thorax, and in his interest to save the heart, he held it in his hand a moment while deciding where to put it. As he looked around for a clean area he spotted the gate post nearby, with its steel ball decorating the top. Inadvertently and upon impulse he simply jammed the heart down on the ball as a temporary convenience. Later, when he took it from its place on the post he failed to notice that the iron ball, having been loosely attached at its base, came off with the heart.

And now, as Paul Harvey would say, "you know the rest of the story."

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