

Tom Lamb Finds Success Ranching the Marshlands of Northern Manitoba

By Lynn Harrington

Photography by Richard Harrington

Few men appreciate the findings of northern experimental stations more than Tom Lamb, of The Pas, Manitoba, 500 miles north of Winnipeg and only 88 miles from Hudson's Bay. He delves into pamphlets, pores over reports and government publications as eagerly as some men grab adventure story magazines.

He's in somewhat the same business, in a private way.

Around 1950, Lamb had a vision regarding those two million acres of the Saskatchewan Delta east of The Pas, an area larger than Prince Edward Island. He could see them drained and dyked, flourishing with wheat-fields and market gardens. But that called for a radical operation on the Saskatchewan River, for which Manitoba was not prepared.

In the meantime, Tom Lamb has proved that ranching can flourish in the delta. To date, he has not lost any head of cattle to the wolves, bears or voracious mosquitoes. The occasional matron has succumbed in an especially severe winter, the greedy cow to an overdose of haywire (Lamb now uses binder-twine). Or the unwary heifer became a mother too early for her own good—the heifers are now fenced off separately. But such losses can happen on any ranch.

Lamb's father, T. H. P. Lamb, founded a trading post at Moose Lake in 1900, and introduced cows and horses. These quickly multiplied, as

the Crees appreciated their qualities. All was fine as long as they rustled their own living, summer and winter.

But the Indians have always been reluctant to put up enough hay to see them through the winter. Invariably, they ran short. They wound up buying hay which they had cured for the trading post, or selling their cattle to the store, which fed the scrawny beasts, then sold the beef back to the Reserve.

Tom Lamb realized that in a sense, he was already in the ranching business. When he leased a thousand acres of land from the Manitoba government and another thousand acres of hayland from the Moose Lake Band, he promptly got rid of the 32 scrubby cattle on hand. The ranch now boasts 340 head of good ranch Herefords.

Ready to Experiment

"You can look on this project as an experimental farm that doesn't cost the government a cent," Lamb joked as he signed the lease.

Lamb has been labelled an "eager beaver" often enough, for taking up enterprises with more enthusiasm than

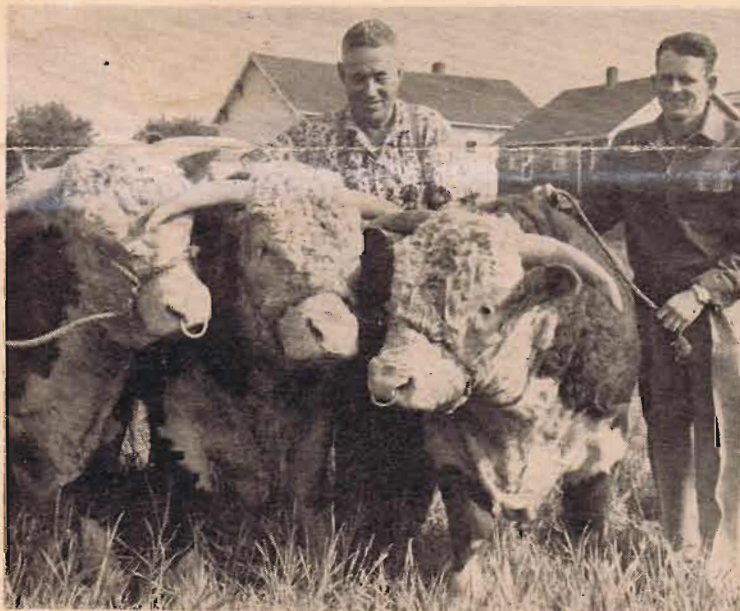
knowledge. But he learns quickly, not hesitating to seek advice in the best quarters, whether it's a matter of selecting purebred Hereford bulls at the Brandon sales, or combining domestic with wild hay.

Much of the haying is an inefficient operation, the ranching Lambs admit. The wild hay grows in strips along 13 miles of shoreline. The hay is baled, loaded onto a stoneboat with removable centre section, and eventually barged to the ranch headquarters on never-freezing Moose Creek. Three hundred bales a day is average, but on occasion that figure has gone up to 1,000 bales of domestic hay on a long summer day. Tom originally believed that marsh hay was as nutritious as domestic, but is now convinced otherwise.

A large pole-sided barn houses the bales through the winter. In this rugged climate of deep snows, it requires one bale per head per day for a six-month period. It may not all be needed—an open fall can save tremendously on the feed bill. But a winter such as 1955-56, of deep snow and bitter cold, makes every strand essential. Should an open fall indicate a surplus of hay, Lamb is not slow to invest in bred heifers.

The cattle summer loose amongst the poplars and willows, seeking knolls or points running out into the lake to get away from flies. About October, the cows recall the open-sided shelters, the free meals, and the ponds where the water never freezes. They drift back to the 7-L Ranch (named for

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Tom Lamb of The Pas, Manitoba—muskrat rancher, bush pilot, construction contractor—with son Donald and three purebred Hereford bulls purchased at the Brandon sales.



Lamb's diesel cruiser pushes an open barge down the Saskatchewan to the 7 Bar L Ranch at Moose Creek. Barge is loaded with three Hereford bulls, lumber, tractor, groceries.

TOM LAMB FINDS SUCCESS

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Tom Lamb and his six sons who are all keenly interested in the project).

No Branding Necessary

The calves are dehorned, castrated, and inoculated against Bang's disease. So far, it has not been necessary to brand them. The calves are dropped outside in March, healthy and fat from the start.

Lamb has shown that cattle can be successfully ranched back there in the cat-tails. Equally important, he has the transportation to get them to market economically. Lamb's covered and open barges ply up and down the Saskatchewan between Moose Lake and The Pas, where Lamb Airways has its office. The original purpose of the barges was to supply Moose Lake, a settlement of some 400 families, on and off the Reserve.

The barges now travel more frequently, carrying gear and equipment for the ranch, and hauling live cattle upriver to The Pas. From there, the beef may travel south to Winnipeg, or north to Fort Churchill, or to the immense mining developments along the Hudson Bay Railway.

The land Tom selected for his experiment is, like all the rest, low-lying with the occasional higher ridge. That

means draining, for melt-water lay on the fields until July last summer. Conrad Lamb, youngest member of the family, cut seven miles of canals with the dragline, with the result that machinery can get on the land much earlier.

Four-acre experimental plots of var-

ious grains and grasses, tall crops of oats, excellent stands of alfalfa have satisfied Tom Lamb that farming the delta was no pipe-dream. His experiments have proved that Manitoba can put two million acres of immensely fertile land to the plough or to ranching anytime she's ready.

Featuring . . .

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