

The Cuban boot project and other tales...



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Sometimes, it's the little stories that best tell the tale. As regular readers of Western Dairy Farmer know (Teaching our bovines to roar, May/June 2005, Did you hear the one about the farmer's daughter? July/August 2005), Canadian dairy farmers have been busily working with farmers in Cuba to create a new model for sustainable milk production in that country.

For Cuba, this is an important project. Cuba's nutrition policy requires that children up to the age of seven receive one litre of milk per day and children from seven to 14 receive one litre of yogurt per day. But, when the former Soviet Union collapsed in the early 90's, Cuba's imports of feed grains came to a halt and milk production plummeted. Today, the Cuban government imports half their milk consumption as skim milk powder and the yogurt distributed to children is a soy product.

But, thanks to Canadian dairy farmers Bruce Beattie (Alberta), Jim Millson (Ontario) and Lorne Hansen (B.C.), all that could soon change.

The objective of our one-year, pilot project Enhancing Sustainable Dairy Production Capacity in Cuba (funded by CIDA and private donations) was to work with one farm cooperative in Havana province to create a model that would boost production in the countryside.

Our first priority at CPA 26 Julio was nutrition for their 50-cow milking herd. We constructed three hectares of "pedestals" (a Cuban system of rotational pastures separated by hedges of legumes grown under tented page-wire; abandoned as being not cost-effective) and 16 hectares of solar power fenced rotational pastures. We also implemented some changes to management (proximity of shade and

water, night grazing) and calf rearing practices.

After only one year, production has tripled. This May Day, as I and a dozen university students from BC, Alberta, Saskatoon, Ontario (UBC AGSC 302 Field Studies in Sustainable Agriculture – Cuba) gathered in Havana's Revolution Square, we burst with Canadian pride to hear Fidel Castro mention our farm cooperative as a model of success in sustainable dairy production.

And that's only the beginning

If Cuba is to achieve self-sufficiency in dairy production, the rural model must be successfully adapted to a peri-urban setting. Our next project hopes to accomplish this: working in the drought-susceptible eastern city of Bayamo, we will add effluent irrigation to the model, resulting in sustainable milk production capacity and improved municipal water quality.

But for me, as an Agrologist, the really special aspect of this work has been bringing Canadian farmers together with Cuban farmers and watching the capacity emerge.

When farmers look at a field, they think "how can I make this land productive?" When they look at livestock, they think, "How can I help this animal reach its top potential?" Behind all the questions is, "How can I make this better?"

When the Canadian farmers meet the Cuban farmers and tour their fields, when they shake – farmer's hand to farmer's hand - and see pride in stewardship reflected back in the eyes of their Cuban counterparts, a bond of respect is born that brings out that natural farmer instinct – how can I help? This potent magic has been the driver of this work. And Canadian dairy farmers have been its stars.

In closing - as promised – a few farmer vignettes from Cuba. Because it's the little stories that best tell the tale.

The Boot Project

As any farmer knows, irrigation creates the need for some good rubber boots. Apparently, a scarce commodity in Cuba. "Do you have the sizes?" I asked the president of the cooperative CPA 26 Julio. Within moments, I had a schedule of members' shoe sizes - all

ninety-three of them. Hmmmmmm.....

Now it just so happens that our winter farmer tours visit CPA 26 Julio. After a warm welcome by the Cuban farmers, a tour of their fields and a roast pig lunch, the January tour made me an offer I couldn't refuse: if they donated the money for the 93 pairs of rubber boots, could I find a way to get them to the Cuban farmers?

In short order, \$1,380 was raised. On my return to Canada, I began searching for the boots. Cheapie imitations from Wal-Mart were immediately nixed – only real farm boots would do.

The rubber hit the road when Allenby's Farm Store in Agassiz, B.C. generously donated 93 pairs of gorgeous, \$25 a pair rubber barn boots for a below-cost price of \$15 a pair.

Released from their boxes and huddled together in size lots, one hundred and eighty six rubber boots dominated my kitchen, dining, living room and hall for days. Bulky beyond belief, each pair weighted in at between five and six pounds. How to get 93 pair of them to Cuba?

Of course! The students!

In May, I was teaching a course for Canadian students in Cuba. Many were leaving from Vancouver. Air Canada allows two 70 lb "bags" per person. We'll just take them as luggage!

Rolling and rubber banding them in pairs to reduce bulk and mindful of the weight limit, the boots were re-packed in six cartons and two Sally-Ann suitcases and seven students and I toted them down as checked baggage.

As the commercial says, the look on the faces of the students and the CPA members was priceless. ➡



The first of 93 pairs. Juan Sanchez Martell, president, CAP 26 Julio, Nueva Paz, Habana celebrates the arrival of the boots from Canada.

Juanito's Hay Cutter

A shorter tale, I was about to leave for a project visit to Cuba last March when I got a call from Jim Millson. "I have Juanito's hay cutter," he said. Apparently, unbeknownst to me, Jim and CPA president Juan Sanchez Martel had been discussing the CPA's need for a hay cutter over a beer during their last visit.

"I've been watching the auctions," Jim told me. "This guy was a cauliflower grower so I figured it would be in pretty good shape, and it is. Been sitting under a tarp in a barn for a while. Got it for a good price too considering some fool was bidding against me till someone told him it was for Cuba..."

To make a long story short, the Massey Ferguson 1950's hay cutter got a spruce up from a local farm machinery shop then flew down, arriving at the CPA the last day of our visit. The entire membership it seemed was there to see Jim and the CPA's mechanic put it together. Even to this economist it sounded like a precision sewing machine when it was at last fired up – smooth as silk!

Cuban Bunnock

Anyone living near Macklin, Saskatchewan knows about Bunnock. Originating in Russia, Bunnock is a bone-toss game played with horse ankle bones. I was introduced to Bunnock on a visit to Macklin with the Canadian Farm Writers in September 2005. What a great game for Cuba I thought – there are lots of horses there!

I happened to mention this to a group of Lloydminster farmers booked on the January 2006 farm tour. Lo and behold, a Bunnock game appeared and was presented to the CPA 26 Julio. A lively game ensued after lunch. Now, when Canadian farmers visit CPA 26 Julio, they are always challenged to a friendly game of Bunnock before boarding the bus. Guess, if you can, who ALWAYS wins?

Want to know more?

Visit our website www.the-holmteam.ca and follow the links to learn more about the wonderful work being done by Canadian dairy farmers in Cuba. Consider coming with us this winter to see for yourself how this tiny



Canadian Ambassador to Cuba Alexandra Bugailiskis and Cuban Farmers' Association President Lugo Fonte raise Canadian flag at CPA 26 Julio.

— Photos by Wendy Holm

little country is setting some very high standards for sustainable agriculture. (See our ad this issue.)

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