

Women In Simmental Country - Lois McRae



The history of Simmental in Canada is 45 years strong and the commitment and dedication to the breed by many women in the livestock industry is just as strong. Lois (Gordon) McRae grew up in Souris, Manitoba, on their family farm where they raised Simmental, Shorthorn, and Polled Hereford cattle. Her parents, Bob and Joyce Gordon, owned Kinnaber Cattle Co. and were one of the founding members of Bar 5 Simmentals where they maintained an ownership position from 1969 to 1973. Throughout her childhood Lois spent many years exhibiting Simmental steers and heifers as her 4-H projects. Lois met her husband Blair through the 4-H program and they were married in 1983 and have been involved with the Simmental breed for 36 years. Their family grew with the addition of their children Brett and Melissa who are now young adults and collectively they all provide input into the family operation of Mar Mac Farms which is located southwest of Brandon, Manitoba.

Mar Mac Farms was established in 1956 with a herd consisting of purebred Black Angus cattle. In 1976 Simmental cattle were introduced as part of their breeding program after seeing the results that could be achieved through crossing two breeds. Lois has seen many shifts in Simmental cattle since they first introduced the breed into their program noting the most significant one was the addition of red and black cattle. "The Simmental breed has advanced a lot in the last 10 years. With the Red and Black cattle, we have to make sure to put enough performance in the cattle. The Fullblood cattle were always and will always be stout, thick-made cattle that add pounds to the calf crop. Simmental cattle were originally selected for the mother cow's milking ability and performance and we need to make sure we keep that performance in our cattle," Lois explains. "The cattle being produced now are more in tune with the needs of the commercial producers; they have more depth of rib, ease of fleshing and are smaller framed cattle."

Lois and Blair work side by side each day at the farm. "We wanted to be able to raise our children around the farm." When asked her role in the operation, Lois replied "I am a jack-of-all-trades. I do the books, advertising, along



with helping get the cattle ready for shows, and everyday chores. In the summer, I spend a lot of time on the baler and harvest machinery." When she is not busy with the day-to-day operations at Mar Mac, Lois also runs a livestock insurance business, markets semen, as well as writes a livestock newsletter and co-manages the Keystone Simmental Sale along with Blair.

Everyone plays a big role in the success of their operation, including their two children Brett and Melissa. Brett received his diploma in Ag Business from Lakeland College and has returned home to continue the family business. Melissa received her diploma in Communication Arts from Lethbridge College and looks after their advertising, website and promotional material designs.

Through the use of embryo transplanting, Mar Mac Farms has selected cows that will work for them and over the years has increased their cowherd to 200 purebred Simmental and Red and Black Angus cattle, using their own genetics. "Our land base has increased over the past years to accommodate more cattle. All





hay and swath grazing so natural fleshing, easy keeping females are very important. Our cows have to work for us," Lois states. She goes on to explain, "We use Simmental for the maternal traits, cross breeding ability, performance and milking ability. The half-blood Simmental female is one of the best in the commercial industry. Simmental steers have the added weight and lean meat yield to bring top dollar in the marketplace."

There are a large number of Simmental-based commercial operations around Brandon, MB. "The Simmental breed crosses well with British cattle, adding pounds and yield as well as maternal traits," says Lois, "The initial enthusiasm of exotic cattle coming into Canada started off a trend of focusing on high performance cattle that will return extra dollars at weaning time. As many producers in Manitoba sell their calves in the fall right off the cows, increased weight means more take home dollars."

Mar Mac winters 70 heifer calves and 70 bull calves each year and for the past nine years these genetics have sold in their annual bull sale, held on-farm in their sales facility; this year's sale will be held on March 6. They also consign their genetics to several sales and market females privately from their yard.

Lois has been an active member in the Canadian cattle industry for many years. She is a founding member of the Simmental Belles in Manitoba and served as Secretary/Treasurer for nine years. From 1998 to 2008 she was the leader of the South Brandon 4-H Beef club. She currently sits on the Canadian Angus Board of Directors and along with Blair they have jointly served as chairpersons of the Keystone All Breeds Bull Show in Brandon for eleven years. In 2007, a group of Manitoba breeders initiated an all breeds junior event and Lois has served as the Chairperson of this All Breeds Junior Event committee since its inception.

"I have been honoured to judge a number of 4-H, Junior and Breed shows. The Cinderella Classic in Saskatoon, National Simmental, Charolais and Angus Shows at Agribition, and in 2003, I had the opportunity to be the lady judge at the Royal Bank Beef Supreme in Regina," Lois comments. "I enjoy evaluating cattle, and appreciate the opportunity to do so. One of my fondest moments was growing up and showing Simmental steers in the Boys and

of the feed is grown on our land. Our cows have to maintain themselves on



Girls Calf Feeding competition that I won in 1977 and 1979. Also in 1985 our family farm exhibited the Grand Champion Steer, a Simmental, at Agribition. That was back in the booming exotic days of Simmental and the steer sold for \$18.00 a pound; that was an exciting day for me. My family has either exhibited or judged at every Agribition since its inception."

Lois has a strong passion for the junior programs within our industry. "Junior programs have always been very important to our family," says Lois. "Both Blair and I grew up in the 4-H program. I was a 10 year 4-H Beef and a 10 year Home-economics Member, was a founding member of the Canadian Hereford Junior Association and treasurer. Blair was a founding member of the Young Canadian Simmental Association." Both of Lois's children, Brett and Melissa, participated in the YCSA program since they were 8 years old. "Each year, we took active part in the Manitoba YCSA events and attended three YCSA National Classics. This was a great learning experience for our children and one they will never forget," Lois proudly explains. Brett was a 4-H Beef member for 10 years, and Melissa for 11 years; both of them very active on their respective executives and organizing committees.

Lois is currently the Chairperson of the Junior Manitoba Youth Beef Roundup that is held in Neepawa each summer in August. "Being involved as a YCSA parent, we could see the numbers dropping and the costs to host events going up. That is why a group of breeders got together and organized an All Breeds Junior show in our province. We were very worried that we would lose the benefits of the YCSA and what other programs have also done to help our junior cattle producers excel in the beef business," Lois states. The junior show has continued to grow over the years and is an educational weekend focused on the promotion of all beef breeds.

When asked where the Simmental breed is moving in the future Lois responds, "I see the breed headed towards the red and black cattle that have a white blaze face,"

Lois states. "As I spend a fair amount of time at auction marts, I feel we need to be able to identify our Simmental cattle. There is demand for Simmental calves and they must be able to be visually identified." Lois continues, "We need to encourage and educate



as many junior members in the Simmental breed for the future of our industry. As we have seen the number of YCSA members drop in Manitoba, we have to concentrate on attracting new members and promoting the benefits of the Simmental breed and our programs to the youth."

The Canadian Simmental Association and Simmental Country would like to say thank you to Lois for her contributions to the Simmental breed and for her dedication to the youth programs of this country.

