

## *Report from the Field*

Here is a mental picture for you: it is midnight, the moon is shining brightly, the air is warm and comfortable... and all you can see of your hormonal and anxious cow is her rear end as she runs away from you at top speed to an unknown destination.

Welcome to farming, and life with the family cow.

For one week, our pregnant cow, Opal, had been showing signs of an impending birth. Her udder had been enlarging and her vulva protruding and sagging, so when we saw her licking up some fluid on the ground, it should have been obvious that she wasn't drinking a puddle of her own pee, which is what I thought for a second. Instead she was eating her amniotic fluid. I went around checking her back end and saw two hooves protruding; they then disappeared back inside Opal.



It was 7:30pm, there was no wind, and the forecast for the night was warm and dry, a perfect night to enter into the world. Opal was on a pasture that we could see from the front of our house, all seemed perfect: we'd wake up to the sight of Opal and calf standing in the pasture.

The first trouble for Opal was the presence of our cats. She'd see the cats and get highly agitated, viewing them as predators. She would start to lay down (a cow's preferred birthing position), then stand up looking for the cats. We catch one and put it in the house, but then another would appear, apparently attracted by the smells of birth. Finally, with 3 of the 4 cats caught and the other not in sight, Opal laid down and really started to push.

Within a minute she had pushed her calf out ([youtube video](#)), the lifeless looking little body outstretched on the grass. Opal immediately began to lick the calf and it slowly came to life. The calf, a heifer!(girl), started by stretching its neck and then slowly trying to lift its head. Within a few minutes she was trying to stand, but was quite the drunken sailor.



The real trouble started when she finally did get to her feet. The pasture is on a slight slope, just enough for the calf to always fall down hill, and eventually toward the electric fence. We proceeded to make the pasture bigger, and bigger, to give the calf more room to stand and tumble down. We'd pick up the calf and bring her to the middle of the pasture. Eventually she was stable enough on her feet to not fall, which started the next problem: wandering in all directions. Opal would nervously run around the calf, but eventually the calf would make it to the fence and go under and Opal would moo loudly.

So around midnight we decided we had to move them to the barn. We led our other cow, Jasmine, to the barn first, which went well. Then it was time for Opal and the calf. Each time we moved the calf to the center of the pasture Opal would follow, so we thought Opal would stay right with us if we carried the calf. But after getting out of the pasture, Opal ran away from us at top speed! What was she doing!?! We carried the calf toward the barn and when we arrived there was Opal, standing in front of the stall she had used in the winter, waiting to be let in.

Up to this point the calf had not nursed. With all the trouble with the electric fence (calf and Ed getting zapped repeatedly), it hadn't happened. We were very concerned: a calf that doesn't get colostrum has a poor chance of survival, and the earlier they get colostrum the better. So we tried encouraging the calf to nurse, pushing her under Opal, but even a 40 lb calf has one heck of a braking system. We tried this for quite a while, but with no success.

The calf was tired, and laid down. The good mom that Opal is, she would lay down next to the calf, teats almost touching the calf, and we again would try to encourage the calf. By 1:30am, we finally got the calf's mouth open and were able to squirt some colostrum into her mouth, but failed to get her to nurse.

Early the next morning we continued to watch for the calf nursing, without a sighting. By 7am we were off to the feed store to buy a nipple bottle for the calf. We then milked Opal, which she patiently let us do, licking Ed's head as he milked her. Then, with the help of our neighbor, three adults were able to subdue the tiny calf enough to get her to drink 5 ounces of colostrum.



We continued to be concerned throughout the day that the calf was not going to nurse on her own. We took turns watching them and never saw the calf nurse. Then, around 7pm, we saw a wonderful sight: the calf nursing like a pro!

The calf, Olive Alexandria, is now happy and healthy!

