

A Rancher's Experience with Galloway Cows and Feeders

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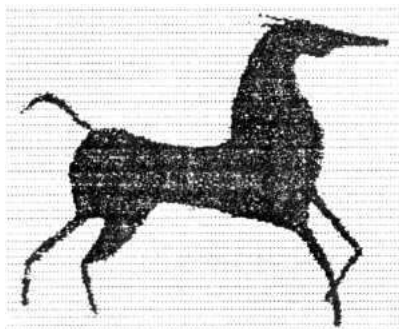
My father farmed in the Summerview district north of Pincher Creek and I can remember that the only career I wanted was to ranch and farm. My dream came true in 1971 when my father put the down payment on a riverfront farm north of Cowley. It was just far enough away so I couldn't borrow too much of his machinery, and close enough to be in touch.

Back then I was just out of Olds Agricultural College, twenty-two years old, indoctrinated with the latest technology and techniques and literally bulletproof. As you can well imagine, this was a dangerous combination. High intensity farming and ranching, artificial insemination, early calving, night calving checks, high labour—and stress. It seemed that I was there to make a living for my cattle, but as it turned out I was also doing a good job of making a living for the bank and machinery companies. Unfortunately, none of them truly appreciated my efforts.

About ten years ago our farm in the river bottom was expropriated for the building of the Oldman River Dam and we were forced to relocate. We were very fortunate to purchase an outstanding ranch only thirteen miles away from the original farm and located high in the Porcupine Hills. This ranch is about 1,200 feet higher in elevation than the former farm, with some parts at 5,000 feet or more and much hillier and rougher. We moved into an area where spring comes a little bit later, fall a little bit sooner, and the winters can be long and cold. Fortunately, my way of operating was about to change 180 degrees.

We built a new 1,800-head feedlot to replace the one on the former property as well as a feedmill and barns, and a shop was moved from one of the expropriated farms. Much of the arable land on this new property had been broken and planted to crops and one of my first projects was to replant most of this land back into forage.

Today we run 140 cow/calf pairs, a 600-head yearling operation and we background and fatten 1,500 head in our own and a custom feedlot. Some of the farmland is custom silaged and the rest is custom harvested. Part of the forage is cut and baled for hay and the rest grazed.



Planting much of the former crop land has benefitted us many ways. We have had excellent results using a minimum and zero-till program and erosion, especially by the wind, has been virtually eliminated. By using custom operators our machinery purchases and input costs have been drastically cut. We now

market much of the forage directly through the cattle with no machinery, twine or labour costs. My big expenditure to run the yearling and cow operation this year was a new horse for my daughter and a new saddle for myself.

We also utilize the manure from the feedlot each year to fertilize areas that need improvement. I feel that the fibre and nutrient properties from the manure make it superior in restoring the land. The benefits are immediate, and it is easy to pick out the areas that were manured.

We introduced Galloways to our operation in 1982 when I made the mistake of taking my wife to a cattle sale in Pincher Creek where I was coerced into buying her a short, dumpy Belted Galloway heifer as a herd marker. Much to my horror the heifer soon acquired the name *Fluffy*. Unknown to me, Fluffy had the fortune, or misfortune, to be bred by a roving big rawboned Charolais bull.

Next spring when her time came to calve she had the instinct to pick a spot under an overhanging sandstone rock, away from a spring snowstorm where she and her calf would be dry and out of the wind. She delivered a good-sized yellow bull calf on her own. As I was lagging the calf and while she looked on mooing softly, the thought crossed my mind that all these positive factors couldn't be coincidental. That fall the calf was taller than his mother and he was well put together. We had to get some more of these cows, and we soon bought some black Galloway cows at a herd dispersal.

Not long after the move we were busy calving, the feedlot was full, and with only children, dogs and my wife assisting (who was pressed into service when needed), I realized that I wasn't bulletproof any more. One thing I'm sure all you men out there can relate to is that dogs are much more forgiving to what a woman would call inappropriate yelling. After finding myself suddenly alone in the corral a few times except for my dogs, I decided there had to be a better way to do things.

That's when we made the decision to incorporate more Galloway cattle into the cow herd. Over the years these cattle have shown the ability to care for themselves, they end up staying in the herd for a long time, and the animals in the feedlot perform well.

It's easy to raise cattle when the weather is warm and the grass is green and up to the cows' bellies, but when it's -35°C with three feet of snow, then you need cattle that are suited to the climate. The double hair coat on Galloway cattle works, and even in the coldest weather you'll find them out foraging for themselves. It is not unusual to see them contentedly searching through the snow for grass, with a couple of inches of unmelted snow on their backs.

With hay selling for \$150 a ton this past winter and in short supply, it hurt to feed it to large cows with thin skins. I feel Galloway cross cows utilize this feed as good or better than any breed.

We don't need flashlights, de-horners, calf pullers, respirators or sheds for our Galloway cross cows. These cows seem to have a knack to pick a good calving spot and they are excellent mothers. Even the heifers have strong mothering instinct and we haven't had a problem yet with a Galloway not wanting her calf. The calves have lots of thick, woolly hair and even if the outer layer is wet, the undercoat will still keep them warm, resulting in less frozen ears and tails in severe weather.

Cows with pigmented udders are another plus. When there is snow in the spring and lots of sunshine, cows with white bags and teats suffer from sunburn. Anyone who has had to rope and tie up a cow so her calf can suckle and then apply ointment to the sunburned bag will appreciate what I am saying. None of us look good with hoof prints stamped on our anatomy-

Even though Galloway cattle have the ability to do well under harsh conditions, we strive to make sure our cattle have a properly balanced diet and we have achieved that by working on a one-to-one basis with our feed representative. Each area of OUT country has different nutritional requirements because of the different soil and forage types and growing conditions. Feeder cattle and cows that do not have any weak links in their nutritional chain will perform to the utmost of their genetic potential. Cows that have received their proper nutritional, mineral and vitamin requirements deliver strong calves that display resistance to the adverse calving situations that we often encounter.

This does not mean that our cows get any preferential treatment. We like to keep several fields of native pasture just for winter grazing. The predominant grass is rough fescue. This grass, or 'prairie wool' as it is sometimes called, cures on the stem and in an average winter will provide most of the nutritional and energy requirements of the cows.

We often have open periods during the winters here because of the Chinooks, and in a normal year this means the cow herd can graze for a good part of the winter.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the case last winter, as we had collectively well over ten feet or three metres of snow, and long periods of cold weather without the famous Chinooks. To stretch the valuable hay supply we supplemented our mother cows' diets with pellets before calving.

Chinooks are warm, dry southwest winds that blow over the mountains from the Pacific Ocean and they are a southern Alberta phenomena. The temperature can be -20°C and the next minute you are bathed in a +10°C wind. In February of 1986

we had temperatures of -30°C during the night and by the next afternoon it had warmed up to $+20^{\circ}\text{C}$. This is an extreme situation and the change can be hard on cattle.

I feel Galloways, with the tremendous insulating factor of their hair coat.. are better able to withstand these fluctuations. Incidentally, these temperature changes work backwards, as well. Although I take good care of my cattle, if they want to die then dammit they can do it without my help. The start of calving has been moved back to the beginning of April. I don't check my cattle during the night, I have found it is sufficient to look at them before dark and early in the morning.

On our ranch there seems to be no difference in the calving rates at night depending on what time they are fed during the day. I believe that if cows are fed a proper quantity and level of nutrition consistently, they are content to lay down and rest at night and most of our calves are born during daylight hours.

The past winter was an extreme test for cattle in our country. Winter started in November with a storm dropping three feet or about a metre of snow, and -30°C weather for weeks. My heifers were supposed to start calving in May, but much to my dismay the first one calved at Christmas. Some of these Galloway cross replacement heifers must have been bred in the corral by an unnoticed bull calf before they were put out on pasture. Because of the severe conditions, I moved them off the prairie and into the feedlot to calve. The seventeen heifers that were bred early all calved on their own and we ended up with fifteen live calves, a good percentage under any conditions. These heifers were only twenty months old.

We find the outside of the thick hair coat of the Galloway calves frosts over after their mothers have licked them, and in effect they have their own incubator. Only the tips of the ears of some were lost. Mind you, I had moved them into a corral with a bedded open-front shed, but it was still -30°C . It is not something I want to repeat, but fortunately it turned out okay.

The joke in our community is that we have 'reputation' cattle-only it's the wrong reputation. We have had almost every breed or cross of cattle in our cow herd and feedlot over the years. Experience teaches you what breeds of cattle do well and those that don't. Galloways cross well with any breed to produce excellent replacement females with even temperament and good feedlot animals.

We have found that other British breeds crossed with some strains of certain exotic cattle produce high strung, hard-to-manage cattle. When you get these cattle into a feedlot situation they can be difficult and dangerous to handle, and they never seem to calm down no matter how long you have them. We refer to them as 'wallbangers.'

Did you know that the steers of a particular European breed of draft cattle in a custom feedlot usually have the lowest cost of gain? that's because they are always in someone else's pen. I have heard comments in the sale barns that the only place you can hold them is the deepfreeze.

If you have ever tagged a baby calf while the cow's morning breath is fogging your eyeglasses, then you can appreciate docile females. Sometimes when wild heifers are kept for replacements the pregnancy rates are low. Thank goodness! I think even the bulls are scared of them.

We personally have had no problems getting our Galloway cross heifers settled, although I wish the ones that calved early this year had waited a little longer.

I would like to talk a little bit about the actual type and quality of the Galloway breed. In every breed we have a range or spectrum of animals from very good to poor -- or the good, the bad, and the ugly. In my opinion that same range in Galloways is smaller. Galloways haven't been victims of the extremes and fads that other breeds have experienced. Galloway breeders have always produced cattle for real life situations.

Our Galloways are moderately sized animals that produce a good calf-to-cow ratio. When you sit down and figure out the input costs of a cow over her lifetime compared to the profits from her calves and her salvage value. these cattle make good economic sense.

Galloway calves sometimes appear to be shorter and have that dumpy look in the sale barns, but it never ceases to amaze me how these very same calves will mature into large, deep, thick feminine cows and feedlot steers that excel in performance and carcass type. Galloway steers have won or placed in the carcass competition at the Denver Stock Show many times, and with good reason.

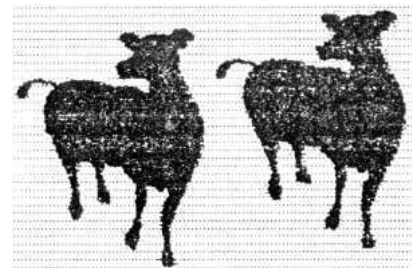
For many years I marketed some of my cattle through the local abattoir which gave me the advantage of seeing the carcasses of many different breeds and the results of my feeding program. We only sold him our best animals, and he was always pleased with the Galloways. Galloway meat is well marbled, the fibres are fine, and the animals yield and cut well. When you sit down to a Galloway steak or roast you won't sit down hungry and get up tired.

Selling cattle to the packing plants can be an interesting experience. Did you know that packer buyers are direct descendants of the old Medieval Tax Collectors. They are non-discriminatory, and rob from both the rich and the poor. These very same individuals on certain occasions have been known to eat their young.

Because packer buyers will sometimes try to discount these cattle, I often choose to rail grade my Galloways. Once the hides are off they are judged on their quality rather than their breed, and they grade and perform well.

I would like to relate an incident that did much to change my way of thinking about life and the cattle industry. It was a very humbling experience when the government took approximately eight hours to level, pile and burn the corrals and barns that had taken me seventeen years to build. I don't own the land on my original farm any more, but I am still overwhelmed by a sense of achievement when I drive by and see the top land flourishing that I strived so hard to rejuvenate with my feedlot manure and crop management strategies. What man builds is impermanent, but the land is forever. It is my belief and my practice that it is our duty to leave the land in better condition than when we acquired the use of it. Although we sweat and toil to acquire and pay for it, we only have a very short time with it in the scheme of things. Bad management can leave its ugly mark long after we are gone. My goal in agriculture is to make a living from the land while preserving and enhancing it for the next generation, and Galloway cattle are a big part of that philosophy.

As you have gathered, we are not breed specific in our operation--we go with what works. We view cattle as a commodity and a means to the end. I can sincerely say that our program is working, and for those of you in the audience today who are looking for an easier and less stressful way to raise good cattle--go with Galloways. Now our cattle are making a living for us.



I consider myself most fortunate because I am still as excited about my chosen occupation as when I started, and I am blessed by the fact that my family shares that enthusiasm.

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