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How One Dairy Farm Transitioned to Beef

Growing up on a successful traditional Canadian family dairy, enjoying cattle from the time he was a boy, it is no surprise that Elgin Craig would make Dairy farming his chosen career.

“Beef cattle and rotational grazing is a totally new experience.”

Managing dairy cattle requires attention to detail. The pedigrees are studied, production records are meticulously kept for generations. Individual cows themselves must meet an extensive list of selection criteria. Feed is analyzed, ingredients tested, and formulas tweaked to enable the herd to reach top performance. Each and every day feed is brought to the cows by the ton. This in turn necessitates manure being hauled away, also by the ton. Long hours of feeding, cleaning, taking care of equipment, and cattle add to the hours spent milking.

2014 brought changes to farm. Joan and Elgin were looking to the future, making plans to enjoy other parts of life without being tied so rigorously to the farm. Demand for quality Holsteins was fueled by an expanding dairy industry and the ability to export cattle again to the US after the 2003 BSE restrictions.

The Craig's took advantage of the opportunity to sell the herd exiting the dairy industry. Elgin and Joan, recently retired from her teaching career, took time to travel and relax. 'Retirement' didn't suit either of them. Soon they began discussing what the next chapter of their life would look like. A list was made, not a to do list like most would make upon retirement but a what not to do list.

On the not to do list was actual retirement, both feeling they would enjoy exploring a new venture together this time around. Crop farming made the list also, the input costs of additional land and specialty equipment wasn't feasible. Their farm had nearly 400 acres of good ground, Elgin enjoyed making hay. Joan had grown up with beef cattle, Elgin missed the cattle. An idea began to form, sell hay as a cash crop and feed lower quality hay to cattle, beef cattle. A plan was coming together, they began exploring their options, discussing just how to make it happen.

Elgin's brother suggested Speckle Park cattle. The breed had been developed in western Canada to excel on native range. Speckle Park not only was reported to gain well on forage but had other attractive qualities – calm



dispositions, good mothering instincts, easy breeding, good carcass traits and meat quality. Speckle Park bulls were being recognized to produce excellent F1 hybrids; steers for grass



finished beef programs and replacement commercial cows that would excel in forage management systems. Possible gains of 2 to 3 pounds on forage was intriguing to a dairy man used to the high cost of feeding concentrates.

Joan and Elgin headed to western Canada visiting several ranches breeding and using Speckle Park cattle. A new chapter began in 2015, the Craig dairy farm would transition into Red Maple Speckle Park. The Craig's goal is to develop quality breeding stock that excel in a pasture raised beef operation.

Grazing beef cattle would require fencing and water system to accommodate rotational grazing not to mention learning an entire new way to manage cattle.

Up for the task, the Craig's began researching rotational grazing, fencing options and companies. Tim Prior owner of Brussels Agri Services had the knowledge, experience and equipment they were looking for. "Tim and his wife Donna have livestock themselves, they know what works. Tim shares his knowledge and experience, always making himself available as questions come up," Elgin says. Invested in their customers' success, Brussels Agri Service offers many educational programs; speakers, pasture walks, and hands on education.



Brussels Agri Service designed, planned and installed not only the fencing at the farm but also the water system, working alley, chute system, TSi management system and scale as well as made suggestions of forages mixes for the paddocks. Elgin comments that he is a firm believer in hard data, "We use the TSi system and EID tag reader to collect data that gives us real numbers allowing us to better manage the cattle."

The pasture consists of 100 acres; perimeter fence is 5 strands of high tensile, 3 hot, with posts every 20 foot. The 70 interior paddocks are one to two acres divided by Gallagher Turbo Wire and step in ring top posts. Each paddock is able to accommodate 20 to 25 cows and one bull for a day. The MB2800i energizer is turned off

remotely, wire is disconnected and cattle walk through to the adjacent paddock. Each paddock then sits empty for approximately 30 days allowing adequate rest and regrowth. Water is run from a well through the plastic pipe system laying on top of the ground. A portable water tank hooked to that line with a float is moved each day with

the cattle as is a mineral feeder on wheels. In the rotation are a few 'sacrifice area' near the barns. These larger areas, 2 to 3 acres, are used to feed hay in winter, during drought and excessively wet periods, preserving the grass paddocks.

"Growing up with dairy cattle everything was measured, tested, formulated, and brought to the cattle then fed. Then we turned around hauling manure out. Beef cattle and rotational grazing is a totally new experience. Our cattle now harvest their own feed for the most part then spread their own manure. Management is fairly simple, open a wire, move the water tank and mineral feeder. Our largest investment is fencing. Compared to the equipment needed in a dairy or for cash crops the fence cost is minimal, over 30 years it is almost nothing. Now time is spent with the cattle and our customers."



The Craig's current goal is to have 50 breeding females. Half their herd is purebred Speckle Park the other half cross bred commercial females. Cattle are typically rotated from May through the end of October. The Craig's have seen major improvements in just the three years they have practiced rotational grazing. Soil preservation has been a huge plus states Elgin, "There is less erosion, less ponding of water and more water retention. Rotational grazing is beneficial for the land and next generation."



Their son, James, has a key role in managing the pasture bringing a new perspective. Together; Elgin, Joan and James, share ideas and experiment trying new things. Elgin remarks, "This is a 180 degree turn from dairy farming. We are all learning together."

The Craig's are enjoying this new chapter of their life on the farm together as they continue to transition to a grass-fed beef operation. They are nowhere near ready for retirement, far too many new things to learn.

Echoing each other's enthusiasm for the future, Joan and Elgin Craig believe - Life is an Adventure - full of new

ways to see things; new Gallagher products to make life easier, new cattle to raise, new forages to plant, and new customers to meet.

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