

Seeing BC's Early Dairy Industry Through JM Steves and Sons

A Time of Great Expansion

Tars Cheema

When Manoh Steves became the first importer of registered/purebred Holsteins to BC in 1886, the future of the 'Lulu' herd would certainly have been expected to remain a leader in Holstein breed development. But challenging economic circumstances that significantly included the over-zealous land development plans of son Herbert forced the sale of land and cattle to cover debt in 1892 and 1894. The dispersal of the Steves' purebreds among many other early ambitious breeders would perhaps accelerate the development of BC's registered Holstein fraternity.

Seeds, Stallions and Moving Milk

The Steves were industrious ag entrepreneurs – beyond their dairy farm, they were well known for their successful Steves Seeds business, and other farm stock – notably Suffolk-Punch horses and poultry. In fact, the seed business helped finance much of Herbert's land development, essentially creating Steveston. Later in the 1890's, the Steves family became established as one of the earliest milk retailers in the Vancouver area. During these years, Lulu Island was isolated by the north and south arms of the Fraser River – until the first bridge was built in 1890 – the Sea Island Bridge. JM Steves took over responsibility for the retail milk business after Manoh died in 1897. Later, the farm would operate under JM Steves and Sons.

"The milk would have to be shipped on the morning run of a paddle wheeler from Victoria to Fort Langley. Before 1908 they sold cream in five-gallon cans and 100 lbs of butter a week primarily to the canneries and to New Westminster," Harold explains from the archives he has uncovered. "Cream was also shipped to Vancouver by CPR train and later by BC Electric tram." In 1908, Joseph built a dairy by the barn on Steveston Hwy (called No. 9 Rd back then) where the raw, chilled milk was bottled, producing more than 35 cases daily, which were shipped to J.M. Steves Dairy Co. in Vancouver for door to door delivery. When the delivery business was sold in 1914, the new owners were granted permission to use the Steves trademark, which then went to the Fraser Valley Milk Producers when they bought the company in 1917. JM joined the FVMPA in 1917 also.

"In 1921, JM Steves was shipping 100 gallons of milk daily to FVMPA, 25 cases of quarts and 10 cases of pints," Harold shares from his findings in the trove of old farm records. The average price was \$0.51/gal. resulting in milk income of \$16,520.43 in 1920.

Records and news clippings document that showing dairy cattle was very much a prestigious undertaking. Major expositions were convened in Victoria and New Westminster and JM Steves and Sons were noteworthy competitors.

Establishing the BC Holstein Branch

Barb Souter captured some interesting early history in the 1983 BC Holstein Breeders Directory. The minutes of the first meeting of the Branch took place on October 1, 1908, 'convened in the cattle sheds.' Hubert Freeman

Page of Matsqui was put forth as chair of the meeting, accompanied by Thomas Laing, appointed as Secretary of the gathering. 'After considerable discussion on the need of a Branch organization, it was moved...' by J. M. Steves, seconded by J. Erskine. The motion was carried, and the BC Holstein Branch had its start. The charter members numbered 54. JM Steves nominated HF Page as President of the Branch, and J Blair nominated JM Steves as Vice President. The first meeting of their Executive Committee was held December 31, 1908 in Vancouver at the Richmond Dairy premises. 'The question of advertising came up, and it was moved (JM Steves) ...that one dollar per member be levied to provide means of advertising'. And so began the annual dues of the BC Holstein Branch.

Harold Leslie Steves (Sr.) - Highs and Lows

Born in 1899, Harold had little chance to avoid immersion in his family's substantial and high-profile dairying business. But it also would appear that he had a well-suited aptitude and interest in pursuing the rapidly developing dairy industry. "My dad got his first camera at 11 years old, so we had lots of pictures from 1910 on," Harold smiles.

With an obvious interest in genetic improvement of the rising-in-popularity registered Holstein population, he excelled in judging at UBC while doing his agriculture degree. "My father won judging competitions in 1922 and 1923, before graduating in 1924." Harold Sr. became the Secretary of the BC Holstein Branch in 1926 and shortly after, he was hired as the first Western Canadian Fieldman for Holstein Canada. The news reports of his hiring in this prestigious role spoke of his skill in the show ring, evidenced by his previous responsibility for the BC exhibit at the Royal! "His job was to promote the breed and help Holstein breeders upgrade with high quality registered stock from other breeders. They even took BC Holsteins to the Royal Winter Fair and he was instrumental in arranging the first shipment to Japan, China (1930) and Australia," Harold explains. These were exciting and highly active years for the Holstein breeders everywhere. HL was stationed in Alberta for most of a year, then in Regina for another year to service Saskatchewan and Manitoba herds. He left his Fieldman role in 1933, returning to the farm. HL was highly regarded and was called upon to judge dairy cattle shows locally and on the Prairies during and after his Fieldman years. When his father, Joseph Moore died in 1934, HL took over the farm business. The JM Steves herd was near 100 cows, making it one of the largest through the Depression, but these were brutally tough times and selling assets was an uncomfortably common survival strategy. Stay tuned for that chapter in Part 3 of the Steves Story, next issue.

Fraser Valley Cows on Way to China



1 - The first shipment of registered BC Holsteins headed to China – 1930.

2 - This December 22, 1930 picture features HL Steves on the left, aboard the Blue Funnel boat, 'Tyndarius' in Vancouver. Wallace Mufford of Milner accompanied the shipment to China. The cattle had individual padded stalls.

3 - Steves Farm PRIDE AMARILA was the first identified cow photo that 11-year old Harold Leslie took with his first camera in 1910. Many more cow photos would follow!

4 - NORA CANARY (daughter of Sir Canary) – won the BC Dairymen's Association first prize trophy in 1916 for JM Steves and Sons.



Dispersing the Genes of Manoah's Registered Holsteins

Kathy Steves

Manoah's son William Herbert Steves married Clara Tully from San Francisco in 1889. Their first son Dalzell was born in 1890. Reasoning that babies need milk more than anything else, Manoah transferred his heifer EMPRESS VERONICA (daughter of BLACK PRINCESS) to the baby Dalzell. Three more heifers were registered to Dalzell by 1895. When William Herbert's second son Lawrence was born in 1892, CANDALARIA (daughter of BLACK PRINCESS) was registered in Lawrence's name. Manoah's daughter Mary Alice did much of the work milking and making butter. She chose PIETJE 2ND to be her special cow and this was transferred to her name by 1889. JEAN L'S BEAUTY was transferred to Manoah's youngest daughter Ida shortly after her marriage to Walter Herbert Steeves and in 1891 LULU QUEEN was transferred to Manoah's youngest son Walter. Joseph Moore, the middle son, chose ELVANNA's heifer EGLANTINE. All the other Steves cattle remained registered under M. Steves and Sons.

After 1889, Manoah had registered only the most promising calves; money to maintain the farm was tight. By 1891/92 prices from \$40 to \$100 for cows in milk were common. Records show that he sold more than 50 head of cows, heifers and bulls to neighbouring farmers, or the butcher at this time. Most of the Steves cattle had been dispersed by the end of 1892. A dozen calves and yearlings were auctioned at the New Westminster Fair in the Fall of 1892 for \$30 to \$40 each, mostly in promissory notes to be repaid in 6 to 12 months. The biggest sale was 22 head to Eburne farmer Alex McLeod, who had doubled his herd size by 1895 when he sold out completely. Thus, by 1895, the Steves cattle and their offspring had been sold to 20 other farms in BC.

Alex McLeod's relative, Roderick McLeod, kept five cows including LULU QUEEN, the first Steves heifer calf and four other cows originally raised by Manoah.

William Newlands of Eburne bought over half of the McLeod herd, including nine Steves cows and fourteen heifers raised by McLeod. The nine cows included four original cows: SATIN, WILHELMINA BYRON, PIETJANNA and WILHELMINA BYRON 2ND. By 1898, Newlands had increased his herd to 40 registered cows and heifers. During 1902-06, Newlands was selling breeding stock (bulls, heifers and cows) from Steveston to Salmon Arm. Newlands sold his entire herd of 48 animals in 1907 and retired. Twenty years after they arrived in BC, the Steves cows and their descendants had been distributed to at least 57 farms through McLeod and Newlands.

The Steves Begin Rebuilding 1893-1901

Though most of the herd had been dispersed in 1892, the family was determined to rebuild the registered herd, principally with two original cows - JESSIE L and CARMINA 2ND. Ida and Walter sold the cows registered in their names but evidently Joseph and Mary Alice made some agreement with Alex MacLeod that they could buy back heifer calves from their chosen cows EGLANTINE and PIETJE L 2ND. In 1893, each cow produced a heifer, one registered to Joseph, one to Mary Alice. The 1895 calving season was a good omen for rebuilding the herd. Three heifers were born to the cows registered to William Herbert's young sons. The heifers were immediately transferred to Joseph's ownership. Mary Alice and Joseph now owned six promising females that could be traced back in two generations to the Cook imports. Unable to afford a fancy bull for such a small herd, Joseph bought Earl of Lulu from Sam Brighthouse and used this bull from 1895 to 1900. In 1894 the Steves only owned three cows and four heifers.

There were also hardships through this period. Ida's husband Billy Steeves left behind his two-year old daughter and pregnant wife when he was killed by a tree falling on his stagecoach to Vancouver in 1895. William Herbert died in 1899, leaving wife Clara with four children. The youngest brother Walter would take over the seed business. Manoah died in 1897 - unable to witness the recovery of his legacy that would come about in the next generations.

JM Steves and Sons

Joseph married a Steveston girl, Bessie McElhinney, in 1898, and their first son, Harold Leslie, was born the following year in the Japanese Hospital on Number One Road. Next came two daughters, Jessie and Winnie, followed by Allen in 1904 and Jean in 1909.

By 1901 the herd had increased to 25 registered animals, mostly sired by Earl of Lulu, prompting Joseph to begin the search for the next special herd sire. After



The inside of the new Steves dairy barn - circa 1912.

The new Steves dairy facility featured an overhead rail for easier transport of milk cans from the barn to the dairy. Circa 1912.

much careful consideration and research, he imported Lena's Paul Dekol from GW Clemons, a leading Holstein breeder in Ontario and Secretary of the Holstein Association of Canada from 1893 to 1912. With Holstein breeders now having detailed milk and butter records for five generations of cows, bulls could be highly selected based on merit. The pedigree of Lena's Paul Dekol was a marvel of intense genetic selection with numerous record-holding production females on top and bottom of the pedigree.

His breeding was considered so exceptional, that seven sons were sold to leading herds in 1903-04, while two full brothers were kept for use at home. By 1905, Joseph's herd had increased to 45 registered females. It was common practice to renew herd sires at least every four years to avoid inbreeding of a sire to his daughters. JM acquired Carl of Lulu from William Bonsall of Chemainus in 1904 and sold him one of the Paul sons - a mutually beneficial trade of excellent genetic diversity. Bonsall's cow had won the milk and butter test contest for three years at the Victoria and New Westminster shows, producing seven gallons milk with four percent butterfat in 24 hours. Carl was sired by a highly regarded bull in JE Page's herd. Both Page and Bonsall had been successfully raising record-winning registered Holsteins for 20 years.

In 1907, a new richly-bred herd sire was imported from John B. Irwin in Minnesota - Sir Canary Mechthilde. JM also purchased Milk and Butter Prince from New York in 1908 with William Carvill Steves, using this bull in both herds. In the next three years, Sir Canary sired 16 sons and 30 daughters. From 1906 to 1909, JM's breeding program produced 28 young bulls that were sold as herd sires. One son, Sir Canary Pietje was used as Steves herd sire in 1917/18. Pietje's dam, LADY PIETJE CANARY'S JEWEL, held the three-year old Canadian milk production record until 1958 with 24,549 lbs milk, and 1174 lbs butter. In 1910, Colony Farm, a supply farm for the Essondale Mental Institute, started raising Holsteins. A prestigious selection committee including JM was appointed by the government to select the 70 head of foundation stock. One of four bulls chosen, was closely related to Sir Canary Mechthilde. In 1918, JM bought a new bull for \$5000, a grandson of the world's highest production record holder - DUCHESS SKYLARK ORMSBY with 27,762 lbs of milk and 1506 lbs of butterfat. This allowed JM to sell Sir Canary Pietje after two years of breeding, to Agassiz Experimental Farm.

During these years, the seed business was thriving, leading JM to grow more seed and raise fewer cows. On November 6, 1919, the first annual consignment sale of the BC Holstein-Friesian Association was held at Joseph Steves' farm. A total of 47 purebred Holsteins were sold including 35 from the Steves herd. JM averaged \$310 for 11 cows and 13 heifers, received \$280 for one bull and 10 bull calves averaged \$175. Prices were less impressive in 1924 when eight cows sold for an average of \$200, three-month old heifers and five baby bull calves for \$50 each.

JM's 1926 income tax return listed the sale

of cattle at \$4352. He started the year with 114 head, added 36 calves, 16 head died and 62 were sold, leaving him with 72 at year end. He also earned \$9550 for cream and milk, and \$1920 for seeds.

An article in Farm and Home magazine in April 1926 gave details of the sale of 42 cows and heifers at Steves' farm. Ten older cows averaged \$138, while three-year olds averaged \$112 and two-year olds brought \$91 each. Eight heifers born in 1925 and 1926 averaged \$58 each. The cattle market appeared to be steadily declining.

Harold Leslie Steves

Harold Sr. (HL as he became known to avoid confusion with his son Harold), attended UBC in 1917-18 then worked on the farm for a couple of years after the end of WWI, before returning in 1921 to complete his Bachelor of Science in Agriculture (BSA). 1917 was the first year Agriculture was offered by UBC. During Harold's university career he was twice 'high man' on UBC's dairy judging team sent to the Pacific International Exhibition in Portland, Oregon in 1922 and 1923, judging Holsteins, Guernseys and Ayrshires. UBC at this time held classes in two buildings at 10th and Laurel in Vancouver, as well as in old army shacks, tents and a church basement. Construction began in 1924 on buildings at the present-day site at Point Grey, but Harold graduated before the move to Point Grey was completed.

HL became the first 'fieldman' for the Holstein Association of Canada in the western provinces, logging **many miles** in trains and rental cars from 1926 to 1933. These were years of excitement in the expansion of registered Holsteins across Canada, and HL was on the front lines. But his field territory kept him away from home for vast periods of time. His father Joseph died in January 1934, age 69. From 1933 to 1938 he was content to farm at home, developing the bloodlines of their large purebred operation. In August 1935, he owned 70 purebred Holsteins. HL continued on as Secretary of the BC Holstein Friesian Association through 1939, organizing their annual meeting and dinner at Hotel Georgia December 14, 1939.

Like his father and grandfather, he too engaged in civic organizations - being a member of the first Board of Trade in Richmond and VP of their Agricultural and Industrial Society from 1920-25. Perhaps it was the difficult economic conditions of that time that led him to pursue work off the farm. Given his skills, experience and knowledge, it is not surprising that he was lured to UBC to teach in 1938, replacing instructor JC Berry (Belmont Farm) while he took that year to pursue his PhD. Once again, HL was part of a UBC judging team at Portland, Oregon, winning the championship with gold medals in all breeds, this time as coach!

After this, HL accepted a position with the Canadian Department of Agriculture, as livestock inspector, initially engaged in establishing WWII animal hygiene, sanitation and public health/safety regulations - one of the first courses he taught. He retired in 1964 with 25 years service.



JM Steves with Sir Canary Mechthilde - an exceptional sire imported from Minnesota. His sons and daughters formed the foundation of the herd at the Agassiz Experimental Farm in 1911. Pete Moore of Colony Farm was quoted in a 1935 Holstein-Friesian World, claiming that Sir Canary "has had a greater influence for good on the breed than any other bull brought into the province."