

News Column
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DAD'S POCKETKNIFE

My dad had one pocketknife – a flat silver castrating knife with one hooked blade for castrating and a second small blade that he used for everything else. I'm not sure ever actually used the hooked blade; I remember him using the straight blade for castrating too.

Dad used the same knife for cutting apples as he used for cutting twine, removing dirt from his fingernails, and cutting tails off lambs. He may have rinsed it off when I wasn't looking but that picture isn't ingrained in my memory. I only have a mental picture of him wiping the blade on his pants leg after cutting an apple.

Dad ate his apple just like the actors in the cowboy movies, except with a smaller knife. While holding the apple in his left hand he would carve a sliver of apple with his right hand so the apple slice balanced on his knife blade. Then he would eat the apple slice directly off the sharp blade. Carefully.

That flat silver pocketknife was also Dad's tool of choice for removing slivers and stickers from the hands and feet of small children. I learned at a very young age that it was a lot less painful to let Dad take slivers out quickly with his pocketknife than to let Mom dig them out – slowly – with a needle.

As I recall the scene, I was screaming and crying, really throwing a fit about him using his pocketknife on my finger, and his response was something like, "Shut up. I can do this fast or you can let your mom torture you while she digs around with her needle."

I only let Mom dig with her needle one more time after that. Dad was right. There was a lot less pain with the pocketknife procedure.

That sharp pocketknife is also a prized tool for determining when cattle should be removed from wheat pasture in the spring. I use my pocketknife for both digging up wheat plants and for dissecting them.

When grazing wheat pasture in the spring, with plans to also harvest a grain crop in June, it is important to remove cattle before the First Hollow Stem stage to avoid yield loss. Grazing beyond FHS can cut yields significantly, depending on how long we graze past the ideal cutoff stage.

We used to think jointing was when cattle needed to be removed from wheat fields, but that is a week or so too late. At the joint stage you can feel a hard node (joint) above the soil surface. Since the developing wheat head is above that joint, we should remove cattle earlier than the joint stage, while the head is still below the soil surface.

You can check for first hollow stem by digging up several plants and splitting the stems lengthwise just above the roots. At this time of year you should be able to detect a very small wheat head in the stem and a hollow portion of stem below that head.

As the wheat plant develops, the length of the hollow portion of stem will increase. It is time to stop grazing when the length of the hollow portion of the stem reaches about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch, approximately the width of a dime.

While I haven't spent any time on my hands and knees in wheat fields yet this spring, my guess is that our wheat is close to the first hollow stem stage. Some of it might even be jointing. I wrote this a week before you are reading it and a lot can happen in a week.

If you see me crawling around in a field near the Fancy Creek Church, you can assume

I'm checking the wheat,... but you will be wrong. Instead, I'll be looking for the knife I lost there three years ago. My daughter gave me that knife and I want it back.

If you have questions you can reach me at the Riley County Extension Office at 785/537-6350. Or, you can send e-mail to gmclure@ksu.edu.

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