

Western Dairy PIONEERS

THE DAVIE FAMILY OF LADNER A FOURTH GENERATION THRIVES

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(with additional content from Barb Souter and members of the Davie family)

The Davie Farm in East Ladner, the unavoidable home to over-wintering waterfowl and, at times, uncomfortably close to Vancouver's weekend rural tourists, has been in operation since 1932 at this location. But the Davie farming story began much earlier with the arrival of Alexander Davie in 1894. Now, 130 years later in 2024, Alex's grandson Ken Davie is still actively working at age 79, alongside his sons Peter and Kenny.

We present an abbreviated introduction, from an article written by Barb Souter for the 1983 BC Holstein Directory:

"Alex Davie of Ladner is listed as a charter member of the BC Holstein Association in 1908. Jack Berry recalls Alex Davie as being one of the outstanding early farmers in the Ladner area and quite a horseman too. Alex Davie came to BC from Ontario in 1894 working at various jobs the first few years, then in 1898 rented a farm near the Paterson place in Ladner. In 1900 he bought the farm on Slough Road (now Arthur Dr.) which was his home for the rest of his life. An interview with Mr. Davie written up in a farm paper in 1932 quotes him as telling of hauling cream three miles to a creamery at Ladner for \$0.60 a pound. "And I made money too," he said.

Alex's son Murray recalled some of the early days on the farm. From 1915 to 1919 the Davies operated a milk route to Ladner, and he remembers going on the milk wagon delivering milk and working with the glass bottles. "All the milking was done by hand," he recalls, "and we always milked about 25 head."

In 1917 the Davies had a cow called Dairymaid, a grade Holstein that made quite an outstanding record. Because she was a grade, and the test had been through the Delta Cow Testing Association (rather than ROP) the record was considered unofficial, but nevertheless was written up in articles in Hoards Dairyman and in the Holstein Journal, where "Dr. Tolmie of Victoria and Mr. JM Steves of Ladner believed that Mr. Alex Davie possesses the best grade Holstein of which there is any record anywhere." Dairymaid's record was 22,514 lbs milk, and 905.3 lbs butterfat.

Alastair Davie was very active in the Holstein Association activities and was President of the BC Branch in 1967 and 68. The third brother Ken started farming in east Delta and now with his son, Ken Jr. has the high production Holstein herd 'Kenavie' on 96 St. Delta.

More Historic Capsules

Agnes Whitley, Ken Jr.'s sister, is the family historian and shared some of her collected materials. Some of it came from a biographical document in Volume IV, 'British Columbia - From the Earliest Times to the Present.'

"The title of a self-made man can justly be given Alexander Davie as his entire capital when he arrived in Ladner about 19 years ago amounted to less than \$20 and today, he is the owner of 460 acres of farming land in addition to some property in Vancouver, all won through his individual efforts."

This account went on to say that Alexander worked for two years as a farm hand, earning between \$20 and \$25 per month, saving most of it by being "thrifty and temperate in his habits." He got his farming start by renting the Skinner farm in 1896, and just a few years later in 1902, he purchased 260 acres followed by the purchase of the 120 acre Arthur Drive farm in 1910 which became his home.



The only 4 horse team to go through the George Massey Tunnel (Deas Island Tunnel). Ken Davie on the left, Alan Bates in the middle, Lock Holmes on the right. Ken Davie was the only one experienced enough to drive the team through the tunnel. The year was 1959.

"His fields are largely devoted to diversified farming but in connection with this, he engages in raising thoroughbred stock. For many years he made a specialty of Clyde and Shire horses, Holstein cattle and Oxford-Down sheep, his efforts in this direction meeting with lucrative returns."

The family documents more of Alex's significant involvement in and passion for horses. With mechanization still years away, horses were the tractors of the day. Breeding Clydes, Shire and Hackneys, he maintained significant teams for working the hundreds of acres and moving crops. Alex married Margaret Paterson in 1903; she was

also considered an "expert horsewoman who captured many driving competitions." Alex made quite a business out of bringing range horses down from the interior and selling them to Vancouver and area buyers.

Not surprisingly, Alex became involved in many ag organizations including the BC Holstein Branch, BC Dairymen's Association, and was a Director of the Fraser Valley Milk Producers Association for 17 years. *"He assumed the role of buying or trading horses to supply power for the delivery wagons. The main barn at the plant had 108 stalls and one or two nearby barns housed about another 50 head. He advised on hay and grain purchases to feed this important segment of the operation."*

He was also President of the Delta Horse Breeders Society, BC Heavy Horse Breeders and numerous other community organizations.



Chapter 2

Alexander and Margaret had three sons - Murray, Ken Sr. and Alastair. Murray married Dorothy Savage and moved to his own farm, establishing the Del-Eden Guernsey herd, while Ken Sr. moved to 96th Street in East Delta on his own 160 acres, and Alastair (the youngest) spent time in Ontario working for Hayes Farm. He returned home to Arthur Drive and took over the Farwest herd, which was continued by his son Blake until about 1986.

"Uncle Murray was in the Skagit Valley and saw Guernseys grazing - he said it was like 'the Garden of Eden,' and that's how he came up with Del-Eden for his Guernsey herd," Ken tells me. Apparently, the plan was to move up to Chilliwack into a beautiful new stanchion barn but the barn was sized for Jerseys! "Uncle Murray never got his (milking) Guernseys to Chilliwack, but it was okay for the heifers," Ken remembers.



Ken Sr. and Gladys on their wedding day in 1932.

Andy Ness came from Ontario in August 1972 after corresponding with Murray (who he knew from showing at The Royal), and immediately found himself at the PNE with the Guernsey show string. "Murray was an excellent guy to work for," Andy shares. "Dorothy (Murray's wife) was really involved with the breeding decisions. They had the best Guernseys in BC then and won lots of classes at the PNE." Nine years later, the Del-Eden cows were sold to Louis Vanmersbergen in Lynden, Washington, and Andy found himself a few kilometers away with the Spetifore Jersey herd.

Murray was inducted into the Canadian Agricultural Hall of Fame in 1981 for his outstanding accomplishments, promotion of and leadership in the Guernsey breed. Murray and Dorothy's son Doug, who left the farm to become a pilot, is retired on the Del-Eden Chilliwack farm.

Again, Agnes' meticulous family archives showed that at just 21 years old, her father Ken Sr. had two adventures, accompanying shiploads of dairy heifers from Vancouver to China in March and December 1931 - trips that likely took three weeks each way. One could surmise that he saved his pay from these trips to help get his own farm started soon after. When Ken moved to East Delta in 1932, he took only 3-4 cows from his father's Holstein herd and acquired other cows, milking about a dozen at the start, most of them registered.

Ken's son, Ken Jr. shares many memories of his time and what was passed down from his parents. "Horses were a real big deal back before tractors took over. Grandfather (Alex) needed a lot of horses - they were growing hay, oats and potatoes. He had 20 Scots doing the work!" I guess those were the 'foreign workers' of that time. "Horses did everything - logging, milk hauling, working the fields, pulling the wagons..." They maintained 70 horses on average to keep up with all the work. "Dad brought a few horses with him in '32 to cultivate the spuds, but tractors were doing most of the work," Ken says.

Ken Jr. was not yet born when WWII commandeered thousands of acres of cropland to grow flax. **Flax??** "They needed linen to make parachutes for the war," Ken explains. After the war, acreages returned to producing hay and oats again, but with fewer horses to feed due to the proliferation of tractors, farmers began growing peas and beans for the nearby cannery.



18-year old Ken Sr. competing in a Ladner plowing match with Beth and Pearl.

"The railway came through this area in the 1930's, but the corridor was sold back to the farmers whose land it cut through. We got it back for \$2/acre and it included all the rail-bed gravel. That was cheap for the land **and the gravel!** But the councilors were all farmers back then, so they knew what they were doing," Ken says with a big smirk.

Around 1940, power lines came through East Delta, making many innovations possible, including machine-milking the cows. This was especially helpful during the years when fewer men were available for farm work due to serving in the war. And if you had the room and feed, it wouldn't be too hard to start milking more cows.

Only a couple kilometers from Ken Sr.'s farm was Boundary Bay airport which had been taken over for military purposes during the war. "After the war ended, the military started selling off airport land, so Dad bought 80 acres," says Ken.

Chapter 3

Born in 1946, young Ken was involved with the farm chores and livestock from his earliest memories. "I was eight years old when Dad bought me a Jersey that I had to milk by hand." It was a way to teach young Ken about work, using a small cow, but she was always bred back to a beef bull, he noted.

"Dad kept gradually increasing the cows and we had a 34-stall stanchion barn that we rotated extra cows through for milking. When I was young, there were seven shippers on just this road and three different dairies came through to get the milk - Palm, FVMPA and Lucerne. Most guys milked 12-20 cows."

Anyone who has experienced the joy of lambs will understand why Ken looks back with great fondness on his time working with their Suffolk sheep flock. "We had about 200 ewes. Spring lamb meat was a really big deal and wool was also worth money then," he paints a picture. Ken's eyes twinkle as he says, "I really enjoyed lambing! We had to check the ewes 2-3 times a night and my dad insisted that we had to use a coal-oil lamp." Sometimes it's the totally unexpected events that stick with us forever. "Dad did some business with Punch Robertson on Mayne Island, so we ended up with a Yorkshire ram from Colony Farm for a day before he was taken to Punch. That ram was just with us for a day and a night, but five months later, we had 51 cross-bred lambs! He must have got in with the ewes and just had quite a time!" Ken laughs. "Sheep were a lot of work though, there were feet issues and we had stray dogs that caused a lot of problems." The sheep enterprise concluded in the late 1960's when a Rosedale farmer came and offered a price, too good to refuse, for the entire flock.



Portrait of Murray Davie, inducted into the Canadian Agricultural Hall of Fame in 1981.

Image courtesy of Canadian Agricultural Hall of Fame

While Ken didn't leave the farm to go work at other ventures, he was always working for other farms as he grew up, gaining a lot of experience, perspectives and sometimes ... amusing stories. "We were always around the horse shows, especially through the summer. I would go along to do the grunt work. I went with our neighbour Albert Huff and he taught me to roll his smokes as he drove. 'You roll 'em, I'll smoke 'em,' he'd say to

parlour to a double-6 has allowed the herd to grow without heavy debt. "I believe in keeping things simple. Don't go crazy into debt...just keep it going," Ken summarizes his philosophy.

A hallmark of this farm has been the productive use of the land, always producing a surplus of hay and/or silage for sale. "We sold a lot of hay to the Taylors on Vancouver Island in the past - Bill would bring his big truck here, go to a Branch meeting and pick-up his loaded truck on the way home." Considerable silage tonnage went to Hovanders in Ferndale - just 12 miles away, and others have come from Chilliwack. Another hallmark is potatoes! "We've been

the BCI Centre. "The boys are using other breeds now - they have their ideas and are doing some things their way. We incorporated in 2016 so the boys have a stake in the farm," Ken shares.

Even though Ken still comes to the barn pretty much every day, brothers Peter and Kenny handle the daily farming operations.

"In 2022, we built a three group pack barn to improve stocking density by creating a breeding age group and removing the dry cows from the milk cow barn; this also improved heifer conception," Peter explained. With the addition of a sand lane, they have been able to recapture 80% of the bedding sand. Peter does the breeding and has been



Circa 1980's. Ken Jr. (in the middle) was always part of the haying crew.



Alex Davie's famous 1917 record-making grade cow - Dairymaid

me," Ken recalls with a chuckle. Ken enjoyed the many summers helping with the horses at the PNE, Washington State and even up to Prince George. "I was so busy with horses in the summers that there was just never an opportunity to get into 4-H," Ken accepts.

"Our first bulk tank in the early 60's was 1000 gallons. We were rotating a lot of cows through the (34-stall) stanchion barn, so we built a 90-cow freestall barn in 1970." Their first parlour (double-4) took over milking in 1978 and by 1980, their original bulk tank could not keep up, so they doubled capacity to 2000 gallons. "We've gradually grown to 110 cows and they're milking more too, so it's time to look at a 4000 gallon tank. We've got 44 years out of the last tank," Ken says with a hint of pride.

Another barn was built in 1986 and expanding the

feeding spuds since I can remember," Ken muses. The Delta area continues potato production still, for over 100 years, and the culls make an inexpensive, high octane cow feed.

Special Memories

Beyond horses, cows, sheep and potatoes, the Davie men also grew crops for high-quality seed. Ken Sr. won Canadian Champion Clover Seed at the Royal, while Ken Jr. had BC Champion Clover Seed, which went on to place fifth at the Royal.

The East Delta Volunteer Fire Hall #4 opened in 1958. Back then, boys could join as young as 14 years, and many farm boys did just that! Ken joined when he was 15 in 1963 and remained involved right to when it closed in 2010. He contributed 48 years as a volunteer - many of the last years as Fire Chief. "Dairy farmers were a big part of the force and I can say the best part was when we were called out to help a neighbour," Ken shares with some emotion... one can only imagine the things he has witnessed from vehicle accidents to house fires and much more.

Chapter 4

The Kenavie prefix originated not long after Ken Sr. began his herd. "Our grades were good cows - so we didn't become 100% registered until the 70's." The herd embraced AI when service became available in Delta through

using some Fleckvieh or Viking Red to gain quick functional improvements. "I'm not going to be all crossbred - I always want to keep our best, highest Classified cows purebred and registered," he reassures. Once again, the fields are growing some different crops - Peter has introduced some cereal mixes into the crop rotation. "I like to do a trial each year - it might be a small change or a complete new mix."

What's the secret to a farming family that has endured for 130 years in this near-urban locale? Adaptability. And hard work! The story of the Davie farm will continue as this generation writes the next chapter, adapting their farming with different breeds, different crops and different goals. We look forward to a new chapter in the future!



Ken Sr. gets a tour in Shanghai 1931 after delivering a shipload of dairy heifers.



(L-R) Peter, Ken and Kenny. Generations 3 and 4 - No fear of hard work.

