

"Buy local" saves farm

(Having many baskets also helps)

by David Greenberg

Two summers ago I ran out of hay for my cow and horse. I called a nearby farmer who sold hay, and asked if he could deliver a few round bales when he had the chance. I got the hay, but also some farming inspiration when later I visited Keith and Linda Davidson on their farm near Wolfville, Nova Scotia, to help them cut up a side of beef.

Walking into their home in Greenfield, I was greeted by Linda as if I were an old friend. Before I knew it, I was cutting meat on a big stainless steel table in her kitchen. She told

me all about her life, beginning with her childhood on a dairy farm on the Gaspereau River, meeting Keith, and how they started farming with eight Simmental cows on a small, mostly wooded acreage bought in 1977. Clearing about five acres a year, they now have 65 open acres, mostly in pasture, with the remaining forested land available for firewood and Christmas trees. Forages and grains for a 65-cow herd of cattle are currently grown on 400 to 600 acres of land rented from neighbors.

Keith and Linda worked off the farm for the first 20 years of their lives

together, while at the same time raising three children. Keith worked for the town of Wolfville, plowing snow in the winter and maintaining the water supply year-round. He said he would often go days on end with hardly any sleep, especially in the winter when he was cutting wood all day and working for the town night after night plowing snow. Linda worked as a baker and cook at Acadia University. She recalls with good cheer getting up at four in the morning, baking and cooking all day, and working on the farm into the night.

Now, children grown, and having built up the farm, the Davidsons work full time at home. Their cows provide steers and heifers finished at home. Steers are sold through Atlantic Stockyards Limited in Truro, and up to two dozen heifers, which they have killed at a nearby inspected abattoir, are sold from home, by sides, quarters, and by the pound.

They cut firewood and sell about 300 Christmas trees each year (at the farm and through the local Lions Club). Since 2002 Linda has been selling baked goods and homemade preserves from the farm. They grow a big garden, and some years raise a pig or two, mostly for home consumption. "We're pretty well independent when it comes to food," she said. "My grocery bill isn't very big."

EARLY YEARS

Keith's early memories revolve around working on the family farm. As a child of about eight, he would ride a team of horses pulling loads of hay from the fields. When he was a little older he would take a single horse and wagon from house to house to cultivate gardens for neighbors for a small fee. He was too small to lift the hoe and cultivator on and off the wagon alone, but once he was hitched up, Keith was known to make short work of any garden weeds. In the winter, he would return to help the neighbors skid logs



Linda Davidson shows off some of her homemade preserves she sells from her farm. She also makes breads and other baked goods. (RD photo)

out of the woods and prepare the next year's firewood.

Linda, a perpetual tomboy, insisted on helping her father with his work, no matter how hard it might be. One year she was part of a rock picking crew. Her father said it was no job for a young lady, and that she could hurt herself. A moment later she crushed her finger under a particularly big rock. Determined to show that she was just as tough as any boy, she bit her tongue, wrapped up her finger, and kept on picking. Her father never questioned her working with the men again.

I asked Linda how the two met. Keith blushed as she replied, "Well, I just looked around the whole valley for the hardest working, smartest, most handsome young man I could find who wanted to farm. And, you know what? I found him. And I have not regretted my decision once in 45 years of marriage."

From the beginning of their marriage, the Davidsons were committed to working long hours on and off the farm, as well as being careful to control costs.

OLD KEPT NEW

Their frugality can be seen in their approach to buying and maintaining equipment. The combine, for example, is one of Keith's prized possessions.

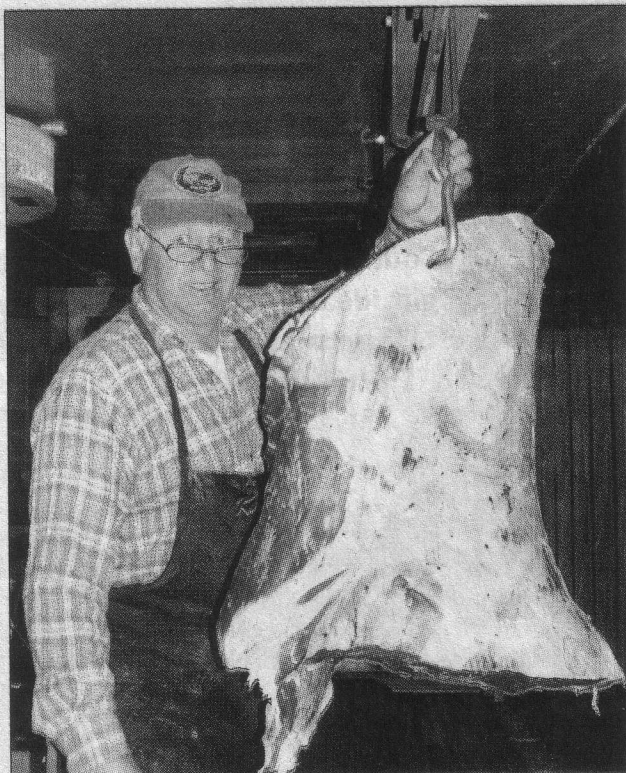
On my first visit to their farm, he proudly showed it to me, sitting in its own section of the machine shed. It looked brand new. As we admired its shiny flank of pristine sheet metal, he said, "Would you believe it's 24 years old?" How, I wondered, did he keep it looking so good? Did he not use it very often?

"Oh no, I used it lots," he replied. "In fact, I used to run this combine flat out most of the summer doing custom work. I just took real good care of it. When it gets a scratch, I retouch it right away. When a bearing starts making noise, or if something just seems loose, I fix it or replace it." The little things, he said, are easy and cheap to fix. But if they are left too long, small issues can lead to greater problems, which can then mean costly repairs.

"Every winter I go over all of my

equipment, making sure everything is ready to go for the next year.... You know, I hardly had a breakdown for the first 20 years I owned this combine." He said the machine is now starting to show its age, which is why he doesn't use it the way he once did. "I want this combine to last as long as I do."

One day in the beginning of the



Keith Davidson with some of the feeder beef they raise at their farm. The heifers are killed at a local provincially licensed and inspected abattoir and kept there until the chilled carcasses can be delivered to the Davidsons' farm. (RD photo)

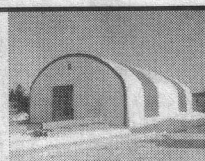
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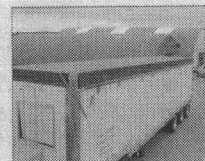
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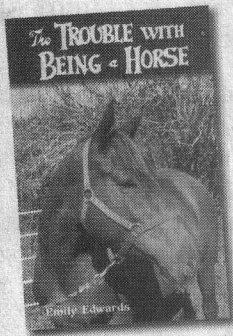
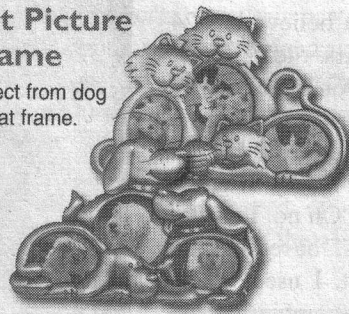
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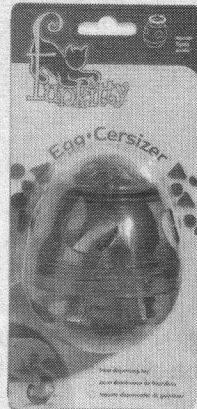


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spring plowing season he lost a coulter from his plow. When he called a tractor dealership, the representative told him to be prepared for an expensive repair. Calling back a few hours later, the representative asked, "Before I tell you the price, let me ask you, do you really want to fix this plow? Because it's really going to cost you."

"How much?" Keith asked. "Just the arm to hold the coulter will be \$600, and..." Before the man could finish,

"I looked around the whole valley for the hardest working, smartest, most handsome young man I could find who wanted to farm. And, you know what? I found him."

Linda Davidson

Keith interrupted him to say, "Don't even tell me how much the rest of it is. I'll have to figure something else out."

He called around to find a used coulter assembly, with little success. But then a neighbor invited him to look in his junk pile. There, he found a coulter just a bit larger than the one he'd lost. A little resourcefulness solved that problem. "I just carefully marked out a circle the right size, cut it down with a torch and mounted it," Keith said. "I was ready to plow the next day and saved well over \$1,000."

MONEY IN BEEF

When BSE all but ruined the cattle market starting in about 2003, they realized the only way they were going to get by selling beef was to go direct to customers. Up to that time they had sold to Armstrong's in the Annapolis Valley, Hub Meat Packers in Moncton, New Brunswick, and the start-up Atlantic Beef Products packing plant in Prince Edward Island.

As with farm machinery, the David-

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sons were frugal when buying equipment for their meat cutting operation. Even that from a used equipment dealer seemed prohibitively expensive. They waited patiently until good deals came along on a rolling stainless steel table, a flash freezer, meat saw, and, last of all, a commercial grinder. With the grinder in place, the meat cutting operation was well outfitted at a fraction of what it might otherwise have cost.

Patience paid off again when it became apparent that mixing endless batches of dough by hand would not keep



Some of the feeder beef the Davidsons cut, wrap, and sell from their farm. Each year up to two dozen heifers are sold by the side, quarter, or pound.
(Linda Davidson photo)

up with the demand for Linda's bread. It was time to invest in a commercial mixer. Not surprising, the cost was prohibitive. The least expensive used machines cost several thousand dollars.

They waited, putting out the word that they were looking for a dough mixer at a good price. Luck played into their hands when a friend saw one for just \$200, to be sold "as is." Keith bought the machine immediately, figuring that no matter how badly it was broken, for \$200 it would be worth fixing. In the end, nothing at all was wrong with the machine. Apparently, the previous owner had not realized that a safety guard had to be in place for the unit to work.



Linda Davidson cutting some of their beef. The cattle are raised on home-grown forages and grains. (RD photo)

MAKING IT ON THE LAND

The Davidsons exemplify what it takes to make it as farmers in Atlantic Canada: intelligence, thrift, diversification, good humor, and, most of all, an iron-clad work ethic. Over the past decade, the sale of local beef has become a key to their success. Repeat customers tell the story. "We have

been eating the Davidsons' meat for years, so I don't really remember what other meat tastes like," says Dawn Minor, who lives nearby with her husband Brent.

"But when we give some to friends, they always remark on how different, and how much better, it is. Buying our meat directly from the farm puts us in touch with the cycle of life."

It also gives them a sense of belonging, says Brent. "For me it really is all about community. That's the first reason we do

it. It's certainly a good value and the meat is good, but those reasons come second to community."

(Writer David Greenberg lives in Centre Burlington, N.S.)

Comment? Please write, or email at dvlmail@eastlink.ca. ●



The sign at the beginning of the Davidsons' driveway showing the variety of products they offer for sale at their farm near Wolfville, N.S. (Jen Greenberg photo)

"Buy local" saves farm

Over the years, since the purchase of eight Simmental cows in 1979, beef has been a mainstay of Keith and Linda Da-

vidson's farming operation. Today they have 63 cows, bred to bulls purchased at the annual sale of yearlings on test at the Maritime Beef Test Station at Nappan, Nova Scotia. Angus, Charolais, and Red Angus have been among breeds used over the years. "Nice to have a three-way cross," Linda commented during a recent phone interview.

The cattle are maintained on home-grown forages and grains – a diet that includes haylage, grazed corn some years, oats, barley, "and some little wheat." This past summer oats did particularly well, yielding 100 to 150 bushels per acre. As for hormones, she scoffs, "We will not touch hormones!"

When BSE struck, they thought of

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getting out of beef. Instead, they turned to nearby Reid's Meats in Melanson, N.S., a provincially licensed and inspected abattoir down the road from their farm in Greenfield. Billy Reid would kill and hang their beef, and deliver chilled carcasses to the farm where the Davidsons would sell sides and quarters, or break them down, cut and wrapped, for smaller orders. Their hamburger is "pure," said Linda, "no fillers."

In this way they sell up to two dozen head a year, all heifers just under two years of age and not needed for herd replacement. Steers are sold through Atlantic Stockyards Ltd. in Murray Siding, N.S. ●