

Canadian Luing Cattle Association Newsletter



Volume 8, No.1

January 2014

MESSAGE FROM THE SECRETARY

Iain Aitken

Happy New Year and welcome to our 2014 winter newsletter. 2013 proved to be very successful for our breed with many enquiries for cattle. We'd like to thank the following first time Luing buyers and hope their purchases do well for them.

Clayton Berg, Rivercourse, Alberta
Mark & Leonard Benson, Golden, B.C.
Devern During, Parson, B.C.
Grant Craig, Rimbey, Alberta
Peter Feldman, Brisco, B.C.
Richard Griebel, Castor, Alberta
Cory Ollika, Waskatenau, Alberta
Wian Prinsloo & Lydia Carpenter, Nesbitt, Manitoba

With many enquiries from repeat customers as well as newcomers the bulls and females available for sale this winter and next spring are pretty much all spoken for. While this is encouraging from our breed point of view I realize it is disappointing for potential customers to be turned away when we run out of cattle. I'd ask that if you are considering buying some Luings in the future to please get in touch with me and I'll add you to the list of potential customers so that we can allocate the animals available as equitably as possible.

Recognizing the need to increase Luing numbers the Directors of the Association want to encourage new breeders to register purebred offspring. To that end the Association is offering to refund the first time annual membership fee of anyone interested in registering cattle. If you want further details on this offer please get in touch with me.

I'm pleased to include an article in this edition by Glenn Webber, one of our newer breeders and a recently appointed breed Director, outlining his experiences with Luings which he runs near Brownfield, Alberta.



Why Choose Luings?

Glenn Webber

In the June/July 2010 issue of *Canadian Cattleman* magazine there was an article on grass-fed beef being marketed directly to consumers. The article featured Iain Aitken's operation near Rimbey and part of the article described the Luing breed of cattle Iain preferred. The premise of the article made a lot of sense to me but I had not heard of the Luing breed of cattle. A quick search on the Internet led me to the website of the Canadian Luing Association and the Scottish Luing Cattle Society. The end result was I ended up in contact with Iain Aitken and Bob Church and am in the process of replacing my current cattle with Luings.

I run a small cow calf operation comprised of a mix of red Angus and Simmental cross cows and a red Simmental bull. I started raising cattle around 2000, just in time to see the dramatic changes brought on by the BSE crisis. My operation is different from most as I do not own any land and rent pasture in the summer season and have my cows wintered on a custom basis. One of the outcomes of this way of doing business on essentially a cash basis, is it really brings home the very slim margins that exist for a cow calf producer.

While the last couple of years have been better, in most years since 2003, there is not much left over after the calves are sold each fall. Back in 2010, I was already thinking there might be alternative ways of raising and selling cattle. So the article on selling grass fed beef marketed directly to consumers caught my attention. And the more I learned about Luing cattle, the more it made sense to me that they had the potential I was looking for.

There are a number of things about Luings that appealed to me. First and foremost was the genetic potential to be raised and finished on grass. I think this has some long-term advantages for beef producers in general, but specifically for anyone who is considering direct

marketing beef to consumers. Most beef cattle are finished on grain and over time cattle have been selected on this basis. There are two reasons why grass finished cattle could be an advantage to a producer. One is the emergence of the consumer demand for grass finished beef and the second is the potential to lower the costs of production.



Seven-Month-Old Luing Steer, Fall 2013

In my view, over the long term, the cost of producing grain is going to rise and this has the potential to add to the overall cost of beef to consumers. Grain production is directly affected by the costs of fuel, machinery, fertilizer and herbicides and these costs are rising and show no signs of leveling off or decreasing. These increased costs end up being passed on the consumer. There is already price resistance on what consumers are willing to pay for beef and higher cost beef makes both chicken and pork more attractive. The small feedlot margins over the past few years is ample evidence of this situation and has a significant downward pressure on the prices they pay for feeder cattle. This has a ripple effect down to the cow calf producer. Grass finished beef could have a significant competitive advantage by not being affected by the inflationary costs of grain production. As Luing cattle were specifically bred to be finished on grass, they make a good

choice for a cowherd that has a view to a low cost production model based on grazing. Luing cattle are well suited to being raised in the climate of western Canada. They are known for low birth weights and calf vigor at birth. The ability to hit the ground running is an advantage with the highly variable weather we experience in calving season. The extra hair coat they have is an advantage in the winter in terms of the feed they require. In my view at the cow calf stage of production, the importance of pounds of calf produced as the measure of profitability is overstated. A 700 pound calf at weaning in the fall looks like it is a good thing, but how much feed did it take to feed the cow over a year in order to produce that 700lb calf. The old adage of you don't get something for nothing applies to cattle. It takes extra feed for larger cows and those extra feed costs will affect the bottom line. I seldom hear cattleman talk in terms of costs per pound of calf produced.

I also took note of the longevity and ability to produce calves over multiple years of the Luing cows. I looked at the average age of my cows and it was quickly apparent that on average, my cows were much less than ten years of age. While I had a few cows over ten years old, I had many cows that came up open at much younger ages. There are significant costs in both time and money in buying or raising replacements. When I viewed cattle with Bob and Iain, there were numerous cows in their teens and more than a few cows that were over twenty years old. While a case can be made that high cull values for cows can buffer or offset the replacement costs, there are costs of both time and trucking in selling culls and buying replacements.

This is the second year I have had Luing sired calves and the results have been positive. The calves are a combination of purebred Luings and Luing crossed to my Red Angus and Simmental cross cows. There have been no issues with calving ease and all have calved unassisted. The Luing cross calves show more growth than the purebred Luings, and that is not unexpected as most purebred calves are smaller than cross

calves. So far the best calves are the Luing crossed to purebred Red Angus. Seems like this combination works well and takes advantage of hybrid vigor. In Scotland, Luing-Simmental crosses are popular for animals headed for the fed cattle market. While I am considering finishing some of my calves on grass and selling them directly to consumer, in the short term most of my calves will continue to be sold at the auction mart. While Luing sired calves may not be as heavy at weaning as my previous calves, I am confident the benefits of a Luing influence in terms of feed efficiency, longevity and winter hardiness will make my operation more profitable. As soon as my number of purebred Luing cows increases, I also intend to cross them with a Simmental bull and see how the resulting calves perform.



Luing Calf, Spring 2013

In conclusion, there are a couple of ways I see the Luing breed can benefit a commercial operation. One approach is to having Luing cows and crossing them to a terminal breed sire. This would work well for operations where the cattle spend a significant amount of time grazing and take advantage of the cow's smaller size and grass efficiency. The second way would be to use a Luing bull on an existing cowherd and take advantage of hybrid vigor in terms of growth, add a little hair coat and improve calving ease.

Critiquing the Purebred Mainstream

Iain Aitken

The first weekend in August 2013 saw three Alberta families hosting ranch tours for a group of American cattle breeders from areas as diverse as Michigan, Kentucky and Montana. These are all friends we have got to know through our mutual participation in the Internet discussion forum “Keeney’s Corner”. My interest was initially drawn to this group by their discussions on line-breeding but their critical analysis of how the mainstream purebred cattle business currently operates and why in many cases it serves the commercial cattle sector so poorly has been an eye-opener for me.



A sobering statistic to start with is the fact that the average duration of a purebred breeding cattle operation is seven years! This has implications for commercial cattlemen. Significant numbers of purebred breeders are not long term, experienced cattle producers. The lack of a commercial cattle background means they have no grounding in the reality or needs of commercial cattle production. To make up for a lack of experience more emphasis is placed on EPDs and other performance data. This has the effect of emphasizing a few traits at the expense of consistency and balance. To achieve superior performance numbers, it is easier to use outcrosses and take advantage of heterosis and create outliers. The downside is the lack of consistency that occurs when these outliers are used in a commercial setting.

A common starting point for aspiring newcomers to purebred breeding is to buy foundation animals from existing breeders at inflated sale prices and use these high prices in marketing efforts to infer that the offspring are, or will be, superior. Unfortunately the correlation between high prices and real world genetic value is rather tenuous at best.

Sadly it seems much of the purebred sector is driven by the desire to make money rather than the desire to breed more efficient cattle. The desire to “beat” their competitors by winning shows and selling animals at higher prices leads to the pursuit of outlier cattle that can be portrayed as unique to differentiate them in the marketplace. A convenient way to market these cattle as “better” is by using numerical data, hence the fascination with ever increasing performance numbers. Most sale catalogues leave your head spinning with all the weights, scores and EPD numbers they list. You would think with all the decades of data collected on cattle they would be twice as efficient as they were thirty years ago. Sadly this does not appear to be true as the biological efficiency of the cattle has hardly altered in that time frame. Mature cows and fat steers have become bigger and heavier in the last thirty years but their feed consumption has risen in tandem with this so we are no further ahead when it comes to profitability.

The risk of using performance data as a substitute for the experience of long term stockmen was forecast nearly 50 years ago by Denis Cadzow at a cattle breeding conference in England.

“Many of our beef breeds have been performance tested for more than a 100 years now. The names in a pedigree can bring to most breeders a mental picture of the animal - he or she was either big or small, bad feet or good ones, good or bad legs, and difficult animals to fatten, or heifers by that bull were bad to calve, and so on - a visual memory of every detail

That was performance testing - real stockmanship - something that has been handed down in some families for generations and must not be lost in this computer age.....”

As always I'm amazed at the insightfulness of our breed's founder - imagine recognizing in 1967 the dangers that would face cattle breeders by neglecting the old, proven breeding methods in favor of being guided by computer generated data. Imagine even foreseeing in 1967 that we were entering a computer age!

Today's cattle breeds were establishing using line-breeding or in-breeding principles as you cannot fix a cattle type, or stabilize a developing cattle population using the outcross breeding methods that are so prevalent today in the purebred business. Selection of the extremes and outcrossing them to other unrelated extreme cattle results in maximized heterosis and this should have no place in a purebred herd. When an outcrossed "purebred" bull is bred to commercial cows the offspring are seldom able to produce the growth and vigor the sire's EPDs predicted.

Along with my American visitors I believe there is a viable alternative to the mainstream path of the purebred cattle industry and that this is increasingly being implemented by breeders across the continent. We recognize that using a systematic breeding approach will improve the consistency of our cattle by eliminating the outliers. We don't seek the high fliers, just a herd of solidly average cattle that function in our environment under commercial management. We don't need to bring in artificially high priced cattle to boost the marketability of our purebreds, as we are more interested in selling consistent and repeatable genetics to commercial cattlemen than to show ring competitors.

Footnote - A Luing Anniversary

It occurred to me while writing the above article that the seven year duration of the average purebred herd is the same time period they talk about as the "seven year itch" in marriages. Perhaps it's human nature for some people to get bored or frustrated after seven years? – when the initial dreams and enthusiasm give way to a reality that is perhaps less exciting than they had anticipated. In the purebred cattle business that might equate to discovering the high priced foundation animals fail to reproduce themselves in their offspring and the high sale prices prove elusive when you are trying to sell instead of buy.

Next month will mark my "silver anniversary" in Luing cattle terms, if not in marriage terms. Twenty-five years ago I made the journey to my first Luing sale in Oban, Scotland to buy three heifers as an experiment, seeking a replacement for our Galloway cattle that were just too slow growing to be financially viable. Those first Luings impressed me and they have continued to do so ever since.



*Dr. Bob Church, Iain Aitken and Mike Keeney
on 2013 Farm Tour*

In our next edition I plan to include an article on Dr. Bob Church, a long Canadian Luing breeder whose involvement with the breed goes back a lot further than mine - to the early 1970s in Scotland.



"Some of our visitors get their first look at Luings"

Canadian Luing Cattle Association

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