

Clare's Canadian Experience

High Country Cattle Services: 22nd-27th February 2010.

Rob & Deanne Young, Breton, Alberta.

Rob and Deanne have Simmental cattle and started their stud after managing other properties beforehand. Their cattle are mainly solid red or solid black and only a few carry full blood markings. Their main priority is to have a strong genetic base and breed good cattle from this base. Their herd is probably only about 40 cows but most of them are either embryos themselves or are recipis that have an embryo calf at foot. They also have a few dodnor cows that are flushed most years. They use a lot of AI and plenty of embryo transfer! They use a 'mop up' bull for the cows that don't get in calf.

So far I have found their cattle to be pretty impressive, it's only a small herd of around 40 breeders and they don't really keep any of their bulls. As you look through the herd at the different age groups of cattle you can definitely see the improvements. I found their 2010 drop calves to be really striking they are thick, deep and they are going to have very little problems with feet and legs. This is one of the structural points Rob and Deanne are very critical of which I think is fantastic for the breed as Simmentals are known for their bad feet and legs. Another thing I noticed about a lot of the cows here is that most of them have fantastic udders which are another point I think needs to be closely selected for! I know a lot of people use some artificial breeding and some natural breeding through their herd but after seeing Rob and Dee's cattle I have learnt that the extra work of artificial breeding definitely pays off!

The cattle are all kept pretty close to the house and you can definitely tell that they are closely cared for because they are all so quiet! We walked through the cattle today and you could touch them all without any of them trying to kick you, keeping in mind that they all had calves at foot and didn't mind at all about us walking around them all. I know this is possible because their herd is so small but it is good to see how much these people care for their cattle.

The cattle here are all kept outside apart from if they are calving or have just calved where they are put into a 'barn' and stay there until Rob thinks they are strong enough to go out with the others. I can't believe how fresh these calves are considering the remarkable weather here, I would say it would have been around -10 when we were out there today but the wind makes it about -20 and the calves and cows were all out there playing in the snow which let me tell you is a great sight to see!

Rob feeds the cows, bulls and heifers a grain based pellet every morning, they get 8 pounds of this a day and then they also get some Lucerne and access to as much straw as they want. I thought the cattle here are all in remarkable nick for the feed they get and also considering the weather they have had to endure, whilst lactating and rearing a calf!

Another thing I learnt here is that the longer the hair on an animal the more it is worth. Dee was telling me that bulls that have that kind of slicker coat compared to a long 'wooly' coated bull will sell for next to nothing. She said that a bull with shorter hair would be lucky to make \$1000. Also like Australia bulls with that curly, hard doing coat are not desirable either!

Another thing Rob said was that the older calves, so like around 40-50days old are very susceptible to getting pneumonia, more so than the younger calves. He puts it down to the freezing nights and, so called warmer days. The temperature range is a killer. But once they are old enough to be treated with 9 in 1 they basically don't get it at all. I found this interesting because I would have thought they would have lost more of the younger calves with a weaker immune system.

Dee was saying that at some shows they cattle are left outside during the night because they are so used to the cold they get sick if they are kept inside where it is warmer and there is little air circulation. So they are bought in during the days and tied outside for the night in the cold. During the day when they are inside they have two big fans on them to keep them cold.

Also Rob has shot about 3 coyotes this winter, which are a bit of a problem when it is calving time. As they work in groups and herd the calf away from its mother and then do the damage, like taking their tongues and leaving the rest, sometimes alive.

Rob and Dee's has been a huge shock for me so far as it is so different and the obstacles that they face every calving season are phenomenal. Dee also took me to the ALTA Artificial Insemination Centre where I got to see some amazing bulls and maybe one day I might see their names around Australia. I have been able to get a handle on the genetics of the moment here to which has been good so I can have some input into generally conversations among other cattle breeders I have met.

Mark Shologan-Rochester, Alberta.

The Shologan's raised Simmental and Angus cattle, concentrating on the 'red factor' which is a huge plus in Canada, most breeds are aiming for this in their cattle. This place was very interesting and a huge learning curve for me. I only worked for him for around three days as he

had a no reserve, full dispersal sale. This was due to his father getting sick and his wife is due to have a baby in May.

Mark classed his cows as 'ranch cows' which he believed was the term for cows that would gain condition and survive on a very basic diet. I thought the cows were a little under-conditioned as they were calving in very harsh conditions and only being fed straw, I just didn't think this was an adequate diet for lactating cows.. These cows had amazing calves at foot considering their condition. These are the cattle people aim to breed though, cows that don't need to be fed anything to special and can calve in extremities. I mean these cows could be calving in -40 weather, and I only saw one calf that had frozen ears, this was due to the cow licking it too much in the cold and the ear literally freezing the nerve endings preventing them from growing.

The only worry I would have if I were to purchase these cows to breed with would be their fertility after having such a tough calving, being mal-nourished and just doing it really tough!

Mark and his family had always aimed to have the best genetics, unfortunately they couldn't use these genetics to their full potential because of family commitments. His sale didn't go as well as planned, but if I were there to buy any cattle it would be purely a commercial deal or to get into some genetics that I didn't have in my herd. Like I said before there were really expensive cattle for sale but because the cows were so poor I would doubt whether it would be successful to flush them or get another calf in time for the next season. If it were successful, it would be a while before they were in the right condition for flushing anyway.

I was very well looked after here and worked really hard but I also learnt so much at the same time and met lots of new people.

Mark works for a company that follows bull sales and broadcasts them over the internet for people who want to buy but can't make the sale. It is almost like ebay where they can see the 'item' and place bids and are successful if the bid is high enough. I found this very interesting. Mark took me to the Calgary bull sale where he was working. The Calgary bull sale is one of the oldest sales in the world where those cattle are shown and then sold the following day. They also have working dog and stock horse trials and these are then sold as well. The sale only sells Herefords, Charolais, Angus and Gelbveigh. It goes for about 5-6 hours and was very interesting to watch.

Don Grant, Bowden, Alberta.

Well, Dons has been great so far. I really feel like I am part of the operation here. Don runs about 75 cows, mostly Salers and has around 7 Charolais. He is trying to get out of Salers as

they aren't worth very much over here. His 2010 drop calves are mostly ET Charolais calves on Salers cows. He plans to breed all the Salers heifers to a Saler bull and then sell them in the fall. The Charolais heifers will all be bred back to Charolais bulls through AI. 12 Salers and 5 Charolais. He plans to lease a Simmental bull from his neighbor and breed all the Saler cows that aren't in calf to a Charolais embryo, to him and then sell them in calf in the fall as well. His calves are quite a mixed bag, with some calves red, fawn, sandy and obviously white. My favourite calf is a Vermillion heifer calf; she is paper white but doesn't have a lot of hair which will bring her value down quite a bit! That is one thing I have learnt over here is that unless the cattle have a thick, long, fluffy hair-coat their value is decreased massively. It is amazing how many people won't even look at a bull, no matter how good he is if his hair-coat isn't as I described as above. Another huge buying point is colour, Don has some really good calves out of Saler cows by a Charolais bull but because they don't look like true silvers they are grey their value is also decreased. Red calves that have grey noses are also a down fall for some people as well. I don't really understand why because all commercial buyers are looking for in commercial cattle is how good they are going to eat, and I don't think their hair is going to effect this.

I have been to a number of bull sales whilst I have been here and the Charolais have not been to flash. I went to one sale where the property sold 15 of 35 bulls it wasn't very nice! Mind you the day before I went to Harvie Ranching bull sale and they have Polled Herefords and Charolais and their average was about \$3200 and they sold about 50 bulls and I didn't think they were anything flash, especially the top selling bull that sold for \$16, 000. His name is 'Harvie Winchester 28W, Harvies were going to keep the international semen rights on the bull and Cole Harvie was going to Australia to promote the bull's semen.

The bull sale I went to where they passed about a third of the bulls was 'Gerrard Cattle Company inc.' I thought they had some really good bulls, they didn't have a sale ring, they used a power point presentation to present the bulls and the pictures were the same as what were in the catalogue. Don also did this with his sale and averaged US\$4000 and had a top seller of US\$11,000 so I guess it just depends on who is there on the day. Also Don had around 200 people at his sale and Gerrard's had 60.

One of the guys Don is in the sale with, Rod McLoud owns Balzac Meats. This abattoir is the largest one of its kind in Western Canada. They kill everything pretty much from beef and pigs to deer and buffalo. He will only kill the game meat if it is kept domestically, not if it has been shot in the forest hunting. The animal needs to be bought in live and killed at the abattoir on the day. He individually wraps all his meat in a wax paper which he finds keeps the meat best in the freezer. The meat is also graded from A to AAA, obviously AAA is the top and A is the bottom. Usually most grain fed animals should make AAA standard and carcasses such as bulls that don't have the fat cover etc. will just make A standard, sometimes they won't even be good

enough to grade at all. The meat is also graded for marbling and is graded by looking at the amount of intramuscular fat within the meat. Rod also has a tenderizing machine that is very unique and he is the only person in Canada to have this machine. It is basically made up of lots of little needles positioned close together and these punch through the meat making it so tender. He can even use cuts that are known to be tough and use the machine and you wouldn't know it was the same cut of meat. He took us for a tour around the plant and showed us where the meat is hung, he hangs it in one room as soon as it's killed and lets the initial dehydration begin, they are hung separately as this is when they lose the most blood. Then it is moved and hung for about 28 days in another cool room to continue the dehydration process. He also does a little bit of this in crivac bags, when the meat is put straight into these bags as soon as it's cut up. He kills some big animals, some being 400 pound sides! He doesn't sell a lot of meat like this; most of it is sold per cut rather than the entire side.

So back to Don's met some guys from Saskatchewan and Manitoba who were at the 'Harvie Ranching Bull Sale' two of them went into partnership with the top price bull together. They were discussing birth weights which was very interesting. They didn't really believe that genetics were solely to blame for birth weights and couldn't really see why people are so caught up about them. After listening to them for a while I thought they were right. Everyone knows that cows that are fed a poor diet will produce smaller calves than a cow fed on a good diet. Same as the calf a calf won't grow to be stout if it is fed poorly. They were also discussing how the birth weights increased greatly when the weather was cooler due to the cows grazing and eating more and trying to keep warm. Also some cows just naturally have a gestation period that is a bit longer than other cows which also makes a difference. So when buying bulls they didn't believe that you should buy a bull based solely on whether their birth weights are smaller according to their genetics as this isn't all that matters. They believed that if you were interested in the bull why just go by one trait when this only makes up a fraction of their EPD's.

Don started his Charolais herd with some pretty good cows which he has bought from other breeders. Like I said he has about seven registered Charolais cows and five heifers. Due to his clever planning he has been able to have half shares in some very reputable cows with other breeders. This gives him a chance to breed some great calves without worrying about artificially inseminating his own cows to bulls from these cow families. Also saves him a lot of costs which would be involved with buying the embryos if he had to. He has got a lot of calves at foot on his place which were embryo transplants from cows which he owns half of but got the embryos for nothing, other than paying half costs for the work etc. I believe this is a great way to breed cattle that are highly regarded whilst avoiding the worry of having the cow at his place and in turn not having to do the work to look after the cows. He also owns half shares in some very good bulls which is another great way to breed nice cattle without the hassle of artificial breeding and extra costs. Don's herd is very interesting on paper, if you look at all the different

genetic lines. He owns a lot of calves and most of them have totally different pedigrees. I believe this is a very smart way to breed cattle as it gives you the opportunity to appeal to a lot of clients, especially if you are just starting out in the breed. Some clients like some lines and not others which is the case everywhere. Don has found a way to appeal to lots of people. He is also looking into buying into some cattle in Australia from Palgrove Charolais. I believe this is another smart move, this way he gets his name out in Australia and has the chance to promote his bulls there. If he breeds his cows to the bulls he owns half shares in, people in Australia get a chance to see his genetics and what they can do. Not only is he putting his name out there in Australia but he is also expanding his genetics in another country, maybe creating cow families and genetic lines that will be sought after in Canada. He is also in partnership with people that are very well known in the Charolais business, another great way to get his name out in the industry without having to do a hell of a lot background work.

Also whilst at Don's I met a guy called Tim Bullick, he has a few Charolais cattle but is also in partnership with Don in quite a few bulls. He is heavily involved in the Charolais breed and has a great eye for cattle. I could talk to him for hours about cattle and learnt so much about the breed from him. Tim also consults for various studs around sale time and is in the stands speaking about the cattle for a lot of people. I think this is a huge honour for someone to be asked to do this, as what Tim says about the cattle will influence the buyer's opinions of the cattle and in turn determine how much the cattle are worth. An owner would need to have a lot of trust and faith in Tim's knowledge and opinions to have him in the stands for them. Don calls Tim a lot for help and also for Tim's opinions about which bulls should be bred to what cows and vice versa.

I left Don's on the thirteenth of April and by this time he had implanted eighteen embryos in recip cows. I believe if people have the time this is a great way to broaden the genetics in their herd.

ALTA Embryo Group, Bearspaw, Calgary, Alberta.

My first day at ALTA was on the 14th of April. I learnt so much within the first few hours! I guess I thought I knew the general gist of embryo transfer work but didn't actually know how long and intricate the processes were. First up we flushed a Simmental cow, she gave 19 Corpus Luteum's and out of that only 9 were able to be frozen. Corpus Luteums are follicles on the ovulating ovary which is where the egg has been released during the cow's heat cycle. The cow will usually only have one CL on one ovary during a natural cycle. But if she is to be flushed she will have multiple CL's on both ovaries as she is given a drug to make her 'super ovulate' causing her to produce more eggs. This obviously needs to happen when flushing to get the best results from

collection. Some cows that are constantly flushed will not 'super ovulate' as well after she has been flushed so many times. Instead of getting lots of eggs, or follicles she might only give one or two on only one ovary. This is when she should be allowed to have a natural calf to restore her hormones and give her body a rest then she is able to flush properly again. She gave 7 first grade embryos, which are embryos that have all the cells tightly bound without any fragments breaking away from the main cluster. Then 2 second grade embryos which are obviously good enough to freeze but had a couple of fragments breaking away from the core cluster. There were also two embryos that are classed as 'transferable' which means they are unable to be frozen but could be put into a cow within about three hours of collection. Then the other 8 were unfertilized eggs, so are of no use at all. It was fantastic to look at these embryos and eggs under the microscope and see the difference in each of them; it makes it all a lot clearer when you get to see it for yourself.

After the embryos have been sorted and determined what grades and quality they are it is time to begin the freezing process. This was also very interesting. The embryos are all frozen in a very specific way to ensure the best results when they are implanted. The straws are filled with air as well as the freezing agents; the air allows the straws to expand a little between temperature changes without exploding.

I also learnt that the 'super ovulation' drugs cause the cow to be able to produce more eggs because it makes the cow produce lots of eggs before the more dominant one takes over and rise to the surface of the ovary creating the CL. This is why it is so important to give the cow these drugs at the right time, because if you are too late the dominant egg will have already taken over and risen to the top, only producing the single CL. If you give the drugs at the correct time it allows lots of eggs to rise and make more embryos.

We also did a lot of farm visits and either inserted embryos or flushed cows on farm which was also very interesting and allowed me to meet so many new and interesting people.

Travis Peardon: Johnston/Fertile Valley Angus

Travis Peardon works for the Government of Saskatchewan as an agricultural advisor. He also has an Angus commercial herd. He took me for a drive out to an Angus herd called Johnston/Fertile Valley Angus. Johnston/Fertile Valley is owned by two brothers and their cattle are their lives. They are two bachelors and don't have children, their cattle are basically their children. They built their herd from AI. Originally they had Polled Herefords and slowly phased out of the Herefords and got more and more into the Angus until that was all they had. They began by buying two Angus cows that were in calf and that is where it all began. Dennis was one of the nicest guys I have met. His knowledge was amazing. They had a cow on their place

that is 13 years old and she looked amazing. They are very critical on the type of cows they keep for breeding, they need to be sound and good mothers, and if this isn't the case they are off to the auction market.

Their herd is bred 90% to AI bulls, and only the top proven AI sires are used over their cows. Then obviously they use a 'back-up mating' bull for the cows that aren't pregnant. They are the people who bred the frequently used bull 20K King. They are very highly regarded as breeders and a lot of commercial breeders bought out of their 2010 sale. While I was visiting Dennis, I noticed the amount of care taken for each and every one of his cattle, for such a large herd, the cows are all very well looked after. Everything these people do with their cattle is done to the absolute best and this showed in their cattle. They also sell quite a few of their heifers every year and basically keep the ones they believe will cope best in their conditions. A quote from their sale catalogue "With this large herd and limited labour we look for a reason to get rid of a cow." They only employ one farmhand and then the two brother's work on the farm as well. They don't crop any of their land so all the feed is bought from other sources so they say that moderate, easy doing cattle are a necessity.

I learnt a lot from visiting Johnston/Fertile Valley Angus, it was a very interesting place and they are breeding cattle that every beef farmer would be happy to have on their property.

John McKinnon, Bart Lardner: Western Beef Development Centre, Poundmaker Feedlot.

John McKinnon works for the University of Saskatchewan in ruminant nutrition and does a lot of work with feedlots around Saskatchewan. First we went and visited Bart Lardner at the Western Beef Development Centre just out of Saskatoon. This farm was donated to the government by a family years ago, to be used for research. The family that donated the farm used to breed Polled Herefords but the centre now mainly focuses on Angus but uses Herefords for back up matings in respect of the family. The university works very closely with the development centre and a lot of students are selected to do their masters and PHD's at the centre. Bart works closely with the students to select a project that will benefit both the student and the breeders. A lot of breeders and producers are in close contact with the centre for any new information regarding beef production. They have done numerous projects, mainly involving feeding through forage feeding, supplement feeding etc. Every project is different and all of them seem to be helping producers make decisions about how and what works best in regards to feed systems. They really aren't very fussed about genetics which I was a tad surprised about because I believe that using different genetics for these projects would also prove a lot in regards to how reliable EBV's and 'numbers' are. Here I met a girl called Leah who is doing her masters in ruminant nutrition,

and was doing a project at the centre. I went with Leah and helped her with her project for a few days following this visit, it was pretty hard work but I learnt a lot by talking to her. We also looked at some of the other student's projects and I got to see some rumen samples taking place which is something I had never seen before.

The same day we visited Poundmaker feedlot. This was an amazing place! They are currently feeding about 28,000 head of cattle. The feedlot has its very own ethanol plant where they produce ethanol from fermenting wheat and in turn use the offal from the fermentation to feed straight to the cattle. There are two forms of this offal, a liquid and solid form. The liquid is fed through the water systems and is very high in fat and protein. The solid form is fed in a mix which varied depending how long the cattle have been in the feedlot. The roughage in the mix is hay which is hammer milled and fed in very long needle like pieces. The cattle in the feedlot were a very mixed bag and I think if you were to go through all the different breeding you would almost find every breed of cattle somewhere in each animal.

My time with Leah was the last of my Canadian Experience as the Matthew George Young Stockman ambassador and I loved every single minute of it. I would strongly recommend anyone thinking about applying to do so as this was a once in a lifetime experience for me. I hope to get over here again someday. I have been lucky enough to meet some extremely knowledgeable people who I will be able to call on for help when ever I need an opinion.

Concluding Remarks

Everyone I spent time with in Canada was so welcoming and I felt part of every operation I worked on. Although I was working reasonably hard at every property I visited it was extremely enjoyable to be able to meet some amazing people and learn how different operations work on the other side of the world. I was gone for around four months in Canada and I did get a bit homesick every now and then but because all the families I spent time with were so lovely I was able to get over it pretty quickly. I have used so much of my new found knowledge here and it is such an amazing feeling to see some of the places I have been on television and be able to say that I have seen it real life. I look back at my photos now and it only feels like yesterday that I was there my photos don't do Canada justice, it is the most amazing place I have ever been and just can't wait to be there again someday, hopefully to catch up with some of the many amazing people I was lucky enough to meet.

Again I strongly recommend anyone contemplating applying for the Matthew George Young Stockman Award to put the work in and do the application because if you are successful it will be the most wonderful experience of your life, I know it has been for me.

Claire Bruggemann