

Standing Up for Canadian Milk – Even on Crutches!

The Remarkable Canadian Milk Tour

Henk and Bettina are prepped, primed and ready to take the message of Canada's dairy farming families and the benefits of Supply Management across the country!

Photo credit: Henk Schuurmans



The Terry Fox Monument on the Trans-Canada Hwy outside of Thunder Bay is a must stop!



Pausing at the Centre of Canada, Landmark, Manitoba.

By Tars Cheema

Some people grumble. Some people write angry letters. Some vent on social media. Others protest. But when faced with the relentless and unsettling news coverage of the NAFTA negotiations earlier this year, Henk and Bettina Schuurmans decided they had to do something *positive!* “We are not demonstrators,” Henk shares. “The attacks from the NAFTA talks were insulting and we had to stand up for our boys’ futures, and all 11,000 producers need a voice!” They had already begun the transition in spring to allow their sons, Jim, Tom and Eric to take on primary responsibilities for leading the 230-cow operation, so Henk and Bettina hit the road in June as the **“Canadian Milk Tour”** – a chance to engage with Canadians from coast to coast, sharing the story of dairy farming – face to face – *farmer to friend*.

We know we live in a **massive** country, but one doesn't fully respect *just how big*, unless you walk, bike or drive it! They set out from Elmira, Ontario, in late June on a John Deere tractor with a full-size fibreglass cow named ‘Maple’ and ‘Keep My Milk 100% Canadian’ signage perched on the three-point-hitch platform. “We wanted to observe and experience Canada at a slow speed – calling attention to *our families, our industry, our future!* If we weren't prepared to speak up, then who would?” Henk explained passionately. Their highly visible, unorthodox transportation presence brought forward curious people to start the dialogue, at gas stations, Tim Horton's, roadsides, and tourist spots. It afforded ample opportunity to meet and

engage with ordinary Canadians, getting answers directly from farmers who actually care for cows and produce the milk that appears on retail shelves. It was a simple idea that caught on fire with the help of social media, traditional media and the celebrity of Maple and Minnie.

Along the way, the fibreglass baby calf ‘Minnie’ would be posed at interesting spots for photo-ops, which would often become the focal points for social media posts, allowing anyone to follow their journey online. “We received so many honks, waves and smiles from people everywhere – city or country – they seemed aware of NAFTA and the problems we faced,” shares Henk. “We had tens of thousands of interactions across the country – all were 100% positive – it was a fun way to bring dairy to people who are supportive but not connected.”

As news spread of their cross-Canada *Milk Mission*, farmers opened their homes to welcome them to dine and stay with them along the way. By now, many in our dairy community know of the devastating accident outside of Saskatoon with a semitrailer truck that severely injured Henk and took Bettina's life. A more tragic and disastrous incident is hard to imagine. The dairy community across our country was in a state of shock that this could possibly have taken place. A roadside memorial for Bettina marked the end of the Canadian Milk Tour. Over the summer, Henk's broken ribs and pelvis needed time to heal, as did his heart, from his incomprehensible loss. The NAFTA negotiations continued with intensified rhetoric and increasing fear over its potentially destructive outcome.

Schuurmans – ‘Man of the Barn’

Back in the 1600s, Napoleon decreed that everyone must have a last name. Many created their surname from their profession or region of origin. ‘Schuurmans’ literally meant ‘man of the barn’ – still so fitting for Henk – a ninth-generation dairy farmer! Back in 1983, Henk took a three-month exchange to California after recognizing there was little chance of him joining the 70-cow home farm with four other boys in the family! Working on the 1600-cow DeBoer farm was a huge eye-opening experience for young Henk and seeded his love for the wide-open possibilities of North America. After completing Ag school and the mandatory 18-month military duty (for NATO in Germany in this case), Henk returned to Ontario in 1986, finding it easier to acquire a work permit. The year in Thunder Bay having not frightened him off, he found a sponsor, extended his stay and eventually became a full Canadian citizen! In 1987, his father sold the farm back home and took a ‘dairy opportunity’ sabbatical around North America in 1988, eventually deciding to settle in Norwich, ON with a 60-cow dairy operation.

Cooon Flora – An Evolution

With still no room for Henk at the new home farm, he found Cooon Flora – the breeder herd of prominent Dutch businessman and farmer, Wijnand Pon. Henk would start in the new 72-cow tiestall barn in May of 1988. “We milked nice-typed, good

production cows. We even had a split Valiant embryo from Tony Charity, but she wasn't special,” recalls the seasoned cowman. As herdsman, he continued to upgrade the cows gradually, with quality additions from herds such as Langview and Hanover Hill. Then came Bettina. She had immigrated with her family in 1987 and Henk hung out with her brothers but eventually found it more desirable to pal around with *her*. Bettina had left behind her job with the riot police in Amsterdam (yes, **riot police**), to return to farming with her brothers – she loved the cow life. But she traded her partnership with her brothers for a new one in 1990 when she and Henk married. This same year, Henk became the Farm Manager. “She took a big role in the farm, raising all our calves and keeping the place in tip-top shape for all the tours, which she often helped guide. She knew every corner of our operation.” 1994 was a big year – the herd would shift to a 180-cow freestall operation and install a double-10 parlour. A shocking fire in 1997 took out their dry cow barn and original tiestall barn, which they replaced with a freestall structure.

When Pon bought Alta Genetics in 2000, Cooon Flora would gain a new identity and purpose – this time as a nucleus breeding herd! The game would be one of intensive breeding utilizing the highest numbers from the most modern genetics, resulting in herd average LPI's that ranked them in the top five LPI herds in Canada numerous times. “We ran a very intensive flushing program; the herd was 10% donors and 90% recipients. BW Marshall, Shottle, Convincer and Bolton were some of our heaviest used sires,” he recalled. By 2010, genomics was becoming



Minnie lightened up a gray day for tourists enjoying a whale-watching excursion from Victoria.



Minnie is far too polite, but one could forgive her for pooping in protest on the lawns of Parliament, after the dairy-damaging concessions made in the USMCA trade agreement.



A spectacular viewpoint at Cape Spear, NL – Canada's most easterly point!



L-R: Jim, Tom, Emily, Lize, Eric. Remembering their wonderful Mem while seeking some closure outside of Saskatoon.

established and the closed nucleus herd concept had to evolve. "You had to dive all in or back out – it changed the AI game very quickly. We had to adjust to the value of genomics and switch our game," asserts Henk.

When the opportunity arose to buy the Coopon Flora operation, it was an easy decision; finally, there was a substantial cow base for the tenth generation of Schuurmans to farm **together**. Milky Wave Inc. was established in June 2013.

The Tour Must Go On

No one would have expected Henk to get back out on the road to complete this journey – certainly not in light of the tragedy and his still broken body. "I just couldn't let that crash be the end to our story. I needed to make sense of what happened. *There had to be a happier end,*" expresses Henk softly, the grief still openly visible in his eyes. With his plated pelvis still needing weeks of healing, Henk, using crutches, resumed the tour in a Holstein pickup truck, a new Maple and Minnie and his daughters Emily and Lize along with him. September 9, the day after Jim's wedding, the Canadian Milk Tour headed west once more, this time, *'in loving memory of Bettina.'* As difficult as it had to be, the entire family gathered at the crash site where the original Minnie had remained, keeping watch. Closure helps healing. The decision was made to repatriate Minnie to the tour once more; she belonged with the herd.

A highlight was spending time in the majestic Rockies – an experience that Bettina had been eagerly anticipating. In BC, they spent an evening at the North

Okanagan Fall Sale in Armstrong, where they were welcomed and supported with proceeds from the sale of a heifer calf. In Abbotsford, they joined a small gathering at Gary Baars' farm for his annual Corn Field Car Races. Once on Vancouver Island, they could commemorate reaching the Pacific edge of their tour. A gathering at Van Valley Farm included an interview with a local reporter before Henk visited with Island milk producers. A three-hour whale-watching tour out of Victoria with 25 onboard created a unique platform to discuss Canadian Milk. Even without a PFD, Minnie was a delightful conversation starter. One sympathetic Aussie couple knew their dairy farmers were struggling and needed a Canadian SM system. Everyone left with a *Keep My Milk 100% Canadian* button and a much better understanding of the realities of our industry. Much further east, about 8500 km into the journey, around Lake Superior, they shared a visit over breakfast with a Vancouver **biker gang**. The bikers left wearing Milk buttons. Henk should be our Prime Minister!

Home for Thanksgiving

After a regroup stop at home over Thanksgiving, they would continue east with renewed determination to complete this mission and be home by the end of October. They even rotated their signage *en français* as they entered Quebec; *language* should not be an obstacle in the Canadian Family Farm/Milk story. Quebecers heartily embraced their Tour and francophone signage at the Milk Board meeting they had been invited to. Canadian concern, courtesy and support accompanied them everywhere.

"Newfoundland was special – we must have met most of their 28 dairy producers who were so welcoming to us. Then the winds whipped up so bad that we had to stay an extra day because the ferry couldn't safely make the eight-hour trip back to the mainland." Reaching Cape Spear – the eastern most point in Canada – was a magnificent milestone! *They had succeeded in touching both ends of the country!* It was time to begin the final leg of this monumental undertaking – the trip back home. Their route through the Maritimes was marked with more encouragement, more open doors and more open hearts. PEI insisted they stay another day, like NFLD – by closing the Confederation Bridge, again, due to extreme winds. "Maple catches a lot of wind," reminds Henk, referring to the large, but light-weight fibreglass cow secured in the truck bed. "We had a wonderful breakfast with farmers on PEI and enjoyed staying with Bloyce Thompson and family of Eastside Holsteins." Back in Ontario, Henk and Bettina's children joined him at

the Ontario Legislature to again promote their Canadian Milk message. They met privately with Premier Doug Ford and Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe – who felt it important to meet them after the terrible accident in his province.

Over the course of this truly **epic** journey, the Canadian Milk Tour wracked up some 20,000 km and handed out thousands of *Keep My Milk 100% Canadian* buttons. Henk has over 2000 pictures and a bulging book of names and messages from the amazing people he met across the country.

With Milky Wave Dairy in the hands of tenth generation dairy farmers, Henk will continue to support and speak up for Canada's dairy farming families and the Supply Management system, to give them a fighting chance in a world flooded by desperate and unrestricted production. But for now, Henk is happy to be home, in the parlour, back to the peaceful, quiet, early morning milkings, while he continues to need time to understand his life without Bettina at his side.

See the amazing gallery of photos from across our spectacular country at:

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