

Champion Country

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Local cattle farmers hit hard by BSE scare

Issue has been blown well out of proportion, say area farmers

By **ROBIN DOWNTON-POIRIER**
Special to *The Champion*

Justified or not, ongoing fear over bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) — more commonly known as mad cow disease — is wreaking havoc among local beef cattle farmers and many others in the industry.

"It's worse than depression time," stressed Sixth Line resident Bert Stewart, a longtime industry expert, having spent 38 years as a 4-H Club leader and traveled around the world as a buyer, seller, consultant and judge of cattle (mostly dairy) after graduating from the Ontario Agricultural College in 1954. "There's not a farmer that's happy the way things have gone in the last year."

Nearing retirement yet still active in the industry, Mr. Stewart feels the mad cow disease issue has been blown out of proportion.

He's not alone in that belief.

"The chances of a human contracting mad cow disease is very minuscule," said area beef cattle farmer Doug Gardhouse. "It's less threatening to humans than most things. We're not worried about it in the cattle industry, just its effects."

And its effects are — to say the least — significant.

A sixth-generation beef cattle farmer who's lived in Milton since 1950, Mr. Gardhouse said the mad cow issue has devastated his business beyond anything he's ever seen.

"From the very first day that the cow was discovered (in Washington last May), the market plummeted and never recovered," he explained. "There are two things that are very disturbing

What exactly is BSE?

Mad cow disease — or BSE — is a brain-degenerating disease that can develop in cows that have been fed infected meats and bone meal from other animals.

The disease is not transmissible between animals or humans unless tainted meats is ingested. If a human does ingest tainted meat (from the brain or spinal column of an infected cow), they can develop human mad cow disease known as variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) — that's fatal.

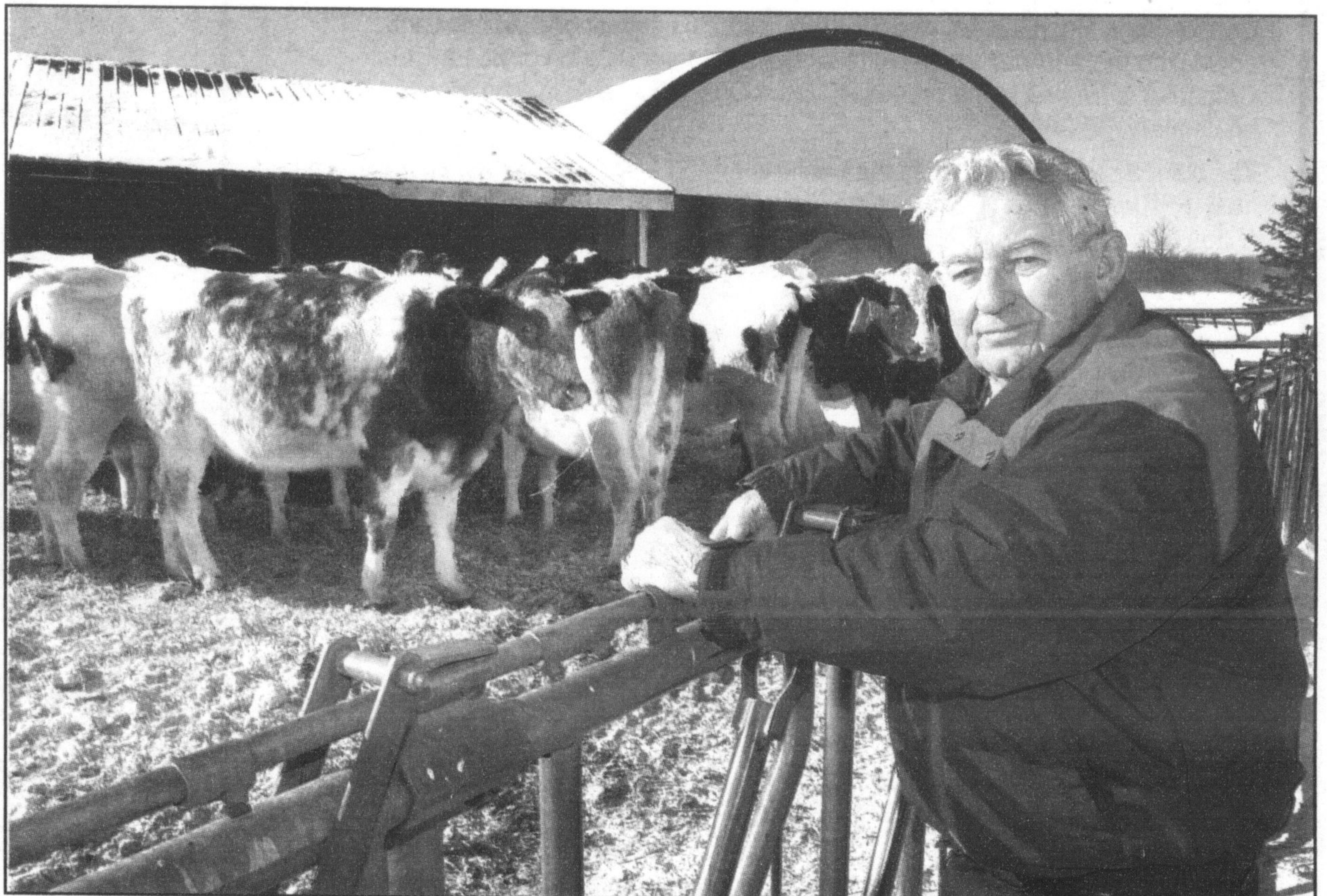


Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

Industry expert Bert Stewart visits an area beef cattle farm, one of many that have fallen on hard times due to ongoing fear of mad cow disease.

about this problem. The first being that it has gone on for so long and the second is that although the market has dropped and farmers are paid very little for beef, the stores are still selling the beef at regular prices. It doesn't make any sense."

The price of cattle has dropped by nearly two-thirds — from 60 cents a pound to 22 cents — according to recent figures from the Ontario Livestock Exchange. And with cattle feed jumping to \$40

a ton in the past five months, farmers are definitely losing out.

Said Mr. Stewart, "Farmers still need to feed the animals, purchase machinery and tools to take care of their farms, and keep their businesses going. But everything is crazy expensive and there's no money coming in."

For those like Milton's Bob Merry — who unlike some beef cat-

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