



# McRaes part of every Winter Fair

BY CHARLES TWEED

For 106 years, you haven't been able to swing a cattle show stick or horse whip at the Royal Manitoba Winter Fair without hitting a member of the McRae family.

In 1907, when the fair began, Finlay McRae showed horses at a fair that was far smaller in scale and considerably less royal than it is today. Back then, no one could have imagined the fair would grow to what it has become. But since that inaugural year, the McRae family has been a part of the Winter Fair each and every year in Brandon.

"I still remember the fair being held at the Wheat City Arena," said Blair McRae, the fourth generation of the family to take part in the fair. "I remember it well because there was an old wooden ramp there and it was easy to get the cattle to go up it, but it was a (heck of a time) to get them to come down."

W.F. McRae, the son of Finlay, followed. As a horse showman, W.F. dazzled crowds with his stable of trick horses.

Then came A.D. McRae, who shifted the family's focus out of the horse arena and into the cattle ring.

Today, Blair and Lois McRae own a 250-head, cow-calf operation south of the Wheat City.

"My grandfather would roll over in his grave if he knew how little I know about horses," Blair joked while eating beef on

a bun between cattle shows in the Barn Bar — a tradition as old as the fair itself.

Blair, who has been showing cattle at the fair since the 1960s, has won numerous awards, including championships for the top steer, heifer, and Angus and Simmental bull.

His wife Lois (Gordon) is no slouch either. Lois captured the Boys and Girls Competition as a youth at the fair — something no McRae has ever done.

The fair, however, has meant more than ribbons and trophies to the McRaes. Early on, the world-class cattle show, which included the Brandon Bull Sale, provided a valuable promotional tool for the family. In the pre-Internet age, buyers and sellers often met in Brandon to evaluate stock, and often settled deals in a back room over a beer or two.

"We have friends that we only see once a year and it's at the fair," Blair said.

He has also seen the fair evolve to include more educational information about the farm and really focus on welcoming families into the fold.

"There are more and more people that are removed from the farm so it's good to have them come out and see where their food comes from and learn a bit about agriculture," he said.

At the same time, the RMWF has held true to many of the traditions that make it a truly unique event.

"The co-mingling here between the horse people and cattle people isn't like it

is anywhere else because we are all together and there is a lot of camaraderie after the shows are done."

Throughout the McRae generations, the family has played a big role in the fair's evolution, serving as directors, chairing committees and volunteering to help ensure the fair goes off without a hitch.

Today, Blair's two children are involved at the fair.

His daughter, Melissa, is helping her cousins show steers at the event. She remembers growing up showing cattle and having fun in the old Keystone barns that were torn down more than a decade ago.

"It's where I've met a lot of my friends and I've learned a lot of things here," Melissa said.

His son, Brett, is supervising the showing ring in the Kinsmen Arena.

"I've got a ton of stories from here and goofy things that happened to me through it all," Brett said. "I learned it all here."

Both said it's important to give back to the fair, something that was instilled in them from their parents, who had it instilled from their parents all the way back to Finlay where it all began.

"The Winter Fair is so different than any other fair because it has everything at one show, so it's a really neat atmosphere," Brett said.

"We take a lot of pride in the fair. It's kind of the 'Calgary Stampede' for Brandon and it's a big deal for our city."

• ctweed@brandonsun.com