

"What Ever Happened To Elmer?"

Editor's Note: Now I know that few pygmy goat breeders will destroy extra bucks or barbecue them either. But this story drives home the need to sell only neutered and disbudded males if they are going to a pet home. A buck is a breeding animal, it is all he thinks about, and he wears a rather potent perfume too. Even if the new owner promises to castrate, they more often don't get around to it. They wait too late for it to be done easily, find they can't afford the cost for their suddenly stinky randy boy, and that once cute little guy is on the way to the auction, their fate much the same as poor Elmer's. When we read this story years ago, Dan and I vowed then we would give our cute little guys the best opportunity we could to stay cute and beloved adults. We disbud EVERY kid, we neuter nearly ALL of our boys, even ones that would make fine herdsires, and we don't sell "pet quality" bucks. Pygmy wethers nearly always lead less stressful and longer lives than even the most well cared for buck, they get to keep company with all of the wonderful does, they are loved, pampered and petted every day. Not all pygmy bucks are so lucky...

Nanny and Flossie were pampered family milk goats that lived right outside of town. I didn't know the people who owned them, but whenever I drove by I always rejoiced to see two family milkers who were obviously so well cared for and happy.

They were mostly Nubian but obviously grades, since their noses were more straight than curved and their ears were of the type known as "airplane". I would see the children petting them and watch the two does follow members of the family around the yard, and I knew that here was a place where the goats had found their true niche - lots of love and milk for the children, with the love returned.

I got acquainted with the family when Mrs. Smith discovered I had goats and called just to "talk goats" one day. I enjoyed talking to her. She was an intelligent woman with an inquiring mind; she obviously wanted the best for her animals. She had bred them to a purebred Nubian buck in a program of up-grading, and of course I heartily approved. She was very excited about the approaching births since they had bought the does as milkers and this would be the first kids they had seen born.

Came the appointed day, and Nanny came through with twin doe kids to much rejoicing. Flossie, however, delivered herself a single buck kid. At my house a buck is not cause for joy, as a rule, but at the Smiths' any kid was welcome and they greeted him with as much enthusiasm as they had the does. They named him Elmer. Mrs. Smith called me "What do you do with buck kids?" she asked. "Elmer is only a grade," I told her - I am not always tactful but I was trying to be gentle. "The best thing to do with him is destroy him or wether him and butcher him later." A stunned silence. Finally - "Destroy Little Elmer? Eat Little Elmer? We couldn't we love him too much! Mindy (another goat breeder) told us to take him to the auction."

I always went to the auction in those days. I guess I was a masochist. I had even, in my early stupidity, sold a goat or two through the auction. It's something I don't like to remember. I went, though, and wept over the goats there, wishing I had an unlimited fortune so I could buy all of them and put them out of their misery... "If you would like to bring him over here," I said as kindly as I could, "I will shoot him for you." Heart attack! "Wouldn't it be better to take him to the auction?" she begged. I was firm. "No. You don't know what will happen to them once they are sold - maybe they will be eaten, maybe something else will happen to them, something not as nice as simply being eaten. Believe me; it's better to destroy him." "I'm sorry," she said, "I just can't destroy Little Elmer. I'll take him to the auction, maybe somebody will take him for a pet." "Worst thing that could happen!" I shouted - but I had lost her. She was polite but distant when she hung up the phone.

So I went again to the auction that week. In the pen with all the skinny, runny-nosed kids, the does with half an udder, the wethers with pinkeye and scabs, was a fat, slick, cunning black Nubian kid with a red ribbon around his neck. I looked for Mrs. Smith. She wasn't around but I found Mindy. Is that Mrs. Smith's kid?" I asked her. "Yes," she said, "isn't he darling?" "Has he been castrated?" I asked. "Oh, I don't know," she replied impatiently, and turned away. I checked. He hadn't been castrated. Nor had he been disbudded. I wrung my hands in despair. Why hadn't I at least done this for Mrs. Smith? I watched as Little Elmer was picked up by one hind leg and tossed over the barrier into the auction ring, and then poked with a long staff to keep him jumping around while the desultory bidding went on. "Oh, Mama," from behind me - "buy me that, isn't he cute?" And a bid came - a pet goat for the child, how cute, how nice for the boy to have his own little pet goat. Elmer left, cradled in the arms of a beaming child, his red ribbon perky but his eyes a little wild... It was six months later when Elmer made his pre-ordained visit to the auction. I recognized him immediately. He was still fat and sleek looking, he had been getting enough to eat, but he was very large. Much too big for a small boy to play with. And it was worse because he now had very sharp horns about five inches long. He was alert and watched all the comings and goings with interest.

I came up to him and said, "Hello Elmer," and he gave me a soft "maa." I rubbed his head and he arched his neck in pleasure, which presented the sharp ends of the horns to me. "Good luck this time around, Elmer," I whispered, and went up for the bidding. "Short yearling billy goat here," the auctioneer informed the audience, as Elmer was dragged in by one horn. "Strong rascal ain't he?" as everyone laughed at the way his feet were planted and how it was difficult for the man dragging him to keep him going. "Just what we need, hon," said a man beside me to his wife. "Great for Jill to practice

goat-tying." And the bidding started. Jill got her goat-tying practice animal and he was dragged out with a rope around his horns and thrown into the back of a pickup along with two pigs and a steer calf.

Another six months passed. As I came into the auction yard I recognized Jill - and there was Elmer again, sure enough. This time, though, he was tied to the tailgate of the pickup truck and nobody was getting too close to him. "He stinks something terrible!" Jill was telling a teenaged friend. "I can't get near him. Horrible stinky thing. And the auction won't let us run him through because he smells so bad. I'm just hoping somebody will buy him from here." A man approached. Jill's dad turned hopefully. "Breeding billy?" the man inquired laconically. "You bet," Jill's dad said, "can't you smell him?" Big laugh all round. The man hawked and spat. "I'll give you \$15 for him." "Done." And Elmer was again dragged with a rope around his horns to another pickup truck where a thin, mangy dog was waiting patiently. I noticed this time Elmer's coat was rougher looking, and there were scabs and scraped places on his flanks. But he was still alert, and proud, still ready for whatever life would bring him. I never went back to the auction again.

A few months later a man came over to buy some milk from me. He mentioned that his "Billy" hadn't "caught" any of his "Nannies" and he was pretty mad about it. "Bought him for breeding," he said, "and he's no good." I inquired. What kind of a buck? How did he handle his breeding program? "Oh, he's a black Billy with long ears - but he's got these huge horns so I keep him chained in the side yard, and if a nanny wants him she just comes up and gets it. Works out great - at least it always has before. Beggar sure smells bad enough, he ought to be potent!"

Could it be ...? I offered to come see the buck and give him my opinion. He said, "Sure, I don't want to get rid of him unless I have too." I got directions to his house and drove out the next day. There, in a field devoid of all but the most discouraged yellow grass, stood Elmer. His head was bowed as if the heavy horns were weighting it down. His bones stood out and there was a large suppuration sore on his left hip, where it looked as if the bone would surely show through, so thin was he. "Dogs got in," the man informed me. "He fought them off, though." Elmer's chain was about ten feet long but it had got tangled up on the log it was hooked to so he only had a foot or two to move. "Don't know if the kids gave him any water today or not, have to keep after them kids all the time," the man muttered. I approached the buck. The chain had cut into the thick black hide on the back of his neck and scabbed over; the once sleek shiny black coat was thin from lice and rough from internal parasites and poor feeding; his feet were like clubs. When I came up to him he didn't even raise his head. I didn't look at the man. "I don't think this buck is in any shape to breed," I told him. "Do you want me to take him off your hands?" "Wal," he said, "I paid \$25 for him, I reckon he's got that much meat on him." "Are you going to butcher him and eat him?" I asked. "Oh, I don't know as I'd mess with that," he said quickly. "I could let you have him for \$20." Money was never something I was very long on. Elmer was sold the first time for \$10 and I didn't have it to spend then - I surely didn't have \$20 now. But what could I do?

"Look," I said, "unless you feed this buck, and unchain him, and give him some proper exercise and worm him, and delouse him and give him some vitamins and trim his feet, he's worthless to you. Take him right now off that chain and bring him into the barn and I will show you what you need to buy for him to get him back to health." "Buy what?" he asked suspiciously. "Well, hay and grain for a start." "Don't have no money for grain," he huffed. "Then, like I said, you need vitamins and worm pills, and louse powder ..." "Oh, to heck wit it. Do you want him? You can have him, I don't care, he's no good to me."

So I drove home and got my trailer and came back to take Elmer on his last trip. Carefully I took the chain from off his sore neck and used his beard to lead him, stumbling, into the trailer. Home again, Elmer and I went up deep into the woods. He stood unmoving, head down, as I stood him by a tree and cocked the pistol at the base of his ear. "Good-bye, Elmer," I whispered, and at last he lifted his head and his eyes met mine. He was less than two years old. The coyotes feasted that night.

I met Mrs. Smith right before we moved away from there. We chatted, I told her we were moving, she asked about my goats, mentioned that she was lucky, only doe kids born this year ... and then she said, "I wonder whatever happened to Little Elmer? He was so cute - we were sure fond of him." No you weren't fond of him, Mrs. Smith, I thought as I turned away. You sure were not fond of him. But I didn't tell her what had happened to him, not then. I couldn't find my voice. I will tell her, though, someday, before her next Elmer is born.