

Giving Thanks for Cows - Dick Braun

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Today we are talking about dairy farmers in the Osler Mennonite church. All types of food production are very important in life BUT today we concentrate on dairy farmers for a few reasons. At one time there were a lot of dairy farmers in this church and so the church schedule was set up so that those people could go home and milk or that they could be there on time after milking. Harry and Eva Martens were the last people in our congregation to be dairy farmers and this is what started this idea of giving thanks to all the people that milked cows and to all the cows that gave the milk and helped to pay for a lot of things in life. This is an era that has come to a close and in many ways it is sad to see this happen.

First I think it is fitting that you hear a little history on this animal the cow that has been looked to for a lot of food and to pay a lot of bills. History tells us that the Friesian people in the northern part of Europe were milking cows that were all white and then at about 100 BC there was a group of people exiled to the north and this group brought with them black cows that they milked and used for meat. They started to cross breed these two breeds and came up with a high milk producing animal that was also good for meat. The group that was exiled to the north got along well with the home grown northerners. They both were of the mindset that war was futile and they did not want to take part in it. The Roman Government then in turn taxed them and they paid their taxes in Ox hides and Ox horns. The name Holstein Friesian given to this cow is because of the area that it was bred in. This area was also a very high grass producing part of Europe.

The beginnings of Holstein Friesian Cows and the Mennonite people may well go back 4 or 500 years or maybe even long before these people became mennonites. We know that most of the early Mennonites were peasant people and so assuming that the upper crust of the people did not milk cows. This would then meant that the Mennonites milked cows and coming from the area where Holstein cows were home – would then be assumed almost right. The other part is that these dairy people milking these wonderful cows were pacifist. This fits so well with what most people that are, or have been part of the dairy farm world are. Most dairy farmers do not like to kill - not even a sick animal. They are very well aware of the fact that being nice or kind to these cows and other people makes for a better environment to live in. They must have soon learnt that the better you treat a cow the more milk it will give and if the cow is not treated nice and fed properly then the first thing that the cow does is cut off the milk production. In the 13th century these northern Europe people had done such a good job of breeding these milk cows and growing such good feed that there was a huge amount of cheese and butter that became an export product. About 400 years ago the first Holstein cows arrived in North America. This is when the name of the cows changed somewhat. The Black and White cows in North America were just called Holsteins and the black and white cows in northern Europe were just called Friesians. When we talk about dairy cows we mostly talk about Holsteins but there are more breeds of milking cows like Jersey –Brown Swiss--- Ayrshire – Guernsey – and milking Shorthorns.

Now some facts:

In 2014 Dairy farms in Canada –11,962 and cows in Canada –959,300

In 2015 Dairy farms in Saskatchewan – 165 and in Saskatchewan –27,400 cows

In 1985 there were 1000 milk shippers and 4000 cream shippers

And about 237,000,000 litres of milk produced annually

In 1985 there were 10 processing plants in SK and in 2004 it went down to 1.

Some of the barns were built so that our young men did not have to go to war – the Martens in 1942 -

The bible mentions cows a number of times. The early people could see that good grass land was a good place to raise cows.

We know that our people had cows in Russia as there is a story about the cows taken out to the village pasture where they were fed grape vines and left over wine press goodies--- I hope that they were very happy cows.

In this area almost all the homestead records show that people had cows.

Then there were the Martens and the Driedgers and the Guenthers and the Sawatzkys and the Buhlers and the Boldts and the Krugers and the Janzens and the Friesens and the Paul's and the Hildebrandts. The Buhler yard had a dairy from about 1925 operated by Cornelius Driedger who married Maria Pauls and then in 1941 Mr Ben Buhler became part of the picture and then Wilf started again in 1968 with Ben joining him in 1972 finishing in 2009. The Martens started by shipping milk from 15 cows in 1942 and finishing in 2015. The J.L. Guenthers started with 8 cows in 1950 and Joe's grandchildren were the 6th generation on that farm and Joe finishing in 2012. There would be many such early beginnings. The spin offs were large in the community. There would be many more stories about individual families that could be told. There is also need for a complete list of all the people who have been milk shippers and attended the Osler Mennonite church at some time. There were also the people who picked up the milk going back to cans taken to the train and then cans of milk being picked up at the farm and then with a bulk truck. There is one person who attends here today that picked up cans and operated the truck for Lobes Transport (John R Wall).

4H programs for young people helped to start our young people to become dairy farmers. It showed them that if you took care of an animal then it would produce for you.

There were many changes in the dairy industry from milking by hand to bucket milking machine to pipe line to parlor and now robots. The style of barn has also changed and feed preparation.

There still are a few things that have stayed the same – cow eat lots of feed and produce lots of manure and no matter what color the cow it still gives white milk.

Our people were well known for their care in breeding the best cow in milk and to last as there were many heifers shipped to Mexico and the USA. There were also many delegations of people from all around the world that found their way here to seek out the best of cows. Our Mennonite people were very involved in the larger dairy world being on the provincial and national boards.

Osler Mennonite church dairy farmers in 1976 were involved in gathering and bringing Holstein bull calves to the Bloodvein Indian Reserve in northern Manitoba. Leonard Doell remembers waiting at the end of the road out there for Jake Neudorf and company to arrive so the calves could be put on a boat and taken across the lake.

*Dairy farmers are known to treat their animals very well. It is a well know fact that if a cow is miss treated the first thing that the cow does is cut back on milk production and there goes the profit. **This is a repeat.***

There is another thing that cows like and that is being punctual as cows have a very good internal clock.

In 1992 Holstein Canada held their annual meeting here in Saskatoon. Joe Guenther was the Chair in charge of organizing the event. There were people here from all over North America and Mexico. Harry and I were asked to give some tours of the area. At that time we talked about \$1,000,000 of milk produced every day from within a 25mile radius of Osler. Some of the guests on this tour wanted to know if you are mostly Mennonite here, “where are the horse and buggies?” The western Canada people could not believe the production of feed in this area as all they had heard about this part of Canada was tumble weed and thistles! There was a big economic impact from the dairy industry in this area to mention a few – feed sales – feed preparation for the year --employment for a lot of young people – cleaning corrals – building barns and other buildings ---equipment sales – repair people like me --

Storm of 1996 – 21 feed silos damaged and some barns almost destroyed but--- the cows got milked.

To some people, the fact that they had milking to do was a way out of attending events such as meetings or maybe even a wedding! Our own wedding was planned so that Kathy’s brother George and his family could stay at our wedding from start to finish - 7pm seemed like a good time to start. It seemed that on Sunday morning these dairy farmers needed to start a little earlier and sometimes there was an evening service too. It was not uncommon to see a few heads nodding off during services and you could be assured it was not just because they were agreeing with what was being said!

Some of the things you will miss; many young people got a start at working for a dairy farmer; a hand shake from Cornie G's – the hand hardened from being in water and teat dip way too often; the smell of –at one time we even that hot chocolate milk with real milk –

There are a lot more stories that could be told and should be written down for the future.

I hope that our people will still be pacifist even if we do not milk cows anymore.