## Breeding down

I got interested in breeding at a young age. No, not that kind of breeding, I'm talking about the use of science to breed offspring that are superior to either parent. It's the magic that happens when you breed a California pruney to an Oklahoma Okie, a backsliding bull rider to a devout barrel racer or a Border Collie to anything.

Trying to upgrade a herd with genetics is one of the many challenges that I enjoy about cattle raising. The goal is to make each generation better than the last in the traits that matter most, but sometimes you can spend a fortune on a bull that looks good on paper but just doesn't nick.

Or you can be like some folks I know who are so tightly wound genetically that they are related to themselves. When that happens you can end up with all sorts of strange beasts, from dead calves born without essential body parts, lambs that can't stand on their own five feet and U.S. Congressmen.

I continue to be impressed with the strides that purebred breeders are making using such tools as EPDs, artificial insemination and embryo transfer. Can you imagine how proud a Holstein recipient cow must feel when she gives birth and looks back to see a beautiful purebred embryo calf belonging to a beef breed?

My interest in genetics was first sparked when I was 6 years old when a scandal of immense proportions rocked our small town.

A respected married man in our community, who was part-owner of the only hardware store in town, had an affair with an equally respected married woman who worked in the housewares section of the very same hardware store.

The problem was his partner was his brother who just so happened to be married to the aforementioned woman in housewares. As the two suddenly-single jilted spouses

commiserated with each other, they too fell in love and saw no reason why they shouldn't get married too. In other words, the two brothers swapped wives.

As you can guess, this made going to the hardware store for Tupperware a little touchy and somewhat more complicated. It also became very hard for all of us school kids to keep track of the children of the two families, especially when the two new realigned couples had even more kids of their own.

All our parents tried to shield their children from the scandal, and my mom wouldn't even let me go into the hardware store when I needed a new bike chain! As if my morals were going to be compromised if I bought a bicycle accouterment from the scandal-ridden hardware brothers.

Making matters still worse, because their fathers were brothers all the kids shared the same last name, which was Young. I was so confused by the scandal that I asked my grandpa how I was supposed to keep all the kids straight. I remember him sagely saying, "Just remember that the older Young brother's kids are all big, strong and stupid, while their cousins, the younger Young brother's twins, are extremely smart and well-mannered, but are weak, small and sissified. Milquetoasts we used to call them."

One would have thought that when the four adults swapped partners that a genetic explosion would have occurred and that the new batch of kids would all be tall, athletic, smart and good looking. Nope. Didn't happen. The second version of the Young children in the words of my grandpa, "Were more worthless than a bucket of spit."

Proving how prophetic my grandpa's words were, the hardware store went out of business when the youngest Young kids took it over. (To be fair, I don't know if the problem was genetic, or the fact that a Home Depot opened up near by.)

What prompted this column was that not long ago I ran into one of my classmates, one of the older Youngs, and without prying too much I asked him how his family was. He replied, "Well, family reunions are sure interesting."

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