



View from the road: Bench is for tired bikers or the curious!

## The Devons:

American Milking Devons represent the unaltered remnant genetics of the original North Devons, an ancient breed native to Southern England. They displayed consistent traits well before the designation of breed names, due more to their geographic isolation than any attempts at selective breeding.

In the early 1600s, as Britain tried to establish a colony in Jamestown Virginia, livestock usually accompanied the settlers on the ships. Conditions in the new world were harsh for both man and beast and the attrition rate for both was high. There were starvation winters when all the breeding stock was eaten. There were bloody skirmishes between settlers and first nation groups. The weakened state of settlers and animals after a long sea voyage also left them more susceptible to various diseases. It was clear that the colony would only flourish once the livestock was doing well. Just as the humans probably carried seeds of food plants and medicinal plants in their coat pockets, there is a school of thought that the livestock did not fare well until enough had been imported with seeds clinging to the mud on their hooves to establish vegetation that they needed. Bluegrass, chicory, Queen Ann's Lace, and many clovers were not native to the region, but showed up in the first half of the 17th century.

Devons were certainly among the first cattle to be sent to that new British colony. Their primary purpose in those early times was to serve as draft animals, though like most ancient breeds, they had a triple purpose, yielding milk & meat as well as energy-efficient power. Their hardiness and adaptability allowed these animals to survive despite poor feedstuffs, lack of attention, inadequate housing and so on... Just to be clear, we are all for care and attention that allows the cattle to thrive, not just survive.

The Industrial Revolution, compelling in its justification of capitalist ideals, was a pivotal period in the development of Agriculture, with its mantra of "progress" at any cost and "change or be eclipsed". In Europe, women left their milking stools to seek a steady paycheque at the weaving mills, enticed by the promise of a better life.

Selective breeding for specific beef traits began, for it was deemed much more profitable to sell numerous animals as beef to the navy. And so, the British herd of Devons, once 60% of the nations cattle, became a beef breed, and Holsteins were imported for dairy production. The last of the original North Devons were exported in 1946.

Similar social and agricultural shifts happened in North America. Gradually oxen were largely replaced by horses as draft animals, and then by tractors. Similarly, specialization shifted dairy production to the high volume milk producers, Holstein and Jersey. The larger heavy beef breeds gained popularity at the expense of the old triple purpose animals. In the 1920's, the American Devon Cattle Club promoted breeding to create a specific beef animal.

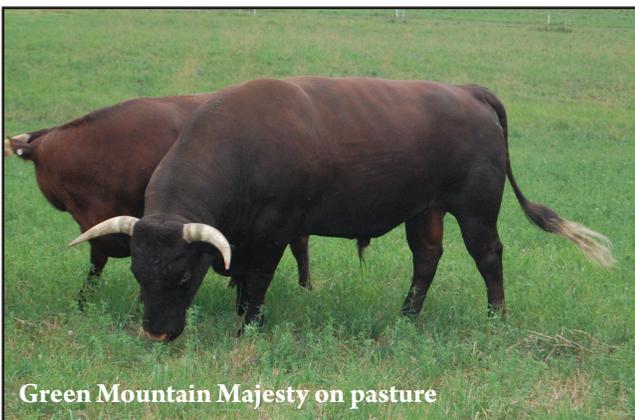
It was only in the early 1970's that a few dedicated and wise individuals recognized that it was extremely important to save the original triple purpose animals. By this time there were only about 200 of these animals left. In 1978 the American Milking Devon Association was formed to promote the conservation of this ancient breed. There are now about 2000 registered Milking Devons, mostly in the New England states and about 80 in Canada.

## The Case for raising Devons:

While ox teams are nowadays seen primarily at county fairs and pioneer villages, the significant strength of the Devon is still in their DNA. They are known for their hardiness and ability to withstand just about any sort of weather; have high fertility rates and very few calving difficulties. They're very attentive and protective mothers. They can be raised & finished entirely on grass and hay. Long lived, they often fare well up into their teens. Devons are extremely intelligent and retain instinctive awareness of their environment, including what grasses and weeds to eat for their health.

When well-socialized, they are friendly and interactive with humans.

They are beautifully calm quiet animals to work with, although barnyard politics and raging hormones can break the zen-like atmosphere periodically. While milk production is modest, Devon milk is rich and high in solids for cheese making. The beef is very flavourful, well marbled, fine textured, and has been described as "meditation beef" by some of our customers.



Devons thrive on unimproved upland pastures and are recognized as being easier on the land than the larger continental breeds. As such, in England they qualify for environmental stewardship grants that are unavailable to herds of Charolais, Simmental and Limousin. They also play a valuable role as sweeper bulls in dairy herds now. In short, they are a true joy to raise & should be more well-known than they are.

Our own experience began when we decided that it was time to repair 35 acres of depleted land on Jacinta's farm. The land was erodible, poorly drained, rocky and had essentially been mined of its nutrients for some years. Seeding down permanent pastures was the initial step to curtail erosion. To rebuild the soil organic matter and nutrients we then needed manure, and to us that meant cattle.

We heard of a few animals for sale within Ontario. It was only 4 heifers and a young bull, but it was a start. Later that summer, we found 3 cows and 3 heifers in Quebec, animals that are now the backbone of our herd. The learning curve was steep as we



created pastures, fenced the field perimeter, purchased haying machinery, renovated the very old and decrepit bank barn, and dealt with nutritional deficiencies and herd politics. Our neighbour Ron, a superb cattle man, no doubt thought we were absolutely crazy, yet he was very generous with his time and advice when we ran into problems.

There are times when a tragedy can become a profound moment of learning. When we weaned our first calves, they were in a pen next to the cows so that they could still interact. What we did not know, was that a pair of racoons had moved in under the calves' hay feeder. One night, the cows, in trying to protect their calves, flipped a gate off its hinges with their horns, inadvertently causing a serious injury to another heifer. Sadly, the poor heifer incurred a brain injury that eventually caused its death. A grave was hand dug in a quiet grove of trees and lined with sweet dry hay. We gently moved the animal onto the front-end loader bucket.

Before the "funeral procession" could get underway, each member of the herd came to pay their respects, solemnly walking up to the deceased heifer and touching noses as if to say goodbye. Though the herd was small then, this process lasted more than half an hour.

We were reminded of elephants, travelling many miles across the savannah to pay respects to a fallen cousin. Eventually, we gave little Goldie the most dignified burial we could, placing her



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head in the direction of the rising sun. We then drilled every gate hinge and installed snap pins or bolts so that gates could never be flipped off again. This event, while tragic, brought us to a greater understanding of what sensitive, connected creatures they really are.

We have constantly marvelled at the intelligence of these beautiful animals, and their way of “being” without complaint or judgement. We have delighted in how they respond to love and attention, and conversely we have seen with a few animals how early trauma becomes life-long cellular memory.

We have become used to seeing peoples’ cautious approach to the Devons because of their horns, and the usual questions, “aren’t you going to take off the horns?” or, “aren’t you worried they will kill you with those horns?” A simple “no” answer’s both questions.



Lead-Cow Winnifred

## A few notes about our Production Practices:

This is not a “how-to manual” as I in no way claim to be an expert. I simply share what we do and why.

From early May until early November the herd is on pasture at Devonside. We utilize a system of rotational grazing that provides a relatively small piece of fresh grass daily. After several acres have been grazed, we follow up with a flail mower to even out grass height at about 6-8 inches, and to help control weeds. (We have a formidable seed bank of Canada thistle on this farm!) It should be noted that not all “weeds” are bad. These cows will often eat the dandelions before the alfalfa .....

The cows tend to graze from sun-up until mid-day. If it is hot and sunny, they will hunker down in the old bank barn for a siesta, the length of which is determined by the weather and the lead cow. Late- shift grazing goes on well past dark. In lousy weather,



'Trailer'~Feeder

they will return to the comfort of dry straw bedding in the barn for the night, but if it is pleasant they will opt for sleeping under the stars.

Eventually, pasture season winds down, and because Devonside has some heavy land with imperfect drainage, we pull the herd off pasture before permanent damage is done to the stand. It is time to move the herd to their winter home. This modern day version of a cattle drive involves a truck and trailer rather than cowboys and horses. This past year it took nine loads to move the bunch, a full days work for the two of us. It is very important to us that the animals are not unduly stressed in the process. We group compatible animals, keep loads at a comfortable density, and try to use cow psychology instead of brawn, hollering or the unacceptable use of cattle canes or electric prods. It is much easier to lead a Devon with an apple than to try to push her onto a trailer.

Safely back at Greenbelt for winter the cows spend much time lounging around. They don't have to walk far for feed and they enjoy the rest as they are pregnant. Gestation is all about good nutrition and adequate rest, as they prepare for their next babies.

Our cows receive no grain or soy, only grass, hay and minerals. They get no antibiotics unless in a life-saving situation. (Only three animals in the herd have ever been in that position. They eat copious quantities of diatomaceous earth, served free choice along with minerals and salt, instead of being laced with systemic insecticides for parasite control. The quality of hay is important for adequate nutrition. Likewise, other key elements for healthy, happy cows include fresh clean straw bedding, put down at least every day if not twice a day, clean water, fresh air, and lots of love and attention.

Shelter from the wind is important in this area, though they handle the cold very well.

It is true that it takes us longer to finish a beef animal than the usual feedlot scenario of shipping out at sixteen months. We

take just about all of the allowable thirty months, so despite the perceived loss of efficiency, the animals get to spend almost twice as much time on this earth as their conventionally raised relations.

Economists would deem this to be horribly inefficient. A mass production model would certainly yield higher gains, fewer "days to market", higher net income and various other such markers. However, I doubt that the cows would be happier, and I definitely would not be happier either. We constantly evaluate our production practices to determine if there are better ways of doing things to alleviate stress on the animals, and to better their overall quality of life.

### The naming of Devons:

All our animals are registered, purebred American Milking Devons. Due to their origins as the wild native cattle of southern England, many farmers have given their cattle names derived from British Royalty and military officers, or names with references to their rich colour, an attractive reddish-brown.

After a trip to Italy a few years ago, a number of our cattle received names linked to the fantastic wines of that region. Thus, Brunello, Amarone, Barollo and Rosso all became part of our Devon Family. When we started wintering the herd at Greenbelt, our nursery, nearly all the calves are born there and so plant names, still with frequent references to the colour

red, have become more prominent, like Redbud and Morus. Our love of music also plays prominently in the naming of our animals. "Leonard" homage to the late great Leonard Cohen; "Spring Wind" for our favourite Greg Brown song; "Arlington" borrowed from Wailin' Jennys first album and so on. Most importantly though, we find it important to just sit with the calves, ask them who they are, and let the proper name come to us.

The Devons have certainly assisted us in rehabilitating our farmland, but they have taken on a much broader role in our lives and occupy a huge place in our hearts. In a legal sense, we could say that we own this herd of cows. In all practical terms however, we are their humble servants, attending as best we can to their needs, and in reciprocity, they provide us with delicious milk, the highest quality beef available, and quality breeding stock to share with other farmers. They are a perfect antidote to nature's deficit-disorder, the best form of therapy one could imagine. As we grow more and more attached to these animals, the level of emotional intensity felt when things go well, or poorly, is very similar to the joys and anguish experienced when raising children. Even though they are animals, they teach us much about our own humanity.

We welcome anyone with an interest in these rare and beautiful animals to come to visit our Devon family ([www.devonside.ca](http://www.devonside.ca)).

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## G6S in Nubians

By Rebecca Lange. HLC Goat Coordinator

G6S is a genetic defect found in Nubians and crosses of the breed. Don't panic - it's not as bad as it sounds! G6S was first discovered in the Nubian population in the 1990's. Many animals are "normal" and do not carry the defective gene, others are "carriers" and finally there are a small number of "affected" Nubians. Affected Nubians have delayed motor development, slow growth (often described as "slab sided") and early death is not uncommon. Usually their life span is to two years at the most. Generally speaking, because of their odd look and obvious impediments most Nubians affected with G6S never breed - however, there are a few that do.

It is easy to test your herd for G6S. All that is required is a hair sample. This sample can be sent through CLRC (Canadian Livestock Records Corporation) to Maxxam Laboratories in Canada.

Working with G6S is not terribly hard to do. Affected animals should not be kept in a herd. Normal to normal breeding's will

only produce normal kids - so there is no need to test. In the instance of breeding a carrier to a normal animal - the off-spring do need to be tested. There is a 50/50 chance resulting offspring will be carriers.



Having a G6S carrier is an added expense in any herd. However, with the genetic pool being quite limited in Canada and there being less traditional type Nubians - it is worth making a judgement call as to whether to work with carrier status bucks and does.

In my personal experience I have worked with a carrier buck. I have been so fortunate that almost 100% of his kids have come back as normal - having bred him to G6S normal does. His superior conformation and my admiration for the outstanding quality of his kids made him worthy of utilizing and attempting to continue his genetic line - without the need to G6S test again.