



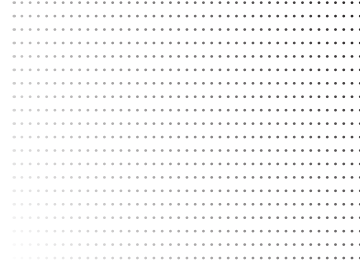
Above: Anita & Leigh McKain

Developing a cow herd to a certain level takes time, patience, and a clear vision of what you want that herd to become. Or in this case of beef farmers, Leigh and Anita McKain at Over The Hill Farms, more of a spotted vision! When it came time to build the herd of their dreams, they had no trouble going all in on their breed of choice. That breed was, of course, Speckle Park.

Having both spent their entire lives around cattle, the McKains were excited to start their own herd when the opportunity presented itself 25 odd years ago. At the heart of that starter herd, a few of which were inherited from Anita's father, were your standard issue Charolais/Simmental cross cows found on many mixed farms in their Barrhead,

AB community. While this group of cows was a great start, they soon found themselves discussing alternative breeds that might better suit their operation and personal taste. One that had been in the back of both their minds for a long, long time was Speckle Park.

"There was a pamphlet that came in the mail back in the mid-1980's on Speckle Park cattle. That was before it was even recognized as a breed," recalls Leigh. Each of them remembered seeing this flyer on separate occasions but it had tweaked something in both their minds at the time. It quickly returned to focus when deciding which direction they would like to go with their herd, something the two of them had no trouble agreeing upon.



SPOT ON!

*The Story of the 2023 CSPA
Commercial Cattlemen of the Year Winner*

Written by Mona Howe

The docility the Speckle Park breed is known for held a lot of appeal for the McKains. Naturally easy-going animals are what best suits their style of cattle operation, adapting seamlessly to their management practices.

Several things appealed to them about this breed that was just beginning to develop some traction. They liked the idea of more moderate framed cattle, easy going temperament, general hardiness and of course the unique color pattern most of the 'parks' possess.

"We were young enough to jump into something new," Leigh explains. Oddly enough, they chose to go with what they affectionately refer to as 'the old man's breed.' "We jokingly call them the old man's breed because they're so easy to handle and they're not monster cows," he continues. "Not only that, but the most trivial part of it was, we were bored with having a red calf, or maybe a tan calf. Now calving is like Christmas! You don't know what you're going to get until it comes out," adds Anita. It goes

without saying the special spots on each new baby add a bit of extra joy to the calving process.

The docility the Speckle Park breed is known for held a lot of appeal for the McKains. Naturally easy-going animals are what best suits their style of cattle operation, adapting seamlessly to their management practices. The cow herd is trained to come to the sound of the horn on the truck making gathering out of the bush and moving pastures a quick and easy job. Each fall, the weaned calves get a 'babysitter' in the way of a 2700-pound steer.

"He's a big Speckle. He was tame right from the day he was born, he'd come to you out in the pasture right from his mother. We put him in with



Left: 2023 CSPA Commercial Breeder of the Year Award. Opposite Page: Calves at Over the Hill Farm

the calves in the fall, he shows them where the water and feed are and everything to get them settled in," describes Leigh.

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"Attitude is a very big deal in our herd," stresses Anita, "If they've got a high head or they kick, we usually sell them, even if they're a good animal." Not only do the McKains find this selection process helpful, so do their customers who come to buy replacement heifers, breeding bulls or 4-H animals off the farm. "It's nice when we have people that come into our yard to buy cattle, they can walk amongst them and touch them and scratch them, nothing gets worked up," notes Anita.

Two of their children, Morgan and Dylan, were all for the Speckle Park idea as well. They were both excited to showcase Speckle Park calves as projects throughout their 4-H years.

"These two were the only ones in the area with spotted calves for a long time," Anita says, "everybody came to the club to see our spotted cows because nobody knew what the hell they were." A testament to the longevity of the breed, after 14 years one of the kid's original 4-H heifers is still in production on the farm. "Every couple or three years she gives us twins. She's still got good feet and a good bag," she continues.

In terms of their marketing strategy when embarking on this journey,

things haven't changed a great deal. While the McKains have sold calves direct to the feedlot when there was demand, the calves still mostly sell through the ring at the local auction market. The key to making this approach successful is in the numbers.

"With the larger groups, interest from the buyers is strong, it's when you have just a few head that get put through 2 or 3 at a time that you take a hit on the price," explains Anita. Quality counts too. As Leigh mentions, "Like with any breed, it's the top end cattle that are going to pay the bills".

The fundamentals of good stock are something the McKains have always made top priority throughout the building of their Speckle Park herd. From the time they purchased their very first Speckle Park bull in 2008, soundness, functionality and docility have always been their main focus. The following year they bought 6 Speckle Park heifers that fit that same vision. When their first Speckle Park calves hit the ground in 2009, they were hooked, in fact they have purchased strictly speckle bulls ever since. Shortly there after, 25 of their Simmental cross cows were sold to facilitate the acquisition of 20 top end Speckle Park cows. Over the years they have culled hard on animals that didn't bring what they wanted to the table.

"If a cow wasn't giving us what we wanted she went to town, we'd replace her with a speckle heifer," they both agreed. This is largely what has advanced their herd to where it is today. That being between 110-120 head of top producing Speckle Park cows, depending on the availability of feed and pasture.

In terms of the amount of speckle genetics in the herd, "We have a just few 50 percenters, but the bulk of them are anywhere to 75% and up," explains Anita. With many of the cows being straight Speckle Park, they have even



ventured into the purebred aspect of the breed with more than a dozen papered cows currently on the place from which they raise and sell a select few elite 2 year-old bulls directly off the farm. Looking to dabble a bit more in that area, some embryo work is on the horizon.

With the recent addition of registered Speckle Park, they chose to add a herd prefix with much historical significance. The Hanging Heart Speckle Park name was derived from a brand that originally belonged to Leigh's great grandfather, Issac Herber.

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“When the hanging heart brand was registered to Isaac Herber of High River back in the late 1800’s, it was one of only two single iron brands registered in Canada,” Leigh recalls expressing how special it is to now own that particular brand and include it as their purebred herd’s namesake.

If the accomplishment of developing a beautiful, functional herd from the ground up brings sweet satisfaction, being named Speckle Park Commercial Breeder of the year for 2023 is the icing on the cake. Upon learning they had been chosen for this honor, they arranged for things to be taken care of back home and made the trip to Canadian Western Agribition this past November. There they were presented with this prestigious award during the Canadian Speckle Park Association Banquet. The McKains were elated that fellow Speckle Park breeder, Dalton Payne, had nominated them for this level of acknowledgement within the breed.

“We worked really hard to get to this point. Of course, we always thought our animals were good, but it’s nice to know that other people are impressed with them as well and to be recognized on the national level,” says Anita.

There is no doubt that Hanging Heart Speckle Park have influenced some changes to the local landscape over the past 25 years.

“Now we’re not the only ones in the neighborhood that can be accused of having black and white cows,” chuckles Anita. “You know, you used to go for a drive, and you didn’t see very many, but now you see one here or half a dozen there or even a whole bunch along the way,” adds Leigh.

It is with the help of dedicated producers like the McKains, that the Speckle Park breed is making its mark in today’s beef industry and getting the credit it deserves.