

BREEDER PROFILE

WEST WIND BLONDES

Giving back to the breed

Submitted by Ian Kruis, with assistance from better half, Jenny Knox

Over the past few years Myrna Flesch has spent countless hours writing newsletters, updating the Canadian Blonde d'Aquitaine website, as well as interviewing and writing Breeder Profiles on our members. This time we decided that she should have a break from her volunteering and so I took the opportunity to interview both Shirley Bilton and Myrna Flesch a few weeks ago. Fortunately I have had the opportunity to visit West Wind Blondes, so I can write this profile from first-hand experience.

If you find yourself in Stavelly, Alberta this spring, you won't have to look far to find a happy man. Despite the long hours and a heavy workload, it's calving season that Blonde d'Aquitaine breeder Shirley Bilton loves most. The loving dedication he showers on the farm's youngest animals is the same loving dedication he has shown to the Blonde breed over the years, as he and Myrna Flesch continue giving back to the breed that has given them so much.

History

Going back a century ago, in 1890, William Shirley Bilton was a sheriff in Westport, Ontario when he decided to move his family, belongings and livestock west in hopes of a better life. Bilton couldn't have known that his decision to move to cattle country would lead to his grandson becoming the first cattleman in North America to purchase a Blonde d'Aquitaine half-blood heifer at auction.

Shirley and Myrna

Born in 1922, Shirley Maxwell took over the farm at the young age of 15, when his father lost his eyesight. A quintessential cattleman, under former farm name 'Bilton's Farm', Shirley transitioned through the years breeding dual-purpose Shorthorns, Black Angus, Angus-Charolais mix, and then Charolais. In 1973, Bilton calved his first Blonde/Charolais cross, using a fullblood French Blonde bull and a purebred Charolais cow. At the time, Shirley saw moving to Blondes as an obvious choice because of their good weight gain and easy calving.

In 1992, Shirley moved to Stavelly, Alberta where he joined forces with Myrna Flesch and formed West

Wind Blondes. They chose this name because you can often feel the west winds coming from over the magnificent Rockies. With two quarter sections of land, there is room for their herd of 70 cows (downsized in recent years from over 100), grazing land as well as hay production – unless it is a considerably dry year, then they are forced to rent pasture and buy hay. Down on the farm, Myrna is responsible for West Wind Blonde's record keeping, marketing and the website, while at 87 years of age, Shirley still does the "hard work."

Breeding

In 1996, West Wind Blondes began the transition to becoming completely fullblood. Purchasing a fullblood bred heifer, Van Alta 32C, and breeding her back artificially to Marmacs Cagney led to West Winds Herdsman 32H and the advancement of the herd, adding fullblood heifers from Brydown, Green Meadows, Hanover, Harcon, Lavelaine, Donaleen,



Shirley, bedding a calf shed, March 2010.

Maple Valley, and Docdale. Good feet and legs remain one of their primary concerns when retaining seedstock.

A big supporter of bull testing, Shirley has totally embraced the BIO program and has run his own West Winds Bull Test (with BIO supervision) since 2004.

In 2005 West Wind developed the first homozygous polled fullblood Blonde bull in Canada – West Winds Rainier 11R. It took West Winds twelve years to go from single to double to homozygous polled.

Sales

Selling live animals from coast to coast in Canada and throughout North America, along with embryos to Sweden and semen to both North and South America and Australia, West Wind Blondes are known as breeders of reputation cattle. In 1999, West Wind shipped West Winds Hunter to China, a first for the breed in Canada. Today, 60% of West Wind Blondes' production is sold as breeding stock, with the remaining 40% being sold commercially through local auction marts.

Recognition

Judges and breeders across Canada have acknowledged the contributions West Wind Blondes has made to the Blonde d'Aquitaine breed. Accolades for West Wind Blondes over the years include bred heifer, 'Bilton's Wanda' being chosen for the National Showcase in Ottawa in the late 1980's. West Winds Lyndon was Grand Champion Bull with West Winds Minuteman winning the Junior Championship at the 2003 Calgary Stampede, the same year West Wind Blondes was awarded Premier Breeder and Premium Exhibitor.

Giving back to the breed

Both Myrna and Shirley have given back to the Blonde d'Aquitaine breed through their involvement in volunteer organizations. In 1973 the very first CBDA was formed and Shirley was one of the founding directors who went as far as signing personal guarantees to ensure the organization's success.

Later, at the request of the CBDA, Shirley was asked to gather a slate of breeders who would allow their names to stand in order to establish an Alberta Association and he did so. While he worked at setting up the Alberta Association, he did not become a member of that Board until several years later. He has worked diligently for many years to advance the breed in Canada and the US. Many years later, Shirley continues to take everything that happens with the breed to heart – he believes in it so much.

Myrna was the first female president of the CBDA (serving in 2001, 2002 and 2006-present), and credits her experience as the first female airport manager in Canada at the Lethbridge Airport as being the key to preparing for the role. Myrna also regularly attends CBBC and Genomics meetings on behalf of the CBDA.

Summary

On behalf of the Canadian Blonde d'Aquitaine Board of Directors and all of the members we thank you both Shirley and Myrna for your countless hours, and commitment to the Blonde d'Aquitaine breed. We wish you continued success with West Wind Blondes. For more information on West Wind Blondes go to www.telusplanet.net/public/westwind. ■