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info@kinshipcircle.org  
www.KinshipCircle.org

by Brenda Shoss, 8/12/05

**Mad Cowboy: The Documentary** is a global montage of images and interviews with activists, scientists, victims, ranchers, farmers, doctors, and consumers. It is a breathtaking portal into the chemically based and ecologically disastrous agriculture we call "food."

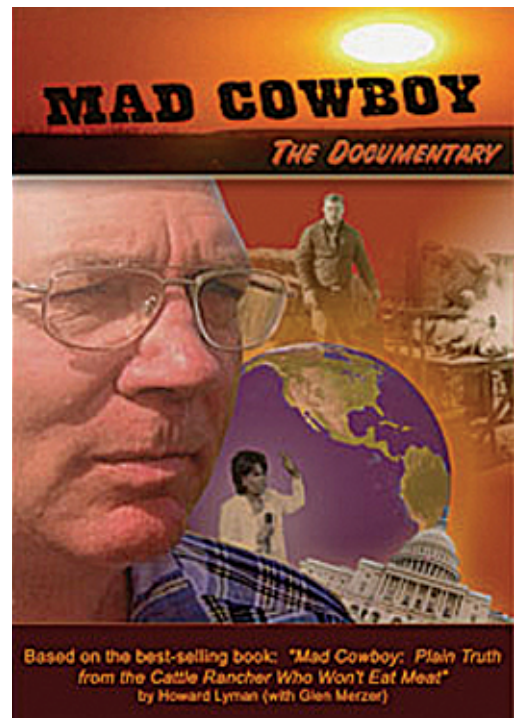


The film's nationwide debut coincides with a third potential case of mad cow disease in the U.S. If confirmed, this case lends poignancy to filmmaker Howard F. Lyman's early predictions about a once obscure disease—bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and its fatal human variation, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.

While critics deliberate on the spread of BSE in this country, Lyman, author of **The Mad Cowboy: Plain Truth from the Cattle Rancher Who Won't Eat Meat**, doesn't mince words. During an April 1996 appearance on the Oprah Winfrey show, Lyman argued an outbreak of mad cow disease in America could make AIDS seem like the common cold.

He explained how the routine process of grinding up diseased cows to feed live cows turns herbivorous animals into cannibals, some infected with mad-cow. While that practice is now banned, cows may still consume cow blood and waste. Calves regularly ingest milk mixed with bovine blood serum.

Lyman's candor prompted Oprah to swear off burgers and Engler & Cactus Feeders Cattle Company to sue Winfrey, Lyman and Harpo Productions for \$12 million each. But a U.S. District Judge threw out the Texas cattlemen's food disparagement angle (nicknamed "veggie libel laws") and the trial ended triumphantly for Lyman and Winfrey.



It also galvanized Lyman's life work. President of Voice for a Viable Future, Lyman previously directed the Beyond Beef Campaign and the Humane Society of the U.S. Eating with Conscience Campaign. He is past president of the International Vegetarian Union and EarthSave International.

**Mad Cowboy: The Documentary** is Lyman's latest stop on a journey from organic agriculture, vegetarianism, and politics to mad-cow, a landmark lawsuit, and a best-selling book.

The former Montana cattle rancher was an

unlikely environmentalist. At 23, he saturated the fields of his 4th generation family farm in fertilizers and herbicides. He crammed 5,000 head of cattle into a factory feedlot. The cows grew sick, so he filled their feed with antibiotics.

But in 1979, with \$5 million in annual profits, Lyman lay paralyzed with a spinal cord tumor. He faced a one-in-a-million chance he'd walk again. The prospect of life in a wheelchair wakened lost memories about a boy on a farm.

"When I was a kid, we had birds, trees, living soil. Now the birds were gone. The soil had no worms in it. The farm was no longer a breathing thing; it was an increasingly precarious chemical equation." Lyman vowed to dedicate his life to the land, the family farm, and the animals.

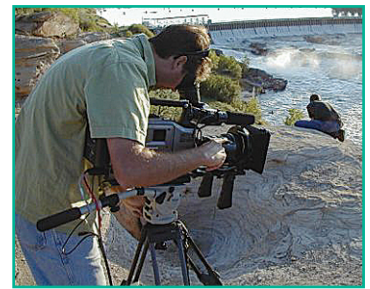
Miraculously, he awoke from surgery able to walk. In 1983 Lyman sold his 10,000-acre farm and became a voice for the financially strapped family farmer. As a lobbyist for the National Farmers Union, Lyman helped pass the National Organic Standards Act of 1990.

Still, Lyman's personal health did not parallel his concern for the nation's food source. At 350 pounds with a cholesterol count of 300, he questioned long-held assumptions about the link between health, livestock farming, and the environment.

"I can tell you from firsthand experience—[animal agriculture] is not sustainable," Lyman contends. Today's factory farms tax water, land and energy stores. Grain-fed livestock guzzle 80% of U.S. water reserves. Beef production consumes more water than the total amount expended on U.S. fruit and vegetable crops, John Robbins claims in *The Food Revolution*.

Every year enormous lagoons stockpile 220 billion gallons of animal poop. The manure seeps into soil, ground water and local aquifers. An EPA study reveals U.S. farms cause 70% of river pollution and 49% of lake pollution.

Modern farms process livestock assembly-line style in artificial settings that require antibiotics, chemicals, hormones and steroids to keep animals alive. Hog farms warehouse 600-pound sows in narrow gestation stalls. At veal factories tiny calves are chained by the neck inside two-foot-wide crates. Millions of egg-laying hens are packed into 48 to 64 sq. inch wire coops. Each bird occupies a space the size of a folded newspaper.



More than 25 billion animals perish in industrial slaughterhouses every year. On the poorly supervised kill floor, many remain conscious as their throats are slit. "If those animals had set out to take revenge on us, they couldn't have done a better job," Lyman says, citing his own obesity as well as the soaring rate of heart disease and cancer in America.

"Suddenly the circle came together for me. We were eating animals and it wasn't working. I became something I never dreamed I'd become: a vegetarian."

There's a lot less Lyman these days. He attributes his 130-pound weight loss and vigor to a plant-based diet. "There is one answer to the many different ills afflicting ourselves and our environment," he says. "Everything revolves around the fork."

The cowboy who challenged the beef trade hopes to rile the livestock and pesticide industries. Lyman imagines a day families return to the land to cultivate organic crops for their own species. He envisions farm communities in place of feedlots and factory farms.

"I'd love to know I'd wandered into my nation's heartland by the sweet smell of grain, rather than the forbidding smell of excrement."

**For stills and information about Howard Lyman's film, book, and the Oprah trial, visit: [www.madcowboy.com](http://www.madcowboy.com)**

**Howard F. Lyman, LL.D lives in Alexandria, Virginia, with his wife Willow Jeane, and his cat, Caesar.**