

# THE PURPLE COW AND OTHER BOVINE TRIBUTES

*By Fred Hobbs*

A cow is not exactly the most exciting, exotic or heroic of creatures in folklore or in the hierarchy of the animal kingdom. Lions roar, tigers are ferocious, horses are loved and admired for their beauty and utility, dogs and cats have their special places in the hearts of thousands of people, “waskly wabbits” and talking mice star in movie cartoons. Even skunks have a certain cache that definitely and mercifully sets them apart. But some bovines have made their mark in the realm of pop culture. Clarabelle Cow was a Disney favorite on the “Mickey Mouse Club”. Elsie was featured for many years in the Borden Dairy advertisements. Common expressions featuring cow references are numerous: “until the cows come home”, “cash cow”, “bell cow”, “fatted calf” and “holy cow.” Would-be thespians are urged to speak in distinct pear-shaped tones by practicing the phrase: “how now, brown cow.” Another example is “sacred cow” which has a spiritual meaning in India, but also is used to refer to a person or thing immune from criticism. And then there are the occupational references such as “cowpoke”, “cowboy” and “cowhand.”

Not all cow references are complimentary. A person can be said to be “cowed” into making a decision or carrying out an act he or she doesn’t wish to do. A decidedly chauvinistic and derogatory characterization sometimes refers to an unattractive or overweight female as a “cow”.

But in all of literature, perhaps the most unusual and humorous reference to the bovine species comes in this verse:

“I never saw a purple cow and never hope to see one;  
But I can tell you anyhow, I’d rather see than be one.”

That catchy little rhyme was written by Gelett Burgess, 20<sup>th</sup> century poet, artist, art critic, author and humorist.

Whether he liked it or not, Burgess subsequently had his hopes dashed. At least that’s the account by another humorist of the day, H. Allen Smith. Smith writes about a practical joker of his acquaintance, Jim Moran, who borrowed a cow from an upstate New York farmer. Moran, with the help of some accomplices, spray-painted the animal a bright purple. Somehow, he then arranged to transport the cow to Burgess’ mid-town Manhattan high-rise apartment house. In the middle of the night, so as to avoid unneeded attention, Moran, with great difficulty, managed to get Bossy, tethered with a rope, in and out of the elevator and at Burgess’ front door. The prankster rang the bell

and Burgess, in his nightclothes, sleepily opened the door. Moran quickly handed the rope to the confused poet. His one word greeting to Burgess was “There!”, whereupon Moran made a hasty retreat for the staircase and disappeared.

No account exists of whether Burgess ever knew who pulled the stunt. Or for that matter, how Burgess disposed of the cow. But, a few years later he wrote a follow up to his famous poem:

“Ah, yes, I wrote ‘The Purple Cow’.  
I’m sorry that I wrote it.  
But I can tell you now,  
I’ll kill you if you quote it.”