

The Itinerant Life of Cow Zero

SATURDAY SPECIAL: She had no brand, not even a name. She was bought and sold often. Now everybody wants her story

By JILL MAHONEY AND MARK

NEAR BALDWINTON, SASK., BIRCH HILLS COUNTY, ALTA. -- At the Anchor R farm on gently sloping prairie in west-central Saskatchewan, the McCrea family's herd of Black Angus cattle have long given birth to their young in a weathered, open-front shed.

It was here, on the ranch homesteaded by their Irish forebears three generations ago, that an entirely unremarkable calf came into the world in the spring of 1997.

No purebred, the 80- or 90-pound calf wasn't branded or given a name.

Her only identification was a small green numbered tag attached to her ear.

That's about as much as the McCreas can remember about any of the calves of that spring, except that a year later, they decided she and about 20 others weren't worth keeping and sold them to an Alberta livestock company for about \$800 to \$1,000 a head.

Nor did they think about the crop again, until last Wednesday, when a phone call from a Canadian Food Inspection Agency veterinarian, Jim McLane, quickly turned their quiet world upside down.

Watching her husband, Mel, take the call in their bungalow, Betty Ann McCrea knew something was wrong.

"I could tell by his face that it wasn't good," she said. "[It was] disbelief, I guess. Shock."

What Dr. McLane told them was indeed shocking: Officials believe that it was very likely that this nondescript calf born on their land six years previously was "Cow Zero" -- the Black Angus heifer whose diagnosis this week of mad-cow disease has sent shock waves through the North American cattle industry.

Tracing the journey of Cow Zero, the first cow to have developed bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in Canada in a decade, became the focus of intense research this week, as the CFIA began frantically to plot the course of her life, hoping to identify all the herds she passed through.

Details of where she lived, where her offspring lived, and what she ate will provide key pieces of information as investigators try to assemble the puzzle of how she became ill -- and to answer the crucial question of whether other cows may be infected.

But officials have run into a roadblock: a lack of records. Back when this animal was going from farmyard to trailer to stockyard, no one in the industry was required to keep track of the buying and selling of individual cows.

After tracking down countless yellowed records in filing cabinets in Alberta and Saskatchewan, investigators have located and quarantined two ranches as the possible birthplace of the infected cow, as well as several others where she may have lived.

An undisclosed farm in Alberta has not yet been ruled out as an alternative birthplace of Cow Zero. But the possibility that they may have raised her, if only for a year, has stricken Mr. and Mrs. McCrea and their son Trevor deeply.

As has the prospect that the herd they have worked so long to build up may be slaughtered.

Soon after his phone call last Wednesday, Dr. McLane arrived at their farm, ordering the family's herd of about 250 cattle quarantined until further investigation. Then hordes of reporters arrived.

"It's more attention than I ever wanted," Trevor McCrea said. "There's two things. You've got people busy asking you questions about this, that or the other thing. And then you're waiting back to hear from the government side of the equation for them to tell you what you can or can't do or what they're going to do. Put it this way: I don't like to be in a position where I have no influence what happens one way or the other."

Does the family believe people might blame them? The answer came quickly from Mrs. McCrea: "I'm sure they do, definitely."

But Trevor McCrea added: "There was never any reason to suspect your herd had BSE in it because there's no imported cattle. We never knowingly fed [ruminant] animal byproducts at any time to them . . . so there was no reason to suspect that there could have been BSE."

Though she would not have been fully weaned from her mother until October or November of 1997, Mr. McCrea says, it is possible the cow took a bite of the protein supplement he fed the older cows in her first few months of life. Mr. McCrea buys such product in five-tonne batches twice a year and gives each of his animals half a pound daily.

By law, farmers are not allowed to feed supplements containing the remains of ruminants (cows, sheep and goats) to other ruminants because Britain's serious outbreak revealed such

feed to be a cause of BSE. But Canada's ban on the practice did not take effect until late 1997, when Cow Zero would already have been several months old.

After the McCreas sold what could be Cow Zero and her fellow yearlings in 1998 to Heartland Livestock Services of Lethbridge, they were bought by Stan Walterhouse, who buys open yearlings, breeds them over the summer and sells them as bred cows around November.

Mr. Walterhouse, an Alberta rancher, raised the cow on his operation near Tulliby Lake, feeding her "natural grass all the time she was here."

Seven months after she arrived, she was on the move again. In November, Mr. Walterhouse sold her to Bryan Babey, a rancher who farms with his brother 20 kilometres north of Lloydminster, near Sandy Beach.

At Mr. Babey's farm, which has been in his family for 60 years, she was part of a Black Angus breeding operation. In her four years there, she gave birth to four calves.

She was fed the same basic diet of any cow, he said, a mix of silage, grains and protein supplements. Now, after her death, Mr. Babey wonders if the bone meal she was fed was contaminated by the remains of an infected cow.

"I guess it could have been. I don't know. I guess it had to come from somewhere," the 40-year-old father of two sons said.

Ironically, it was a lack of feed that led Mr. Babey to sell off the possible Cow Zero and several other cow-calf pairs last August. The devastating drought that haunted the Prairies that year had taken a punishing toll on his land.

"We were running out of feed; we were running out of pasture," he said, his voice heavy.

He sold the cow-calf pairs through C.J. O'Grady, a Lloydminster cattle broker who found a willing buyer in Nilsson Brothers, a cattle exchange based in Vermilion, Alta. He was paid \$1,400 per pair.

"They were all healthy cows. They didn't show [any] signs of sickness," Mr. Babey said.

Nilsson Brothers found a farmer looking to expand his herd, and on Aug. 23, 2002, the cattle - and likely some others from another farmer -- were trucked to northwestern Alberta to the ranch of Marwyn Peaster.

Mr. Peaster, a Mennonite, had recently moved to Northern Alberta from Mississippi, to take up land in the area where his wife had been raised. They and their two young sons wanted to

make a life out of farming in the dramatically beautiful landscape of Birch Hills County, in the Peace River District.

They were farming grain, but Mr. Peaster wanted to diversify, and so he set up a feedlot and bought a herd.

The cattle looked healthy and strong when he bought them. But five months later, Cow Zero grew thin, then staggered and fell -- and launched Mr. Peaster and the Canadian cattle industry into a major crisis.

After she fell to the ground, too weak to get up -- thereby becoming a "downer" in the parlance of beef producers -- Mr. Peaster said, he made immediate plans to move her off his land.

The tall, lanky man with a thick southern U.S. drawl had no way of knowing that she had developed mad-cow disease, a condition that takes two to seven years to develop and destroys the brains of its victims.

Mr. Peaster singled out the animal to be sent to a slaughterhouse, where he knew she would be examined by meat inspectors who would judge whether the carcass was fit for human consumption, or whether it should be sent to a rendering plant to be reduced to animal feed.

Either way, he would get paid for her -- and she would be out of his stockyard, where she had been in close quarters with 150 other cattle in his herd.

"It was just a typical cow that went down and was shipped for slaughter to the processing plant, and that's when it was condemned. It had pneumonia, and so it never entered the food chain, which is a good situation," Mr. Peaster said, standing near his now empty stockyard, his hands jammed in the pockets of his jeans.

When the cattle transport-trailer arrived at the Peaster farm, about 20 kilometres south of Wanham, Cow Zero was loaded for the last leg of her life's journey.

Jim Henderson, a veterinarian who runs the Animal Health Laboratory for Alberta Agriculture in Fairview, said a meat inspector identified Cow Zero as a risk at the slaughterhouse.

"It was down on the truck. It was very thin. It had pneumonia," he said.

The inspector, who condemned the carcass, sent her head for testing and put her remains in the rendering tank to be taken to grind up to make a protein supplement that experts believe is safe to feed to feed non-ruminants, mainly chicken and pigs.

The head was sent to Dr. Henderson's lab, a low green building on the outskirts of Fairview. It appeared normal, but a microscopic examination suggested abnormalities that needed further examination. A target area in the cow's brain stem was removed and sent to a departmental lab in Edmonton.

It arrived in early February.

Because there was no mad-cow disease alarm in North America, and the condemned animal was not designated for human consumption, her tissue samples were listed as a low priority and put on a waiting list for three and a half months.

Early last week, the provincial histology lab started to process the cow's brain tissue, a complex process of staining and slicing that takes four or five days.

After a technologist viewed the slide the morning of Friday, May 16, she rushed it to Brian Miller, a veterinary pathologist who heads the province's screening programs for BSE and related diseases.

Around 9 a.m., Dr. Miller entered the office of Gerald Ollis, the province's chief provincial veterinarian, making sure to shut the door behind him.

"He said, 'We have a problem here. This looks like it could be BSE,' " Dr. Ollis recalled.

Dr. Ollis's response was curt, but echoed the fears of every beef farmer and cattle industry worker across the country.

"Oh, God."

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