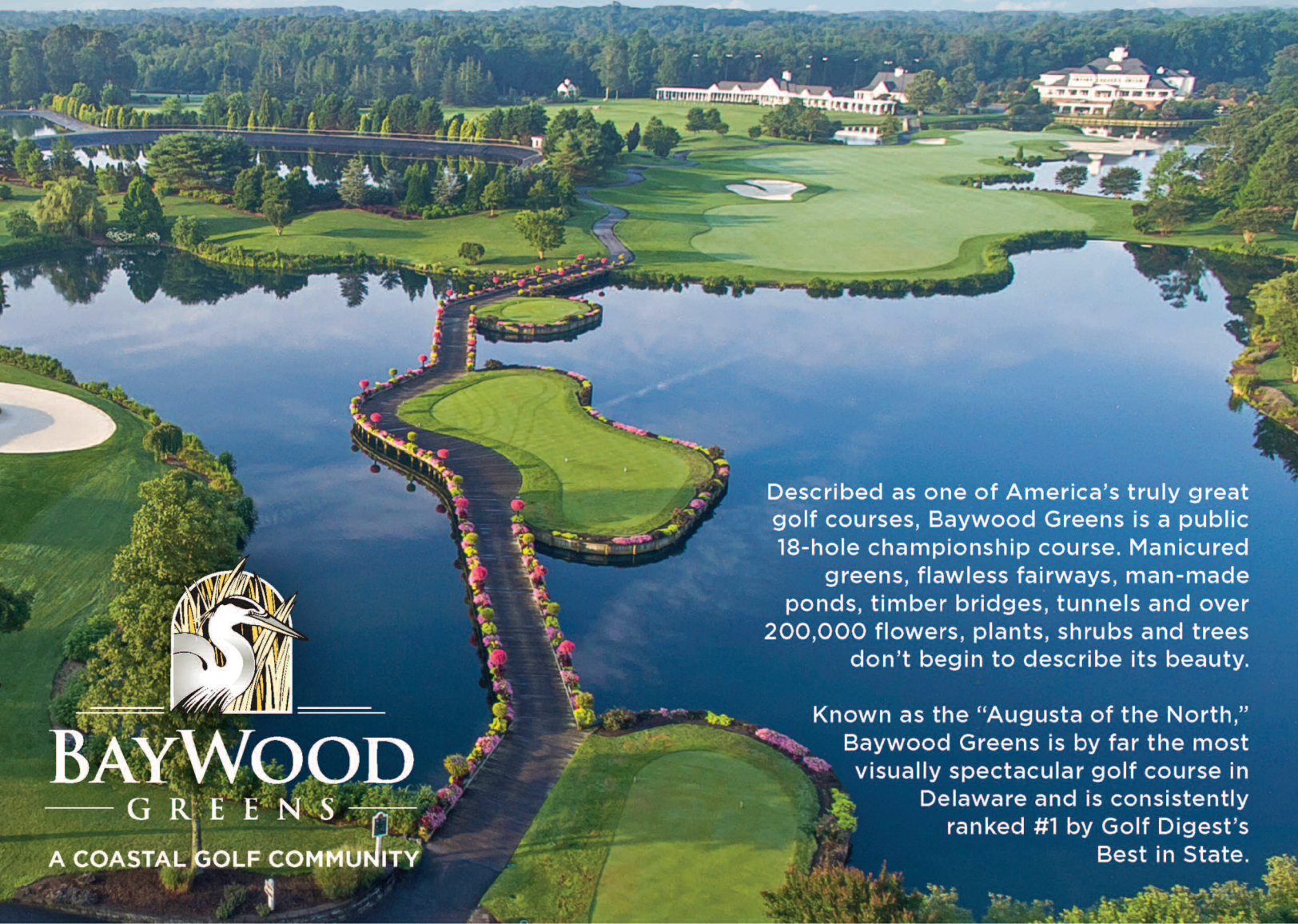


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Hi Definition

Coastal residents are quick to greet passersby, but the ways we wave say something about us

PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY BILL NEWCOTT



At first I was a little weirded out. I'd just moved to Delaware — so how did just about everyone here seem to know me?

It didn't matter if I was walking in my new neighborhood, bicycling along the back roads, or even sitting at intersections in my car. Just about every person I encountered ... *waved*.

I waved back, of course, half expecting the interaction to continue. But no — those folks went on about their business. Sometimes I'd notice them waving to the person behind me, too.

Eventually I just started calling this phenomenon The Delaware Wave. I've lived, in order of appearance, in New York City, northern New Jersey, Los Angeles, Palm Beach, Fla., Washing-

ton, D.C., and Bethesda, Md. Never in any of those places did I find myself being greeted with such jaunty enthusiasm by complete strangers.

I haven't been able to find any academic or historic explanation for it, but I have a theory that has to do with the unique social dynamic of coastal Delaware: Until very recently — and by that I mean just a few decades ago — the area south of Dover was sparsely populated by farmers, the merchants who served them, and the folks who ran the seasonal beach destinations.

In those days, everyone really did know everyone else, and to refrain from waving hello when the fellow from the next farm passed by wasn't just bad form, it could lead to resentment (Why didn't Abner wave to me?), gossip-mongering (Abner must have something to hide), or worse (Abner must *die*). >

Encountering a friendly pedestrian offering a traditional "Delawarean" wave, the polite motorist responds with a 10-Finger Palm Wave.

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Treasure Hunting

Then came the influx of newcomers, surging into Sussex County like Canada geese, bringing with them just as much noise and almost as much poop. The old-timers kept waving, and the aliens just followed suit.

Of course, varying levels of familiarity developed, leading to endless variations on the old “howdy, neighbor” Delaware Wave. As a public service, here is a primer on these gestures, and what they signify:

The Delawarean

The most common Delaware Wave can best be described as approximating the way Indians used to say “How” in old Hollywood westerns: Arm extended to the side, bent upward to a right angle at the elbow, fingers straight. Occasionally accompanied by a slight parting of the lips in a mimed “Hi.”

The Enthusiast

Rarely seen but unmistakable, this Wave resembles the appearance of a frantic third-grader trying to get the teacher’s attention, as in “Oooh! Oooh! Call on me!!” Reserved for best friends and sisters who spot each other at opposite ends of the Tanger Outlets parking lot.

The Midway

Usually adopted by guys who think they’re cool: arm straight out to the side, palm facing forward, akin to the gesture of a batter who has just hit a home run and is slapping five with the base coach while rounding third. A particularly nonchalant form of the Delaware Wave, this one frequently occurs without eye contact. Adopters of The Midway aren’t quite antisocial, but they’re not particularly friendly, either. Do not trust them.

The Low Five

The arm is barely raised, the hand bends outward at the wrist, palm facing the ground. Nearly imperceptible finger movement may be present. This form of the Wave is often adopted by recent big-city transplants who are just getting used to this whole Wave thing — especially when they think they recognize the car that’s coming, but can’t quite make out the face of the person behind the wheel



Don’t take it personally — the “Midway,” one of the less emphatic Delaware waves, is typical of a distracted waver.

and are not positive it’s someone they’re comfortable waving to.

The Finger

Not as offensive as it sounds, this is actually a friendly, if minimalist, Wave. The waver smiles and points at the recipient, in the manner of a politician singling out random faces in an applauding crowd. This waver is saying, “Hello, you. Yes, I mean *you!*”

The Wiggle

As noncommittal as the Wave can get, this one consists of a mere flutter of the fingers at the end of a floppy arm. It’s totally insincere and more of a kiss-off than a greeting. These wavers have retired to Delaware only to realize it’s not for them. Soon they will be moving to The Villages in Florida, where they can stay in their air-conditioned houses all day and not wave to anybody.

The Swat

A particularly violent form of the Wave, this variation involves adopting the bent-arm, upright-hand pose of the classic Delawarean, but in this case the hand is forcefully swept downward, as if the waver were crushing a tarantula on an imaginary tabletop. As coastal Delaware’s population grows, the Swat is, alas, becoming increasingly common: The waver has been waving all day, and his or her arm is now growing tired. “I’m waving at you, okay?” the waver is saying, with some exasperation. “What more do you want from me?”



The “Finger,” a specialized wave that makes a point, is also useful if you’re running for public office.

The Wheel Grip

You would think the crush of cars in the area would slowly kill off the Delaware Wave, but happily it has actually added to the traditional wave lexicon. Drivers who wish to reciprocate a pedestrian’s friendly wave have many options, among them the 10-Finger Palm Wave: While keeping their hands at 10 and 2 o’clock on the wheel, they flare their fingers upward. More cautious drivers will raise one or two fingers in greeting. The most enthusiastic drivers have been known to actually roll down their passenger windows and engage in more traditional, emphatic Delaware Waves. Concerned DeDOT officials are reportedly considering initiating a “Don’t Wave and Drive” campaign.

The ‘My Bad’

Sadly, we’re beginning to live so close to each other in coastal Delaware that interpersonal conflicts are inevitable. That can lead to the uncomfortable moment when you reflexively begin to wave at someone, then realize to your horror that that’s the guy whose dog keeps leaving deposits on your lawn. When caught in mid-Wave, the default resolution is to move your hand to your hair, as if flattening down a stray curl. Those without hair up top face a more complicated choice as to where that hand should go, but frankly I’ll pick my nose before I wave to *that* guy. ■

BILL NEWCOTT, an award-winning film critic and former staff writer at National Geographic Magazine, AARP the Magazine and The National Enquirer, lives in Lewes.



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Making Waves

Nobody knows how wind and ocean water work in tandem, but researchers at a Cape Henlopen lab are trying to figure it out

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL NEWCOTT



There is nothing more irresistible to me than a sign that reads, in effect, “Keep Out.” Without fail — you just know it — there is something absolutely fascinating going on beyond that sign. Even better, there’s also probably someone hellbent on keeping you from finding out what that something is.

Much of my career has been spent trying to get past “Keep Out” signs, so you can imagine my delight one recent day in Cape Henlopen State Park when I spotted a large gray building, right

near the fishing pier, with a startling array of signs bearing some of the most fantastic cautions I’ve ever read:

“WARNING!!! DO NOT ENTER IF THE SIGN IS FLASHING. EXPERIMENT IN PROGRESS.”

“VISIBLE AND/OR INVISIBLE LASER RADIATION — AVOID EYE OR SKIN EXPOSURE TO DIRECT OR SCATTERED RADIATION.”

So many exclamation marks! This, I told myself, I’ve got to see.

A far more prosaic sign stands a few feet from the thrillingly ominous ones, identifying the building as something called the Air-Sea Interaction

Studying the interaction between wind and sea, University of Delaware researcher Fabrice Veron is unraveling the mysteries of hurricanes at his Cape Henlopen lab.

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Treasure Hunting

Lab, a facility belonging to the University of Delaware's College of Earth, Ocean & Environment.

Not the sort of establishment you'd expect to be dabbling in death-ray lasers that will simultaneously blind you and cause your skin to slough, I thought. So I placed a call and set up a visit with the lab's director, who happens to have the coolest name of anyone I've met since moving to Delaware: Fabrice Veron.

"I was born in France," says Veron, explaining his fantastic name (magazine style demands I henceforth refer to him as Veron, which is too bad because Fabrice is just too good to use only once).

As Veron greets me at the facility door, I am slightly disappointed to see that the mad scientist I'd been hoping for is actually a soft-spoken, bearded fellow with an easy smile and quick laugh.

Veron is one of the world's foremost experts on ocean waves. Raised near the sea, he loves scuba diving. In school he developed an early interest in mechanical engineering and then, as a musician, in acoustics.

"My aha moment came when I was in grad school — I realized acoustic waves are a lot like ocean waves," Veron says. "This was a way to combine all my interests."

It's just a few steps from the door to the building's centerpiece, a 138-foot-long wind-wave channel: basically a mega fish tank (sans fish) mounted about 15 feet above the concrete floor. The tank itself is about 4 feet deep and 3 feet wide with rectangular panels of glass that extend for its entire length. The contraption resembles a subway car, or a monorail — only if you were to open a door in the side of this train some 8,000 gallons of water would come pouring out.

The tank was built 40 years ago, dedicated on June 20, 1979. This building, a former Fort Miles munitions depot, was not only large enough to contain the tank, it also had a solid concrete floor strong enough to support the massive weight of the machine plus all the water inside.

As the lab's name suggests, Veron and his colleagues use the tank to study the interaction of the ocean surface with the air above it. They create waves in the tank two ways: with wind, created by a fan at one end, or with a mechanical wave maker that physically pushes the water into action.

The entire tank also tilts at one end to create currents that will interact with the waves, just as they do in the ocean.

In fact, Veron says with some pride, "this is the only tilting wind-wave channel in the world. People come from all over the planet to work on it."

The wave-making mechanism is being serviced on this day, so Veron turns on the wind fan. At first a small ripple action appears on the water surface; soon actual waves, about a quarter-inch high, develop.

Then Veron starts saying things that blow my mind.

"We really don't know how waves are formed," he says, and I think he's kidding.

But seriously: "What you just witnessed here — waves forming from blowing wind — we don't really understand it.

"I tell my students if they were to aim a hair dryer into a full bathtub — and I also say they shouldn't do that — but if they did, those ripples would start to form from the blowing air. And we don't really know why that happens. The pressure variations in the air are not enough to make waves."

What else don't we know? "Hurricanes are very mysterious," he says, and I can sense his excitement rising. "In some ways, they're relatively simple. We know there are two dynamics working on a hurricane: The hurricane gets its energy by removing heat from the ocean, and the ocean takes energy from the hurricane by causing friction at the surface.

"But when we did the math, figuring how much energy a hurricane could pull from the ocean's surface and how much energy the water surface pulled from the hurricane, we came to a surprising con-

clusion: There should be no such thing as a hurricane! Hurricanes don't exist! There's not enough energy being transferred."

Now, in the Cape Henlopen wave tank, Veron and his fellow wizards are trying to solve that puzzle by studying spray — the water droplets tossed into the air by violent wave action — to see if that's where the missing energy is coming from.

"Water droplets are very efficient in transferring energy," he says. "It's why you're chilly after taking a shower.

"We're literally trying to measure how many droplets get ejected by a breaking wave."

Plus, he adds, since the winds of a hurricane only encounter friction at the tops of waves — rather than across the entire surface of the sea — it's possible the effect of friction removing energy from storms has been overestimated in the past.

If Veron and company can crack that energy transfer puzzle, scientists may be able to improve predictions of hurricane strength.

But what about the killer laser beams promised by the signs outside? Where is the Frankenstein monster lab equipment I'd been hoping to see?

Veron points to a nondescript array mounted atop the tank.

"That's it up there," he says. The powerful lasers are used to create cross-section views of the water in motion and artificial fog floating above it, basically CAT scans of wave and air activity. The windows at the point where the beams enter the water from above are heavily shielded with black shrouds, but water and fog tend to diffuse light, so everybody in the lab has to be extremely careful and don goggles when the lasers are zapping.

Veron has waves to study, so it's time for me to wave goodbye. I knew this would be fascinating, I tell him as he escorts me to the door.

"It is fascinating," he smiles. "For a geek like me, anyway."

Well, sign me up for the Geek Squad. ■

BILL NEWCOTT, an award-winning film critic and former staff writer at National Geographic Magazine, AARP the Magazine and The National Enquirer, lives near Lewes.

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Aging Bull

Meet Bob, the well-traveled supersized bovine who found a home near Dagsboro

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL NEWCOTT



Something about tourist towns seems to inspire the oddest of odd-ball business attractions.

When I lived in L.A., my favorite doughnut shop was in the shape of a giant doughnut. In Florida I entered an alligator farm by walking into the mouth of an enormous gator. Atlantic City has the legendary Lucy, a six-story landmark in the shape of an elephant.

For a while I thought coastal Delaware might be an exception. Sure, there's the flying white baby grand piano atop the Keyboard America sign along Coastal Highway. And the retired crop-dusting plane posted above Midway Speedway. And then there's that swooping Huey helicopter behind the fence of Bethany Beach's National Guard training site. (Here's a joke I just made up: Heading north from Bethany you can visit Huey, Dewey, and Louie's Pizza.)

But those things aren't ginormous versions of

something — they're totally life-sized. Overall, our neck of the woods seemed to have avoided that traditional tourist trap bigger-is-better mentality.

Then I met Bob the Bull.

You can't miss Bob. He's a roughly 15-foot-high, 20-foot-long black fiberglass bull. If Bob's sheer size won't stop you, his attire will: He's wearing a checkered chef's hat. And a red napkin tied around his massive neck. And sunglasses.

He sure got my attention. One look at Bob and I veered off Armory Road near Dagsboro, my tires crunching into the pebbled parking lot of the Parsons Farms Produce market. I found myself standing feet from the colossal bull's eye-level snout.

Next to me was a woman in shorts and a "Mamma Mia!" T-shirt. Even through her dark shades, I could see her eyes were wide in amazement.

Bob the Bull is unmistakably the same oversized mascot who once stood on a corner in Ocean City, but his attire has changed a bit: Bob's checkered hat used to be solid red, and those sunglasses were framed with fashionable (but obviously fake) tortoise shell.

"This is the bull from Ocean City, isn't it?" she chirped excitedly. "Isn't it?" she repeated, clearly seeking affirmation.

She seemed so certain I had to agree. But was it? And if so, how did this supersized bovine find its way from Ocean City, Md., to a farm store in Dagsboro?

Soon I would learn that move wasn't even the half of it: When it comes to being a traveler, Bob is one well-seasoned hunk of beef. Over the past 40 years or so, he's lived in no less than four states and covered thousands of miles.

I headed inside, past the succulent-looking peaches and beyond the shiny apples, and found the owner, Paul Parsons. He was out back, sharing lunch with his wife, Brittany, their baby daughter, Scarlett, and Paul's dad, Preston.

It turned out Bob the Bull is a relative newcomer to coastal Delaware: He's been looming over the Parsons parking lot only since spring of this year. But his presence there had been Paul's dream for nearly two decades.

"I've wanted Bob here since 2003," he says. "I couldn't get him then, but last year I got a second chance."

Those who ventured south to Ocean City in the mid-1970s will remember Bob the Bull standing at attention outside Capt. Bob's Steak and Seafood House on 64th Street. He went by the name of Mr. Ocean City in those days, and he became a landmark families waxed nostalgic about all winter long while reflecting on their summer vacations. Generations of parents tracked their kids' growth by how high they measured up to Mr. Ocean City compared to last year's photo.

Besides those countless photos, waves of inebriated college students tried to climb Mr. Ocean City over the years — leading the owner, Bob Wilkerson, to coat it with Vaseline in an effort to discourage them.

Wilkerson bought his big bull from a Wisconsin company that specialized in such things. (FAST Corp. is still in existence, providing playgrounds with whimsical fiberglass slides and high schools with monumental fiberglass mascots. When Mr. Ocean City was delivered from a half-continent away, Wilkerson was surprised to see him roll into town on a flatbed pulled by a station wagon.)

In later years Wilkerson began to dress Mr. Ocean City in festive holiday costumes: as a bully ghost for Halloween, as Santa Bull for Christmas. Folks in Ocean City

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couldn't wait to see what that bovine landmark would be wearing next.

Alas, in 2003 Capt. Bob's closed, and the new owners didn't want a big bull in the parking lot (the building is now occupied by Dead Freddie's Island Grill, the name of which largely explains why I don't ever go to Ocean City).

It was then that Paul Parsons, hearing the bull was up for sale, got the itch to buy Mr. Ocean City. But the Parsons family was heavily involved in shifting their business from poultry to produce. For reasons hard to fathom, shelling out the money for a two-ton fiberglass bull in a chef's hat just wasn't in the budget.

"We really wanted that bull," says Parsons, still sounding a bit mournful.

So, Mr. Ocean City instead went to a buyer named George Katsetos, owner of Maria's Family

Restaurant in Chincoteague, Va. He was renamed Bob the Bull in honor of his original owner — and also because he now lived nowhere near Ocean City. At first, the big fella

took a place of honor in front of the restaurant, but then the city got involved, telling Katsetos the thing was just too, well, big. Reluctantly, he moved it out back, and the city wasn't too happy about that, either.

Humiliated and unwanted, Bob the Bull fell on hard times. Workers cutting nearby trees let a branch slam into his flank, leaving a gaping hole. Grass grew tall around him. People who'd loved Bob the Bull sought him out, saw the carnage, and left with their heads bowed in sorrow.

But Bob was not ready to be put out to pasture.

The town kept pestering Katsetos to get rid of the bull, and he finally gave in.

By some amazing stroke of luck, Paul Parsons' mother, Cora, saw on Facebook that Bob was once more on the market.

This time the Parsons family didn't flinch. They rushed down to Chincoteague the next day.

"I gave him a price," says Parsons, "and he said, 'You know he's got a hole in him, right?'"

"I said, 'Yep!'"

"It was a bargain. He just wanted it gone."

On Nov. 1, 2018, Bob the Bull was carted away on a flatbed — and taken straight to Stratoglass Fiberglass in Ocean City, a company that specializes in fiberglass fabrication and repair.

"The strangest thing happened that day," adds Parsons' dad, Preston. "When we pulled into the fiberglass shop, a car pulled in behind me. It was the daughter of the man who used to own Capt. Bob's Steak and Seafood!"

"She jumped out of her car and said, 'I'm just so glad someone saved him!'"

It took a winter of work, but by spring of this year, Bob the Bull was ready to roll.

"They did an amazing job," says Paul Parsons. "He was too

big to get into their shop, so after they repaired the hole, they actually had to cut another entryway so they could work on him from the inside all winter."

On March 20, Bob was loaded onto

another flatbed and gently rolled the 20 miles or so to Dagsboro.

Since then, Bob the Bull has been discovered by the popular Roadside America website, and that's bringing in big-bull seekers from all over.

"I thought they'd be interested in the history of it," says Parsons. "But, no, they just want to see the big bull."

"We want to get back to making costumes for Bob, like they used to down in Ocean City. But there are only so many hours in the day."

I left the Parsons family to finish their lunch. Back outside, Bob the Bull continued his eternal gaze, peering over the rims of his sunglasses.

"He's had quite a busy life," says Parsons. "We like to say Bob the Bull has retired to the farm." ■

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