

Making Hay with Charolais Cattle

PLANZ FARMS

Candace By



Photos taken July 8, 2014, unless otherwise marked

Planz Farms is a unique operation in south central Saskatchewan. Their land block of 29 quarters borders the United States and their home place is all of one mile from the line.

In 1998, the family operation, of Nathaniel (known as Nat) and his two sons Calvin and Darel, came to a crossroads. "The machinery was getting played out and the cost of re-investing in new machinery was too high. Dad wanted out and our kids were all gone. It was just too much. Dad and Mom moved to town and we took over the operation." Calvin and Darel explain. That is when the decision was made to seed everything to hay.

Calvin and Darel both worked stripmining coal in the Coronach area. They were both doing shiftwork and trying to farm and ranch on the side. It just wasn't an optimal situation.

Seeding everything to hay, made their management practises quite a bit different. They had to market

their own product in order to cash in on their crop. Their closest market is right next door in the U.S. It is a large market with lots of opportunity but there is a bit of extra paperwork involved to get it across the border. "When they are in a drought situation, they don't put up much of a fuss at the border," Calvin states.

Being that close to the border, they used to be able to visit their

neighbours on the U.S. side without an issue. Not anymore. Since 9-11 things have really changed. They see helicopters come over if they are out checking fence on the border, but not as many as they did right after 9-11. The border crossing at Scobey has 38 employees now, which is a huge increase over pre 9-11. If a cow got out on the U.S. side, you used to be able to chase it back. The last time



Darel and Calvin Planz

they had this happen, they had to get a U.S. vet, there was brand inspection and quarantine before the animal was brought home.

They started by placing some advertising to sell hay in Montana and worked out a deal with a trucker in Scobey, Montana. He has remained a business associate of theirs and has helped in many ways. "He is pretty well known and he'll phone us and say someone needs a load tomorrow," Darel says. Because of licensing, many truckers cannot cross the border, so their guy gets it to Scobey and from there it can go anywhere in the U.S. Two years ago they sent 13 loads to Texas, all round bales. They managed to get back hauls from drill pipe coming up to Williston, North Dakota to save on trucking costs.

They have two brokers, one in Nebraska and one in Wyoming. They normally sell between two and three thousand tons of hay each year. In 2012 they sold a record 11,000 bales, but only because they had some carry over from the year before and a great crop.

They have 16-1900 acres of hay, which was previously grain land. They tried taking two cuts one year and found the hay just didn't do well the next year, as there isn't enough rain in their area. They normally get 2-2.5 ton/acre but this year the crop will likely be 1-1.5 ton/acre. They missed a rain in early May and it froze three nights in a row at the first

of June, affecting the yield. It was seeded alfalfa/crested wheat fifteen years ago and now it is time to rejuvenate the crop. The plans include grazing some of the older

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hay, reseeding some and utilizing fertilizer on some. Grazing some would allow them to increase their cow numbers.

They sell their hay to repeat buyers now and Calvin has a black book with the names and addresses of every single one of their customers. Last year their hay sold for \$80/ton, so the price has been good.

"We have been fortunate to not get stuck with a load of hay. We know lots of people who haven't been paid, but our trucker looks after us," Darel says.

"Once when he thought he has taking the hay to a questionable customer, he required a certified cheque before he would unload," Calvin adds. "Those guys don't like selling crap and don't like people getting stuck with it. He knows the quality of the hay because he buys

some of ours himself," says Darel.

They have started selling their hay to a feedlot in Wolf Point. They are starting to ask for feed analysis, which is something they haven't had to bother with in the past. More people are using it as a means of marketing their product, so they will have to do some this year. It may enable them to collect a premium based on the protein in the feed. "It is pounds per gain on your animals and dollars in your pocket," says Darel.

"Twenty years ago you threw them a bale and if they ate it, it was fine. Now it is big business," Calvin says. "You can't blame them for wanting it. When calves are bringing \$2 or \$2.50 a pound, you don't need poor quality feed," adds Darel.

Darel started with the mine in 1985 and is now a pit foreman. "The shift work is getting tougher," says Darel. "Especially your shift," laughs his Mom, Rosina. "I have to make sure the coal gets to the plant. We get it to the silo to load on the train and haul



Above: Rosina Planz

Below: Hay field with the Planz farm in the background.
Photo by Donna Ross, 2013





Left: A line up of their haying equipment. Right: With the price of calves and cheaper feed, they are creep feeding this year.

it to the plant,” Darel explains. “When I started, work was five miles from home near Elder’s place. Their house shook when they dropped the bucket,” Darel tells.

Calvin started in 1984 and retired this year from being a dragline operator after 29 years. The new dragline came in and six months later I started, now the dragline is wore out and so am I,” Calvin chuckled. “In the drought years of the eighties, it would have been tough to keep farming in this country.”

“If it wasn’t for that mine, a lot of these young farmers wouldn’t be going,” Rosina confirms.

“It isn’t just the 400 plus jobs it provides, it is the spin-offs it creates in the community that help too,” says Darel.

A lot of the young people that hired on when the mining started are getting to their retirement stage and there will be a big turnover of people in the next few years.

Nat Planz bought his first quarter

in 1951 for \$800 from his Dad. This land is more suited for ranching and it has been a good life. They have a good water supply, lots of springs and a good well.

When they decided to seed

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everything to hay, they were running 150-175 cows. Now they have 250 Simmental x Red Angus females, which they terminally cross with Charolais bulls. All of their replacements are bought and they put in about forty bred heifers each year. They haven’t had trouble buying replacements that start calving at the beginning of March

and hope it doesn’t become an issue. Quality is a concern when buying replacements, as they invested in the Reserve Grand Champion Pen of 10 Replacements Heifers at Canadian Western Agribition Commercial Sale a few years back.

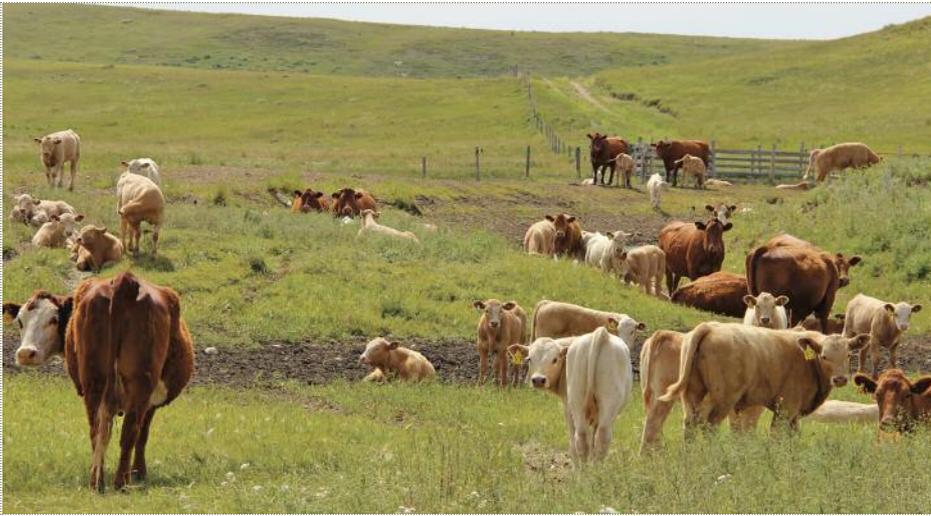
If they took some land out of hay production, they could increase to 300 cows, but at the moment, this is all their land base can handle. As their land is all in one block, they don’t have trouble with cows and bulls from neighbouring pastures. They don’t have to chase cows for miles to move or rotate them in pastures.

They try to keep the cowherd young. Ninety percent would be under seven years of age and the oldest cows would be around ten. The first year they put up the calving barn (1996), they had 56 bred heifers and ended up with 57 calves. “It is a god-sent blessing, that calving barn,” Calvin confirms. When asked how big the calving barn is, Rosina

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Photo by Donna Ross, 2013



quickly responded “not big enough.” It is 32 x 64 and there is a 40 foot addition of an old hip roofed barn they have butted up against it.

“Our cows are pretty spoiled. If there is a five mile an hour wind, they don’t come out,” Calvin chuckles.

They start calving March 1. They used to market their calves in Heartland in Regina, but when that closed five years ago, they moved to Moose Jaw. They could sell in a Charolais pre-sort sale, but trucking is always an issue. There are fewer and fewer guys hauling cattle and they usually end up selling a couple of weeks after the feature sale. They wean the day before they go to town and keep the cows out on grass until they preg check. Their calves normally average 630-640 for steers

and 600-610 for heifers.

They run their bulls for 60 days and sell all of their calves at once.

“***It’s the bull that makes the calves. If you buy scrub bulls, you will have scrub calves and we don’t want scrub cattle around here.***”

They run nine bulls on 200 cows. They normally have about 120 calves in the first cycle of the cows, so it is

over half, as you have to take the replacements off the total.

They got started in Charolais kind of by chance. Calvin and Nat went to Shaunavon to buy a Simmental bull and didn’t like what they were offered. Calvin suggested they go into town and look at a paper for guys that had bulls for sale. They saw an ad for Darneth Charolais and went to look at their bulls. Ken and Darlene Plewis sold them their first Charolais bull in the mid eighties and they continued to buy from them until their neighbours started selling Charolais bulls.

“Nat used to say, ‘It’s the bull that makes the calves. If you buy scrub bulls, you will have scrub calves and we don’t want scrub cattle around here.’” Rosina quotes.

They run their cows in one big group, but keep the first calvers separate. They run in pastures of a quarter, half or three quarters and rotate them regularly to keep the grass coming. Trying to keep the calving interval small, you can’t have too many bulls. When selecting bulls Darel goes by the 205 day weight the most and Calvin goes by the calving ease. Neither of them have any patience for poor temperament. Having said that, it is important to note they select performance bulls with a 96 to 106 pound birth weight. They prefer polled bulls, but the performance of the bull is more

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Left: Solar panels supply the power to pump water from the dugout into troughs. Right: Opening this year's hay fields

important than whether or not he is polled.

"When you live 60 miles from a vet, you have to have something that works for you," Calvin explains.

"We have 13-1400 pound cows and aren't afraid of birth weight. We have no calving trouble. We helped two cows calve this spring and one was backwards," Darel states.

"We're here 24-7 when it comes to calving. We don't miss anything. We take time off work at calving time," says Calvin. "If you calve later, you have to keep them longer. You only get out what you put into it. If you don't want to put anything in, you won't get anything out. Calving is our harvest time."

"If you work one shift and lose a calf, you have worked for nothing anyway," Darel expands.

They cull cows hard on disposition and ultrasound to preg-check at the end of November or first of December, after the calves are gone and the cows are dried up. The culled females are fed and sold at the end of

December or mid February. "You can't afford to keep problem cows with the prices now," Calvin says. They use a bale processor to feed in

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the winter and don't use any grain.

They are creep feeding the calves this year after quitting for a few years. For a while they didn't feel the prices were paying for the cost, but they are going to do it again this year. They also had issues with the creep fed calves being a little harder to handle when it came time to sort them off in the fall. Their market manager suggested they pull them off the feed a month before weaning

and they are going to try that this year. They don't creep feed the first calf heifers' calves because the Red Angus calves will get too pot bellied. They creep with straight oats. "With the prices this year, if you can put another 20-40 pounds on them, it pays to creep feed," Darel figures. "Our cows don't graze native hay until the first of July. It's all tame hay until then. And they kind of get that hard finish on them when they get on the native pasture and it is a little dryer. They really pack the pounds on," Calvin adds.

This second generation operation is succeeding by hard work and good management. They have a plan and it has worked well for them, year in and year out. Buying quality replacements and top quality bulls shows in the calves. They express sincere gratitude to the people they have bought their bulls from (Ken and Darlene Plewis, Ron, Donna, Michael and Judy Elder), as they know their bulls have raised the type of calves providing their success.

Left: The calving barn. Right: 2013 Commercial Producer of the Year—Donna Ross presented Lois, Darel, Calvin and Joanne Planz the Saskatchewan Charolais Association Commercial Producer of the Year Award at the SCA AGM 2013

