

CANADIAN LUING

Cattle Association

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NEWSLETTER

Fall 2011

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY

Iain Aitken

Welcome to our fall 2011 Newsletter – the first edition available in electronic format.

I hope you are all experiencing a bountiful summer like we have enjoyed in central Alberta. A healthy balance of rain and heat resulted in excellent pasture growth although we do have a surprisingly large number of grasshoppers. Hay crops in the area have been big, although difficult to cure with the rain and high humidity. Crops are coming along nicely after a late start and with the heat recently there should be some good crops to harvest in this area.

I had intended to write a follow-up article to my Larry Leonhardt/Shoshone piece in the last newsletter but will save that for a future edition. In early August I spent three days in Montana in the company of Larry and many fellow posters on an internet discussion forum we participate in called “Keaney’s Corner” which is described as “A reflective and futuristic view of cattle breeding from outside the registered mainstream.” It was truly inspiring to be among such a group of independent thinkers, philosophers and cattle breeders from across North America.

Needless to say I came back with information overload and it will take me a while to process all the ideas and concepts we discussed.

Instead I have written an article on the creation of the Luing breed in Scotland for those unfamiliar with the story. I hope this article shows the dedication and vision it took to create the breed, the commercial principles that drove it and why in turn some of us are such fanatical custodians of that genetic heritage.



Living in luxury – Summer 2011

Canadian Luing Cattle Association

Page 2

Fall 2011

CREATION OF A BREED – Iain Aitken

Whereas the origins of many breeds are lost in the mists of time the Luing was created relatively recently by the Cadzow brothers, Denis, Shane and Ralph, to fulfill a specific role. Put simply the Luing was created *as a maternal breed for efficient production of beef in cold or wet climates.*

The Cadzow family had for many generations been grain farmers in East Lothian (close to Edinburgh) on the thin strip of high quality grain land that runs down the east coast of Scotland. Grain farming in the era before chemical fertilizers required livestock on the land both to utilize the grass break in crop rotations and to provide a source of manure to enrich the soils. The traditional policy was to buy feeder cattle, often from Ireland, but the margins were usually pretty slim after the cattle dealer had taken his share. So the idea was born for the family to seek some cheap hill land on the west coast of Scotland with the intention of running a cow herd there to breed their own supply of calves to fatten on the east coast farms.

In 1947 the brothers were successful in purchasing the southern half of the island of Luing, off the west coast, just south of Oban. This comprised 2000 acres and later they were able to acquire the other 1800 acres on the island. Over several decades the operation grew to encompass 700 cows and a land base of 10,000 acres by renting more land on the adjoining mainland and several other islands. In geographic terms the new

land base was only 140 miles away from their east coast farms but physically it was worlds apart. In contrast to the rich arable farms of the east coast the land in the west was steep, rocky country where wind and rain is the norm. The annual precipitation of between 70-100 inches results in very nutrient leached soils. Over the years the family greatly improved the carrying capacity of the land with applications of lime and phosphate which in itself was a challenge as these products had all to be transported to Luing by boat. In recent years the advent of a roll-on/roll-off ferry to the main island has made things easier for light passenger traffic but for heavier loads obstacles remain.



Heifers show the tough grazing conditions on Luing

Transporting cattle between the different islands and the mainland has involved the use of their own barge for many years entailing additional expense and planning headaches that most of us don't encounter.

Canadian Luing Cattle Association

Page 3

Fall 2011

The large uninhabited island of Scarba, west of Luing has been the “development centre” for replacement heifers since the early days. Weaned calves are shipped there to overwinter on the rough grazing supplemented only by a pellet ration dispensed from wind powered, automated feeders on a daily basis. Refilling the feeders is a complex job involving meeting a bulk delivery truck on the mainland and ferrying the pellets over one wagon load at a time on their boat. The silver lining to the extra cost and difficulty of farming on an island is that it provides isolation from other cattle and allowed a high health status to be maintained once the herd was closed.

So this was the environment in which they were going to establish their cow herd. Given the climate, the quality of land and a problem with tick-borne “louping ill” and red water diseases it was decided that they needed cattle acclimatized to the area which necessitated a closed herd. The three main attributes they concluded would be essential for the success of their cow herd were:

- ability to withstand the tough environment;
- ability to produce a calf every year;
- and ability to breed their own replacements.

And I should emphasize that this project was not about creating a breed in the beginning - it was purely about creating a type of cattle that were efficient in a commercial beef production system.



With their extensive experience of fattening various breeds of cattle their initial choice for a cow was the Beef Shorthorn x Scottish Highland, an F1 cross that was fairly common on the west coast at that time. After breeding some of these heifers back to Shorthorn bulls with very favourable results it was decided this second cross offered more potential. Forming a herd of Highland cows to breed the F1s followed by all the successive crosses would be too complicated and with the desire to remain a closed herd buying in F1s was no longer an option. So the road ahead seemed clear - they would need to retain a second cross bull and breed it to its half sisters and create a second cross strain of cattle. This was complicated by the fact that all bulls had to be licensed by the Department of Agriculture at that time and a prerequisite of licensing was that they be purebred. Permission however was attained for the use of “cross bred” bulls on Luing and in 1952 the first bull, Luing Mist, was retained to be followed in 1953 by Luing Oxo. Both these bulls were sired by Craggleton Alister a Shorthorn bull in which the Cadzows had great faith. He was

Canadian Luing Cattle Association

Page 4

Fall 2011

described as being correct in every aspect and of the old type (i.e. prior to the small cattle fad that was beginning to dominate beef breeds at that time). The initial use of Luing Mist and Oxo on their half sisters and subsequent matings of their offspring provided the necessary degree of line breeding to “fix” a type. It must have been very rewarding in the early years to see the plans come to fruition and the cattle they were breeding ably filling the roles intended for them. It was no coincidence though that they were developing a strain of cattle that performed well commercially given Denis’s aims:

“I cannot emphasize too much that every characteristic of our cattle had to be of commercial value. These were cattle for our own use at that time and they had to pay their way to prove to us they were better than any other breed as a suckler cow or a beef producer”

The Cadzows kept extensive records of every aspect of their cattle and this allowed them to identify and cull lines where the cattle were harder to winter, had structural faults or produced steers that were harder to fatten. They used performance measures ahead of their time but selection was also done with the knowledge and eye of a

master breeder.



Denis Cadzow assessing young bulls (1974)

By 1964 with the herd numbering 400 cows the brothers began to think that perhaps this strain of cattle they had developed offered potential for other producers under similar conditions. So the idea of becoming a breed arose - but of course these were still just crossbred animals in the eyes of the law. Plans were made to hold an open day and demonstration of the cattle on Luing in May 1965 and much lobbying was done to ensure a good turnout of officials, industry leaders and representatives from many other breeds. The cattle on display must have made a great impression as the decision to grant breed status to the Luing was made a few months later and was officially recognised by the British parliament in July 1966. Luing was the only new breed granted official status in the UK in the 20th century.

Canadian Luing Cattle Association

Page 5

Fall 2011

The formation of a Luing Cattle Society followed quickly on the heels of being granted official breed status and from the outset this breed was clearly different from others. As Denis stated:

“The Luing was to be a commercial breed, bred for a truly commercial outlet - no showing or show fads, only commercial usefulness was to be its measure”

Accordingly the first two rules set by the Luing Society were:

- *No competitive showing but commercial demonstrations allowed.*
- *No bull to be sold until he was 20 months old at the official breed sale.*

The former was not allowed because it encouraged selection/reward for superficial aspects and the latter because it was felt the best interests of the commercial bull customer would be served if he saw the mature type of the bull before purchasing. These foundations served the Luing breed well and from the outset the breed has gained ground steadily, albeit with ups and downs coinciding with the ebbs and flows of the cattle cycle and overall cow numbers. From the 1960s through until the late 1990s the majority of purebred females sold at Society sales went into commercial cattle herds to be cross bred. The breed was fulfilling its rightful place in the beef production chain that Denis had envisioned back in the early days when he said:

“The biggest scarcity in beef production lies not in the terminal bulls, but in finding suitable mates to give these bulls.....This is the place our breed has booked on the assembly line, and they will be there ready to do their job efficiently”

I believe that statement is as true in North America today as it was in Scotland forty years ago - hence my belief that the potential of our breed is unlimited as long as we stick to our commercial cattle roots and remember the purpose of our breed.



Canadian Luing Cattle Association

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An oilfield sign serving as a backdrop to our grazing cows to drive home the message – “Let the cows do the work!”

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