



CANADIAN LUING

Cattle Association



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NEWSLETTER

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MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Jeff Longard

Always Back-pedalling...



“The older I grow, the more I recall/ the little I knew, when I knew it all”.

Just when I think I have learned something about cattle, they teach me something else. By “they”, I mean the cattle, not the industry. This is not to say that breeders, stockmen, and

books can’t teach a great deal; they can. If I need to learn something new, I approach it academically. I get the best journals, read the best books, consult with the experts. What’s wrong with that, you might ask? And I admit that it is a great starting point when one needs to tackle a new subject.

But it is *only* a starting point. There are inherent dangers in such an approach. First, all such information is contextualized, and the context is not always visible. Second, those who are providing the information are usually selling something.

When I started in cattle several years ago, I was not long in learning that the average cow in Alberta was poorly suited for her environment and the task of maintaining her warm-country inefficiency would never make business sense. So I studied and read and decided that now I knew the type of cow I was looking for.

The first time I had to back-pedal was on weaning weights. Bigger calves have more pounds and generally bring a higher price: the logic of that is so inescapable that I was blinded to how much more it was *costing* me to produce these bigger calves. By bringing home a fatter cheque I was losing more money. I needed more efficient cows, not larger calves.

The second time I screeched into reverse was when I decided that small cows raising big calves

was the mark of efficiency. Actually, it is simply the mark of milk production and it means that you will have an open cow soon and you will cull her early at enormous loss to yourself and enormous gain to the “poor struggling packer”.

Then I had to back-pedal on something very dear to the heart of purebred breeders: testicle circumference. Forty centimeters at one year of age for a bull that’s going to be of any use! Oh, I knew I was right on this one because all the books said so and all the breeders shouted their agreement. After all, it is a *fact* that the daughters of a large-testicled bull will come into heat sooner than daughters of a small-testicled bull. No one was talking about the other facts, however. Yes, she will come into heat sooner, but when she reaches 15 months of age the difference will be about five days. Since she will have been cycling for weeks or months before being put to the bull it’s hard to imagine the importance of this miniscule difference. And yes, she will cycle (5



Medicine River Ranch 10U

days) earlier but her cycles are not correlated with her fertility — she may be bred earlier and catch later. (I’ve seen this too many times myself.) Yes, the bull may have larger testicles but the hog-barn-type feeding regime necessary to get him to that size

means that, in terms of actual breeding value, he may be (I can almost guarantee that he *will* be) dramatically less efficient than a smaller, rugged, forage-raised bull. Yes, he may have an enormous set of testicles but their enormity is only in circumference, not in length (which is never measured, so real volume remains a myth), nor in uniformity or lack of fat deposit or genuine production over sustained breeding pressure.

Finally, cow size. This is the one dear to my own heart. I believed firmly that the only way to have an economical herd is to have small cows, 1200 or so pounds adult weight. Here, I *had* to be right, since all the successful mavericks say so. The big, slab-sided 1700-lb draft animals from the French Riviera had to go, of course (I still believe that!), but so did the 1400-lb deep-chested beef machines. 1400 lbs is 200 lbs too big! Well, that belief comes from watching the advertisements from Colorado and Spirit River, and not from watching the cows. We need to ask ourselves why that big, deep, beautiful animal, who is bringing in her fourteenth calf, weighs so much — is it because she's an inefficient grain hog or because she knows

how to get fat on grass, maintain condition on stockpiled forage and live off her back through the winter? In other words, the question we must put to ourselves is: How much is the animal costing us? If she can reach and maintain 1300 - 1500 pounds while maintaining fertility and lowest-cost production, she's the one we need!

I admit that "The Most Medium Cattle in the Country" is not a slogan that sells. For that reason, breed societies have not targeted the breed standard but ever-increasing tangents. That's a marketing issue, not a stockbreeding one. Whenever I start to latch on to any extreme — it's bigger, it's smaller, it's faster-growing, it's high-yielding, it's all about — well, you fill in the blank — I need to get back to letting the cattle tell me what qualities are necessary for good beef, good economics and long-term sustainability. Since that takes years of careful attention, it's no wonder that EPDs and market hype are more popular. They short-cut true breeding knowledge and make everyone an expert. At least until the business flops: you can only back-pedal so far. ▣

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY

Iain Aitken

Rethinking Breed Choices



With our national cattle herd being downsized at such a rate I wonder if we haven't missed a great opportunity to review the use, type and purpose of our cow herds?

We are all individuals and have our own ideas and standards of the type of cow we like to

keep or sell, but looking around the countryside it seems there are some fine cow herds heading to the packers, yet there are herds of non-descript Heinz 57

varieties retained to rear another calf. We are constantly being told that we need to increase efficiency on our operations through better grazing management, cheaper feeding systems and lower overhead costs. I think there is also huge potential to increase efficiency by having the right type of cow, matched to her environment and bred to the right type of bull.

I find myself again drawing on my experiences in the old country where there seemed to be a much more stratified approach to breeding, both in the cattle and sheep sectors. The UK sheep industry presents a very clear example of stratification based on efficient use of the different land types and their relative productivity. On the highest hills the sheep breeds kept were almost akin

to goats, lightweight breeds that were survivors. They had limited production potential in terms of milk, carcass and growth due to the physical constraints of their environment. The sheep on the high hills were almost always bred pure.

Lower down the hill, on “upland” farms, the land, vegetation and weather could support more production. Many of these farms ran sheep retired off the hill farms at five years old to get two more years of production from them under the better conditions. They were usually bred to a maternal type ram to produce F1 replacement females for use by other farmers in the uplands or on the lowland farms.

The lowland farms typically ran F1 females bred to terminal sire breeds. Many lowland flocks now use F2 females with an extra shot of terminal blood to improve carcass conformation.

A similar policy of stratification was followed in the cattle herds that shared the land with the sheep. Traditionally the hill farms were the domain of the Highland, Galloway, Luing and Welsh Black breeds. The upland farms would cross these hill breeds with bulls like the Shorthorn to produce F1 females to cross with terminal sires either in the uplands or on lowland farms.



Medicine River Ranch 15U

There was a tremendous logic in these systems in that the animals were matched to the environment and natural resources as closely as possible, with the wise use of hybrid vigor where the conditions supported its use. With the widespread move to higher input farming in the 1970s, these systems broke down, particularly with the cattle.

Nowadays there are lowland cattle maintained on hill farms that are totally unsuited to their environment. By winter housing and pushing inputs to these cattle they can be sustained - but the efficiency drops significantly.



Lochend Luing Ranch 31U

Canadians might wonder why there was a need for such an elaborate system of production in a country with such a tiny land base. To understand that, you need to appreciate the vastly differing climatic and topographical conditions existing in a country with a “raw, wet” climate. Altitude and topography is very important in a small country surrounded by water and subjected to heavy rain and high winds. Lowland farms could run anywhere from sea level up to 300 feet in altitude. Upland farms might run from 300 feet up to 700 feet depending on the area of the country and hill farms would run anywhere from 700 feet up to 3000 feet and beyond. The differences in soil type, vegetation and productivity between these zones are quite dramatic. The high hills might be pure heather where the lowland pastures would be highly productive tame grasses and in some cases the distance between would be less than 10 miles!

What is the relevance of this to Canada? There isn't a huge fluctuation in altitude across the prairies and it's all so far from the oceans that maritime influence isn't an issue. My belief is that there are still opportunities for increased efficiency through stratification here through making a better job of matching genetics to the type of systems we

run. Even though we do not have the same conditions as the homeland of our British breeds, I believe we could benefit from the breed characteristics that were established over many generations under their stratified structure. Prevailing moisture levels tend to dictate forage volume and quality, but duration of grazing season is a management decision. I see opportunities here to better match real foraging-type cows with extended-season grazing of lower quality forages. There are



Greywood Luing 2U

significant differences in foraging ability between cattle types or breeds. Part of that is education — herds can be taught to graze species and areas that have previously been underutilized, but I believe there is a genetic (or breed characteristic) component too. We pastured some cows on a neighbor's land this year and he was amazed to see our cows graze thistles, hemp nettles, sedges and slough grass when there was plenty of lush tame grass on offer. He had grazed cows for several owners in the past and had never seen any that would eat his “weeds”. I speculate that some cattle just have a more sophisticated palate and are able to appreciate the mineral and nutritional content of these plants that many other cows would walk right past because they don't look like grass. From what I have read and heard about Manitoba there seem to be a lot of cows there maintained on land growing lower quality coarse, sedge and slough-type grasses. I remember in the 2002 drought, a lot of cows from the hard grass areas of Southern Alberta were sent east to

Manitoba and they were not able to adapt to grazing this coarser, wetter forage. I think that the Luing would be in heaven on that type of forage.

I am surprised even in “grazing club” circles in Alberta to see the size and type of cattle that some producers attempt to maintain on low cost systems. I understand that some producers prefer large, milky cows that calve in January and wean a 700lb calf in September, particularly if they have a lot of grain acres to seed in April/May. However the cattle with this type of genetics are generally not well suited to an extended grazing season, May calving herd. They tend to be too heavy milkers and subsequently lack the fleshing ability to winter graze, and tend to become late calvers and then open as a result.

Another breed characteristic that I feel has a lot to offer in many parts of Canada is an extra well-insulated hair coat. The British breeds that have the double hair coat consisting of a soft downy underlayer and longer guard hairs on the outside are considerably better prepared to withstand cold weather than the regular coated cattle. This leads to increased cattle comfort and decreased feed costs. To really appreciate this, you need to see the cows winter grazing on a -30C day with some wind — I have seen our Luings grazing happily while some of the other cows are huddled behind wind breaks. The colder the winters are in your area the more you need double haired cattle — no different to triple-glazed windows in our houses versus single-glazed.



Cattle that happily graze through a foot of snow are clearly a better choice than cattle on expensive feed!

The other part of the efficiency/matching genetics to resources equation is the end product — producing something the market wants as



Medicine River Ranch 31U

consistently as possible. Consistency in a herd is hard to achieve, but the premiums (and maybe more significantly the discounts) applied to your cattle when you sell them reward cattle that are of consistent breed, type, size and quality. When we talk of efficiency of production we have got to talk about hybrid vigor. I think the use of hybrid vigor has been overlooked or dismissed by many breeders in recent years. Part of the problem might come from the promotion of F1 bulls by some seed-stock producers. Unfortunately when a rancher uses an F1 bull he will not see spectacular results from hybrid vigor, as these benefits have already been captured by the seedstock producer. This may make it appear that hybrid vigor doesn't produce the rewards claimed of it. However, used in the correct place in a breeding program, hybrid vigor has a large contribution to make — it's one of the few free

performance-enhancing inputs in the industry. Straight-breeding a herd of cattle because you like the breed is leaving a lot of money on the table instead of putting it in your pocket. In an ideal world, I think peak efficiency could be achieved by having straight-bred purebred herds (preferably line-bred to ensure prepotency) supplying seedstock. Crossing animals from two different breeds would be used to generate F1 females to run with terminal sires. Maybe the best known F1 cross in Canada traditionally would be the Hereford x Angus (the black or red "baldie") although there are probably more Simmental x Angus F1s in the country today. We have had good success with the F1 Luing x Red Angus cross and I'll be keen to see the results of one



Galena Creek Ranch 48U

bull customer who is using a Luing bull on horned Herefords to produce a hairier coated, better winterized baldie.

Have you maximized the efficiency of your cattle herd by matching its genetic make up to the available resources under your system? ■

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT...

"We get out of a cow about what we're willing to put into her. Rockets don't run on low grade fuel, and cows of extreme size and performance don't run very well on low cost forage and maintenance. Yet, we continue chasing the rabbit that promises, 'If you run fast enough, you can catch the impossible dream of something for nothing'. No matter what the EPDs read, the DNA stars show or the association programs promise — it won't ever happen! Performance at all levels carries a price, and optimums are more efficient than extremes." - Ed Oliver, in linebreeding Hereford breeder Jim Lents' *The Lamplighter*, Fall 2009.

LUING CATTLE FOR SALE

With ever-tougher times in the beef industry, virtually every breed is claiming to have the low-cost efficient answer. Unfortunately, too many such cattle are raised in pampered conditions on expensive supplements that the average cattleman cannot afford to reproduce on the ranch. Frankly, claims of “forage developed moderate framed maternal” breeding stock need to be investigated before they are believed.

Yes, we make these claims for Luing cattle, and we invite you to investigate! You are welcome to observe our herds of purebred, commercially-raised cattle, chosen for reliability. Luings are genuine low input, grass-based genetics, since they are a breed created, selected, and maintained for that purpose. So, as you flip through all the flashy ads and elaborate promises that will arrive in your mail in the following months, just ask yourself: Where else can you buy bulls from people running their purebreds tougher than you run your commercial cows?

Our mother cows are proven efficient foragers in the real world. They can handle winter grazing, without supplementation, through deep snow when it's -40C. Our Luing cattle survive and thrive on grazing alone nine or more months of the year, and maintain a condition and fertility which automatically select them as keepers.

BULLS FOR SALE: Rising two-year-olds, all polled. Our young bulls are proven efficient foragers in the real world. This year's offering of bulls from four breeders have been reared in one group since weaning on a grass and forage ration. Foraging ability, winter hardiness, easy fleshing and fertility come as standard with these bulls.



Medicine River Luings



Lochend Luings



Galena Creek Luings



Greywood Luings

These are a few of the bulls available; we encourage you to come and have a look at them all. Bulls are sold on a first-come, first-served basis. Book your bulls now and we will keep them until you need them. Contact Iain Aitken at (403) 843-0094.

FEMALES FOR SALE:

From Lochend Luing Ranch: A selection of the 2009 heifer calf crop is available for sale. Contact Bob Church at (403) 208-3747.

From Galena Creek Ranch: a small selection of heifers is available, located at Rimbey. Contact Paul at (250) 346-3100.

SEMEN FOR SALE:

The Association is offering semen from Lochend Achayella 34P (bw 75 lbs), a deep and well-fleshed docile bull that is ideal for use both in purebred and commercial herds and is suitable for breeding heifers. His calves have exhibited vigor, strong growth characteristics and excellent carcass traits. His daughters make top quality replacements, and the steer calves fatten and marble well either on grass or in the feedlot. For further information, contact the secretary at (403) 843-0094.



**Lochend Achayella 34P -
Semen Available**

End of an Era

Iain Aitken

This fall has heralded the end of an era in our Luing herd as we shipped the last of our “granny cows”. Back in 2001, Dr Bob Church allowed me the pick of the Lochend Luing Ranch mature cows to form the nucleus of my new herd. I selected four good-looking cows that demonstrated the characteristics I was looking for, and was surprised when we got the pedigrees transferred to discover that two were 14 and two 15 years old! With no preferential treatment, these four old cows went on to rear twenty three natural calves between them, as well as another six by embryo transfer out of my favorite “223U”. Two of the cows were shipped as open at 16 and 22 years old respectively. The other two were shipped for finally turning in substandard calves at 21 and 23 years old respectively.



LLR 223U, “The Old Yellow Cow”, at 23 years old, with her last calf on the Medicine River Ranch.

Looking back over the years to various groups of much younger dispersal cows I’ve bought, I doubt if any of them have given me as many calves on average as these old Luings did. I think this is a remarkable testament to the Luing breed’s inherent longevity and fertility. I’ll miss my granny cows, but hopefully we will be able to perpetuate their characteristics through the offspring they have left us.

Canadian Luing Cattle Association

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Lochend Achayella 34P

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