

## Buffalo Lake Shorthorns - The Bignell Family



Lyle & Wendy Bignell with their girls, Brett (13), Carley (10) and Drew (8).

It has been said that there are more purebred cattle breeders in the county of Stettler, Alberta, than in any other county in North America. If you have ever travelled in this part of the world, you will pass farm signs of leading breeders of many different breeds, many of which are household names in the beef industry. As you drive towards Stettler, the landscape gently rolls with a mixture of grain land, grass, trees and small lakes. This is cow country at it's finest and it is here that you will also find the purebred herds belonging to the Bignell families - Kendall and Shirley Bignell, their son Lyle, and his wife Wendy and their family. Lyle and Wendy's family consists of three girls, Brett 13, Carley 10, and Drew, now 8 years of age. Like many of today's families, the Bignell family has an extremely busy life. Both Lyle and Wendy have off farm jobs. Lyle works full time in the oil patch. He says he is fortunate that his oil field employment is based in close proximity to his farm, so he has the flexibility to stop in at the farm in the case of an emergency. Wendy is a pharmacist tech and works in Stettler at the first job she ever got. She has been at the same job now for 21 years. Both Lyle and Wendy are involved in sports throughout the year. Their three daughters are involved in lots of school and sports activities. Juggling all this along with two purebred herds and a large commercial herd that adds up to over 300 mother cows, is a major job in itself. I can think of no family that does all this better than the Bignell's do.

Kendall and Shirley purchased the present farm in 1974 from his father, who had moved there in 1946. The farm is located approximately 14 miles northwest of Stettler, close to Buffalo Lake, from which their farm received it's name. For several years the Bignell

family operated a dairy and the decision to disperse it was made in the early '80's. The Bignell's had two dual purpose Shorthorns in their milking herd that had been purchased from the Seagrave herd of Frank and Dan Ulrick, Powasson, ON. These females were named Campaign Kate 1P and Seagrave Dawn. They decided that they would keep these two cows and switch them from milk production to beef production. In the fall of 1983, Lyle attended the 4's Company sale and purchased Keriglen Duchess Kyle from Fred and Elsie Fehlauer. More foundation cows were added from the Kenbar, Winalot, and Raydur herds in Alberta. Their purebred Shorthorn herd was established.

Today the Buffalo Lake landbase consists of 2560 acres of both owned and rented land. 400 acres of this is used to grow the silage and grain required to maintain their herd. The balance is hay and pasture. All of their land is located within 5 miles of their farm headquarters, which is a great asset when you are as busy as these families are.



Buffalo Lake cattle on fall pasture

Lyle's first herd sire purchase was an American bred bull named WPS Irish Expansion 605 x, bred by Willson's Polled Shorthorns, Reubens, Idaho. He was also purchased in the 4's Company Sale and he bred extremely well in the Buffalo Lake herd. After he was used in their herd for a few years, Irish Expansion was sold to Bob Sharpe's Balgerran herd at Lacombe, AB.

In 1988, Lyle and Wendy attended Canadian Western Agribition and it was at this show that they saw a bull named SRS Remington x. This bull was exhibited by Tim and Marlene Lehmann, Rosthern, SK, and he was the first Shorthorn bull calf that Lyle had seen that weighed over 1000 lb at the show. Not only did Lyle and Wendy like Tim and Marlene's bull, which they purchased there, but an almost instant friendship developed between them. Lyle says from that point in time on, until Tim's untimely death on January 1, 2000, they talked by phone every Sunday. It was Tim who urged Lyle and Wendy to exhibit in 1989 at Edmonton's Farmfair. This was the first show they exhibited cattle at, and they have shown at Farmfair every year since. Lyle also exhibited at the 1989 Agribition show and they have exhibited there several years since as well.

SRS Remington x did a great job at Buffalo Lake and he left a foundation set of females that were good working cows with excellent udders. Remington was sold to the Misty Hills herd of the Scafe's at Dawson Creek, BC. After a few years there, he returned to Alberta and was still working in a commercial herd at 11 years of age.

In 1991, Lyle purchased a bull named CCS Nobleman x from Don Cagwin, Virginia, IL. By the time this bull made the trip from Illinois to Alberta, with a few stops along the way, he had lost a considerable amount of weight. Lyle says he was not sure what he had got when he saw the bull for the first time. He decided to give him some time and used him the following spring in his herd. He is thankful that he did, as Nobleman bred extremely well and many of his daughters can still be found in the background of their herd. Nobleman also sired a bull

named Buffalo Lake Top Flite 7D x that was sold to Albert Oram, Castor, AB. Lyle was impressed with how this bull developed and bred, so he eventually brought him back to use in his own herd again. It was one of Top Flite's best daughters that a few years later would give birth to a bull that would be the best breeding bull in their herd, to date, that being Buffalo Lake Highball 3H x.

In 1993, Lyle purchased another bull at Canadian Western Agribition from the stalls of Mantua Farms, Powell, Wyoming. This bull was TMF & MF Packer. He was a tremendously thick made son of Sutherland Titleist x and one of the leading donors in the USA, Miss D Cumberland 410. Again, Lyle's good eye selected a herd bull that would sire some excellent brood cows that had capacity and fleshing ability.

It was in 1998 that a bull calf was born on their farm that would get their attention early in his life. This bull was born from a daughter of Top Flite that Lyle had purchased from Albert Oram. He was sired by GPS High Velocity 03C x, an American AI sire. Lyle named him Buffalo Lake Highball 3H x and this calf seemed to show more muscle and length than any other bull he had raised. Highball was eventually to become their herd sire, and to say that he bred well, would be an understatement. Highball stamped every calf with his great body length and put more lower quarter in his calves than any other bull he has used. Most of his daughters were retained and they soon became the basis of the cow herd. The Highball daughters were an impressive group. They were extremely similar in type with great udders, above average muscling and lots of growth. Lyle says the Highball sons had tremendous growth and they were

easy to sell to commercial bull buyers. In 2002 a Highball son was born that again surpassed all their expectations for growth. He was a dark cherry red bull named Buffalo Lake Dustbuster 11M x. This bull was shown successfully and he drew lots of attention for his tremendous growth and thickness. Lyle decided that this bull was the bull that should follow his sire in their herd. He carried on the tradition started by his sire, Highball, and he sired cattle with as much performance along with more depth and volume. Unfortunately, Dustbuster died accidentally on March 22nd as a two year old bull.



**Reserve Grand Champion Female, Farmfair 2004**  
*Buffalo Lake Diana 3J x and Buffalo Lake Blockbuster 6P x*

By the time of his death, Dustbuster had an exceptional set of calves on the ground. One of his calves was Buffalo Lake Blockbuster 6P x, and he again displayed exceptional growth. This bull was Grand Champion bull at Farmfair, as a calf, and it was here that he was admired by breeders from all breeds. Bignell's displayed him to numerous international delegations at Farmfair and as a result, sold semen from him to Ireland and Denmark. March 22 is a day that Lyle will never forget, as Blockbuster died on the same day, exactly one year after his sire. Fortunately, Lyle still has a bank of semen on Blockbuster that he can use to reintroduce him into his breeding program.

In 2005, Lyle was needing a herd bull to replace Blockbuster who had died unexpectedly. He attended the Saskvalley/Bell M "Who's Your Daddy" sale and purchased Saskvalley Nasa 113N x at the top of the sale. He says that this bull is working really well on their cow herd today. Most of today's cowherd contains the breeding of Highball, or his son, Dustbuster or his grandson Blockbuster. This cross is producing bulls that are sought after by his commercial bull buyers. Nasa is also adding some more volume to his offspring which is a trait that Lyle likes.



*Buffalo Lake Legacy 6N - a full brother to their former herdsire, Dustbuster*

Today the present herd consists of about 50 purebred Shorthorn mature cows, 80 purebred Charolais mature cows and 180 commercial cows. The commercial herd is almost entirely Shorthorn cross females on which Charolais bulls are used. The tan calves produced from this commercial herd top the markets every fall and they are also a great promotion tool as they have helped sell many bulls. Bignell's also keep most of the heifers from each herd, and they are used to supply replacement females to their 3 separate herds. Because of their workload, they do not tolerate any females that have any problems or do not calve in a very precise time period.

I visited the Bignell herd two years ago in April. I was

impressed with the uniformity in the cow herds. I did not find a bad udder or a female that looked like she was getting a free ride. Most of the cows are reds or very dark roans. They are very functional in every way. The younger females from the Highball lineage are simply an impressive group. The three herds are moved to large pasture pens side by side, once the calves are born and well established. Their bull pen was equally impressive. Both Charolais and Shorthorn bulls are similar in growth and at that time bull sales had been strong. Most of them were sold already, all privately in the yard. Lyle has a philosophy that if the bull is good enough for him to keep and develop, then he is worth a premium. No one selects a cheap bull out of their bull pen. His prices start at \$3000, and they go up from there. Usually they sell out before grass time. In 2007 they held their first annual bull sale and it was a good success. A second sale was intended to be held in 2008,

however, a double booking of the sale facility made them decide to postpone it for this year and restart it again in 2009. Lyle and Wendy wondered if this decision would affect their bull sales, however, they are extremely pleased that sales have been excellent. They expect to completely sell out again this spring.

It is now 10 years since the Bignell's quit breeding over 100 Shorthorn and Shorthorn cross heifers each summer and selling them as bred heifers in the fall. These heifers were sold bred to Shorthorn bulls.

Despite a decade of time passing,

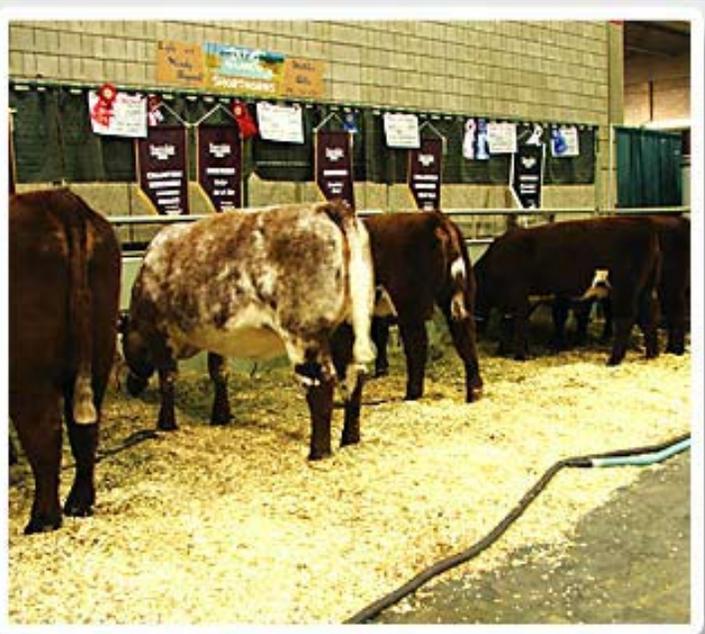
Lyle says they still receive several phone calls every year from commercial producers looking for these heifers to add to their herd. These heifers usually sold for a significant premium each year and they usually had repeat buyers waiting for them when they became available. Lyle feels that these bred heifers as well as the tan Charolais/Shorthorn calves they sell each fall are two of the best promotional tools they have used to develop a strong bull clientele.

The purebred Charolais herd was established in 1997, with the main intention of using this herd to produce bulls for their commercial herd. The Charolais herd has already seen significant success in the 10 short years

since it was established. The Charolais herd has been established with the same mind set of developing a herd of uniform, no nonsense cows, and they have been successful in doing this. They have already accomplished in 10 short years, what some breeders spend a lifetime trying to do. Lyle says that having both Shorthorn and Charolais bulls on offer has helped sell both breeds. Oftentimes a bull buyer has walked into the bull pen with the intentions of buying one breed and decided to purchase a bull from the other breed. He also says that most of their bull buyers are looking for performance bulls so that is what they try to produce. They don't get many inquiries each year for heifer bulls and he expects that living in a community where there are so many purebred breeders of several breeds, gives many other bull options for breeding heifers. Only their best bulls are selected to go to the bull pen each fall and only the bulls that are structurally sound and show that they can perform, ever see the bull pen. Between the Shorthorn and Charolais herds, they usually keep 44-50 bulls each year.

Speaking about the pens, the Bignell's have designed a set of pens that allow them to move cattle in groups around their yard with ease. Their facilities are very practical but also very functional. A few years ago, they decided to rebuild their pens so that they would last a long time without needing much repair. They constructed them out of used oilfield pipe, and I would imagine that they will still be as functional several decades from now as they are today. Designing and building them must have taken a lot of work, but this has paid for itself countless times already, and will continue to do so for years to come.

I think I would be remiss if I did not write about the important role that Kendell and Shirley play in this family operation. They are the only people that are full time in the operation, with both Lyle and Wendy both working off the farm. One doesn't need to ask about the role they play in managing this operation, as it is obvious. This herd is maintained and managed just about as good as any operation you will find anywhere. Kendell and Shirley play a very significant and important role in the day to day operation of the farm. Anyone who reads this article that has owned or worked with a cattle herd, knows of the work that is involved. This operation has three herds consisting of over 300 mature cows along with pens of replacement heifers and bulls. Anytime you visit this farm, every calf is tagged, the cattle are clean, well fed and content. You do not need to be a



*Buffalo Lake lineup - Farmfair 2005*

rocket scientist to know that everyone involved in this operation knows that the work day does not end, until the work is done.

As I mentioned earlier, the Bignell's are very active in their community. Lyle says that he hung up his hockey skates five years ago but both Wendy and him enjoy curling in the winter months. Lyle and Wendy have been very active in playing ball through the summer months. They now play slow pitch ball and Lyle has played in six National Championships in recent years. This has taken them from British Columbia to Newfoundland. Their three daughters are following in their footsteps and are very active in numerous activities as well. One can see that there are few nights where they can all just veg-out on the sofa, in front of the TV!

This is one busy family but they always make time to show you their cattle and the welcome mat is always out. They are a true family operation and they work together and play together. If you have the opportunity to visit their farm, you will find their optimism infectious, and I guarantee that you will probably drive out their lane feeling better than when you drove in. They are proud of their families, proud of their cattle, and proud of any successes along the way. In my opinion that is a pretty good combination to have – good people, good cattle, and good service to their customers. If you are ever in this part of Alberta, make sure you make arrangements to visit the Bignell operation. I am sure you will not leave disappointed.