

Kincardine family finds niche market

Johnsons raising registered Texas Longhorns

By Eric Howald

Five years ago, Kincardine Township farmer Murray Johnson was selling hay to Florida.

Today, he's raising registered Texas Longhorn cattle, selling breeding stock and beef that is leaner and has less cholesterol than skinless chicken breast.

Murray and his wife, Jean, were introduced to the longhorns by their son, Mark, who lives in Calgary.

"We were looking for a niche market," says Murray, as our hamburgers cook on the barbecue. "There is no sense doing what everyone else is doing."

While many cash-croppers across the country are in financial trouble because of low commodity prices, he believes the Texas Longhorns will make Johnson Creek Ranch, owned by Murray and Jean and son Mark and his wife Sheri, self-sustaining in the next couple of years.

A dairy farmer, Murray was out of the cattle industry for 10 years before getting into the longhorns in 2001. Before returning to the cattle business, he and his family wanted cattle that could look after themselves better than the Holsteins once milked.

Texas Longhorns fit the bill. Spanish explorers brought the



The Texas Longhorns have a horn span of six feet.



Murray Johnson with one of the Texas Longhorns. The cattle, despite their horns, are a docile breed.

breed to Mexico, which at that time included Texas. The cattle escaped or were set free as settlements were started and later abandoned.

For 500 years, the cattle ran wild, surviving everything nature could throw at them.

To survive, the animals, over time, developed hard hooves and strong legs so they could travel for food and water, and long horns to defend themselves. Calves are small, allowing for quick births, and they are up and running shortly after birth. The breed is also more resistant to common cattle diseases.

The cattle multiplied quickly in the wild and numbered in the millions. During the years of the great cattle drives which ended in the 1890s, more than 10 million animals were driven out of Texas.

Despite the advantages of the longhorns, the breed almost died out in the early 1900s with the introduc-

tion of the fat beef breeds from Europe combined with the fencing of the last of the open range.

A few cattlemen saw what was happening and started to save some of the best longhorn cattle on their ranches. That's how the seven "families" of longhorns survived.

The Johnsons have found the cattle easy to raise. The bulls and cows are in the pasture year-round while calves and first-calf heifers are allowed to run in and out of the barn in winter.

Jean, the ranch manager, spends one to 1.5 hours per day providing feed, water and bedding.

The longhorns have already caught on in Western Canada where 90 per cent of the farmers are using them to breed their first-calf heifers because of the easy births.

Heart Healthy Beef

Every intensive cattle, pig or chicken operation has to use antibiotics on a regular basis. If there is an outbreak, even more drugs are used.

Because of the survival traits the longhorns developed from centuries of running wild, Murray is able to say, "Our vet bill is close to zero - not \$100 a year."

"We're organic except for the ni-

trogen we put on the pasture and hay fields," he says.

Son Mark bought the first four longhorns in 2001 and the registered herd has now reached 58 in number. That's allowed the Johnsons to sell breeding stock the past couple of years and now they're selling Texas Longhorn meat from their farm (see the classified "for sale" ads in this newspaper).

It's great for health conscious people, says Murray. Scientific studies show that longhorn beef is leaner and better for you than most popular meats, including chicken.

Murray and Jean, who have farmed for 40 years, live on the North Line in Kincardine Township. They have 250 acres, 110 ten of which they rent.

Murray supplements his income by clearing snow in the winter. As the herd grows, the farm becomes more self-sustaining. He believes he'll be able to give up the snow-blowing in a couple of years.

"Raising longhorns is something we should have done 20 years ago," he says.

"We're hoping it (longhorn beef) will catch on in Canada," he adds, as we enjoy a second hamburger.

If it does, the Johnsons will indeed have found the right niche.