

## The Petting Zoo

“You must be kidding! You *are* kidding, right?”

“No, Bill ... I’m serious! It could work!”

Bonnie and I were discussing ways we could get more parents to attend our ‘Bring Your Parents to School Day’. The turn-out last year had been pretty poor. Probably because we’d held it on the same day as the Tractor Pull and Sunflower Seed Spitting Contest in Cleardale.

Bonnie’s idea was to create a petting zoo outside, with a large fenced-in area where kids could pet and hold baby animals. She figured the kids would make their parents come, whether they wanted to or not.

“But where are we going to get all the baby animals?”

“Are you kidding? I can get baby goats, ducks, kittens ... you name it and I can get it! I even know where I can get some baby ferrets!”

“Well ... won’t we have to build ...”

“Already taken care of! I’m donating the wood and chicken wire, and Jessie volunteered to build it.”

“Jessie?”

“Don’t worry ... she promised not to paint anything!”

“Well, I guess ...”

“Good. I’ll clear it with Darren.”

Darren said yes. Although he told us that he wasn’t going anywhere near the thing if there were chickens. Darren has a thing about chickens.”

The fence went up pretty quickly, despite the fact that Jessie decided to get creative and make four hexagonal tessellated pens. She’d just learned about tessellations in Math class, and we suspected she was showing off.

Our open house was scheduled for a Friday afternoon, and Bonnie made sure it was well advertised. The baby animals started arriving Friday morning. I was there to help, along with a few students.

“These ferrets are cute! Are you sure they’re babies?”

Bonnie had a look at them. "How should I know? They're cute ... that's all that matters, right?"

The rabbits arrived next. We'd had a bad experience with rabbits on a previous occasion, so Bonnie would only accept two. They weren't babies, but they were fat and cuddly, and we made sure they were both female. And not pregnant.

Soon the pens were starting to fill up. We had a large box of puppies of indeterminate parentage, two crates of kittens, a rooster, and a very large corn snake in a cage.

"I'm a little worried about that snake. Does he bite?"

"Only if you bite him first!" Bonnie laughed. "No, he's harmless. Besides, he just ate."

"Not one of the kittens! Please tell me he didn't ..."

"Relax, Bill. I fed him a cheeseburger. He loved it. If snakes could smack their lips, he would have smacked his lips!"

"Snakes don't have lips!"

"Now, Bill ... don't be that way ..."

I changed the subject. "Why so many puppies and kittens, Bonnie?"

"I brought them. I'm hoping that a few of them will get taken home when the day's over. I'm giving them away free!"

Two baby goats arrived, along with their mother. Apparently they weren't weaned yet. We had a crate of chicks and three baby ducks ... Mindy had brought those. The four piglets wouldn't stay in their box, so they had to have a pen all of their own.

So far, things were looking pretty good. It was after the pony, the baby horse and the calf arrived that things started to get ugly.

"We can give pony rides too!" I have to admit, Bonnie was thinking ahead. "But the fence posts are too flimsy to tie the calf and the colt to. Do you think we could keep them in the gym?"

"Well ... I guess so ..." Our Junior and Senior High kids could have their PhysEd classes outside.

"Leave them in the pen for now. They seem pretty calm. I'll take them inside in a few minutes."

Paige appeared, carrying three puppies and a handful of kittens. "These are the ones I want!"

Bonnie wasn't pleased. "But we brought them! We're trying to get rid of them!"

"I want to keep these. Besides, I've named them all. And Jessie wants all the rest!"

Bonnie threw up her arms. "All right. But they're all going to live in your room!"

Paige wasn't finished. "I was thinking, Mom. Now that Brooke is gone, maybe we could turn her room into a puppy and kitten sanctuary. We won't even have to buy newspapers ... we can use all those Justin Bieber posters on her walls ..."

Bonnie sobbed. "Brooke..."

"Let it go, Mom. She's only been gone three weeks!"

Everything was in place, and we were waiting for parents and the elementary classes to arrive. Just then we heard a scream.

It was Mindy. "My baby ducks! Huey, Dewey and Louie! They ate them!"

Sure enough, when we went to investigate, the two ferrets, looking very satisfied with themselves, were sitting by the duck box cleaning their whiskers. Feathers were everywhere.

"What am I going to tell Jeremy? He really loved those ducks!"

We were speechless. But Bonnie took charge. "Here, let's round up these ferrets and put them in a cage before they eat anything else!" I sort of noticed that they were already eying up the chicks. In fact, there seemed to be a few of those missing too.

As we were doing that, Darren arrived. He scanned the cages carefully before stepping over the fence.

"Don't worry, Darren ... no dangerous chickens. Just a box of baby chicks!" Bonnie's remark caused Darren to frown. "But you sort of missed the ducks ..."

Mindy wailed.

Darren had had a bad experience when he was little. He'd wandered into the back yard where his parents kept the chickens, and he'd been attacked by a big angry rooster that was as tall as he was. He'd given as good as he got, but in the end the rooster had been triumphant. Darren was rescued, torn and bloody, by his mother.

That was the story the way Darren had related it to us. But Kate had told us later that, really, Darren had gotten food poisoning after eating at KFC, and hadn't been able to look at another chicken since.

We tended to believe Kate.

Darren wandered over to see the baby goats. He bent down to pick one up. "These are really cute!"

"Uh ... Darren ... you really shouldn't ..."

But it was too late. The mother goat wasn't too pleased about Darren handling her babies. She lowered her head.

"Darren, look out!"

She took a run at him and butted him from behind.

He didn't land on the calf. That was good. Someone might have gotten hurt.

But he did land in a rather large pile of ... brown stuff ... that the calf had deposited on the ground.

Darren didn't take long to jump to his feet. He was pawing at his face. "Cow poop! I have cow poop up my nose!" But of course, he'd had to open his mouth to say that. Pretty soon he had cow poop in his mouth too.

"Urgggh!" That's all he could get out. He was trying really hard not to swallow.

"Here, Darren, let me help!" Mindy took him by the hand and led him towards the school.

"We'd better get the calf and colt into the gym. I'll do it." Bonnie led them away.

Kate was outside the fence supervising the pony rides.

"He's so cute! I want one!" Kate looked like she'd fallen in love with the pony.

I had to agree. The pony was cute. And apparently he was also hungry. When Kate turned her back on him, the pony took a bite out of her.

"Owww! Owww! The stupid animal bit me! Right in the ... backside!" Kate was always polite.

"Here, let me have a look ... it might get infected!"

Obviously that was the wrong thing to say. I realize that now.

“No, you’re not looking at my backside! Get away! Darrennn!!”

She left at a run, with her hand strategically placed over the hole in the back of her pants.

The kids and a bunch of parents had arrived by now, and they were wandering around inside the pens. At the moment, everything seemed to be under control. I wondered what could go wrong next.

“The kids seem to be having fun.” Bonnie was looking a little contrite. “I hope Kate is OK.”

I looked around. Things did seem to have settled down. Two small boys were chasing the baby chicks around in one pen. The four pigs were chasing a little girl around in another. She looked like she was having fun, so we ignored it.

“Where’s the rooster?”

“Oops! It ran into the gym when I was taking the colt and calf in there, and I forgot to bring him back out. Let’s go get him. You’d better come too ... I might need help catching him.”

As we entered the gym, we could see there was a problem. Kate was lying on the floor, sobbing. The floor was covered with more ... brown stuff. Lots more.

How could one calf and one baby horse poop so much? And it sort of looked like one of them needed more fibre in his diet.

“Kate! What happened?”

“I slipped on all this cow ... excrement!” Kate was always polite.

“Here, let me help you up!” I reached a hand out to her.

“No! I have a hole in my pants. You just want a look at my backside, don’t you!”

She was also a little crabby when she was in pain.

Bonnie was helping her up when Darren came running into the gym from the hallway. He was flapping his arms.

As he ran past us, Kate pleaded with him “Darren, help me. I’ve been bitten by a vicious pony, and I’ve slipped in some ...”

But Darren wasn't stopping. He kept running, heading for the rear door. And now we could see why. The rooster was chasing him.

Apparently there'd been some truth to his story after all.

"He didn't even stop!" Kate sobbed. "He doesn't even care!"

"Uh ... Kate ..." She looked at me suspiciously.

"I think Darren had other things on his mind ..." I paused. "And if you get cow poop in that bite, it really is going to get infected. You'd better ..."

"No. Go away. Bonnie, can you help me up?"

Bonnie helped Kate out of the gym. I had to turn my back. When she came back, she took a basketball away from the baby horse, who had been contentedly munching away.

When Bonnie and I returned to the pens outside, everything was remarkably calm. Kids were laughing. Parents were smiling. Rabbits were hopping. Baby goats were bleating.

No-one even noticed Darren disappearing across the field, with a large rooster flapping closely behind him.