

# The Thompson's of Poplar Park

By Grant Alexander

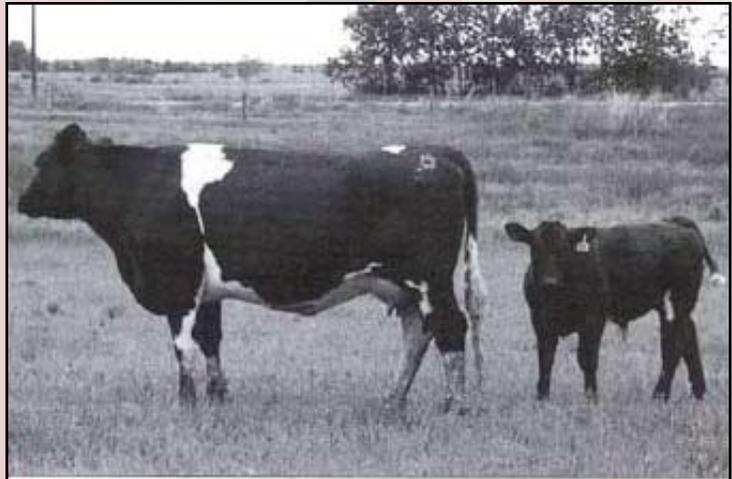
A trip to Hamiota, Manitoba, to the farm of John and Susan Thompson and family is never a wasted day. It is quite the contrary, if you enjoy friendly people and good Shorthorn cattle. Their farm is situated about halfway between Virden and Riding Mountain National Park in west central Manitoba. It is mixed farming country with rich fertile soils. Contrary to much of Western Canada, this part of Manitoba has received substantial amounts of rainfall this spring. Not too many miles from the Thompson farm, farmers were unable to plant their crops because of the wet conditions.

The farm where John and Susan live was settled by John's grandfather, Corbett Brown, in 1907. He moved here from the family farm in the tobacco growing area of southern Ontario. His son Norman was born there and farmed there his entire lifetime. John was raised a mile and a half down the road, and from a very early age rode his bicycle down to his uncle Norman's farm almost every weekend to help out. In 1973, John bought his first Shorthorn cow, and in 1976 he started farming full time with Norman. John registered his cattle with the JT prefix while Norman continued to use the Poplar Park herd name.

John and Susan were married in 1985, and their marriage has been blessed with four children, William, Sean, Russell and Evelyn. All four children are involved in the farming operation along with their parents, and are very active in 4-H. This year they have 16 head showing in their local 4-H show. John is in his first year of being the leader of their 4-H club and says he didn't realize how big a job this was.

Their farm consists of 1600 acres of which about 700 acres is in cereal crop production with the balance being pasture and hay land. John says that the crop acreage seems to decrease every year, as more and more is seeded to grass. Shorthorn cattle have been on this farm since it was homesteaded and the first registered females arrived in the 1930's. The Browns showed their Shorthorns extensively throughout Manitoba for several years. John remembers hearing about one of the bulls that provided the foundation for the herd. This bull was Ridgeview Peter Pan and he was Grand Champion bull at the 1949 Brandon Exhibition. This bull was purchased from the good Killoh herd, who were their neighbors, and he grew into a very big bull who bred extremely well for them. John says that even today he has older men who come to the farm to look at his bulls who recall this bull in

their conversations, even though it was over 50 years ago. Two other bulls from Richardson Stock Farm, Winnipeg, as well as a bull from Searle Farms, Selkirk are other early sires that worked well in the herd. John remembers one of



**Pairs like this are typical of the Poplar Park Herd.**

the Richardson bulls, Kelburn Quicksilver, being tied in the barn for part of the winter. He was a big white bull and when he was supposed to look after feeding him, it was easier to go under him than around him, so that was how he got to the other side.

The first registered females were purchased from Irwins at Newdale, Manitoba. These females were polled and in those days there was a very limited market for polled cattle. Norman used to say that it took them years to breed the polled gene out of these females, and about the time they finally accomplished it, they had to start to try to breed it back into them. Today's herd is predominately polled however there are still many horned animals. John likes to use polled sires simply because polled bulls are easier to sell, however, he is quick to point out that some of the horned bulls they used did an excellent job for them. Poplar Park Mist 4R and Poplar Park Extender were two of these horned bulls and one has to agree when you see the daughters in the herd.

The cow herd numbers have stayed relatively constant with around 130 breeding age females. With more being seeded to grass each year, there could be some expansion in the future. John says that they have always had good sized cows in the herd. He mentions a big cow who bred extremely well for them that came in from pasture open in the fall. His hired man had nicknamed her "the battleship" and since she was open, she went to market. She weighed over 2200 pounds at the auction mart. Today, the pastures

are full of big framed cows with thickness and volume. They are also easy fleshing females and have big thick meaty calves on them.

John's detail to structural soundness and no nonsense cattle comes from the years he spent with Norman. To Norman, structural soundness was extremely important. John remembers going with Norman to visit Colin Patterson at Yorkton, Saskatchewan on numerous occasions. He says Colin's good herd of Shorthorns was really only an excuse as they always ended up spending hours analyzing the Clydesdale horses he kept. He says that if Colin and Norman heard of a horse that they hadn't seen, they could always find an excuse to go see it. John says this background was one of the main reasons that structural soundness was always so important. He says that he sees some younger cattle judges today that don't emphasize this same importance to structural soundness and as a result, some cattle are winning shows that these older breeders would have never used.

One can not write about the Poplar Park herd without writing about Norman Brown. Norman was an astute cattleman, who knew what he wanted and was never influenced by trends and what others thought. He watched these trends though and when he saw animals that interested him, he was not afraid to use them. In 1975, Norman purchased a female from Doug Morris, Scotsmorr Shorthorns, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan and she was carrying one of the first calves to be born by Highfield Irish Mist. John recalls the day this calf was born and how impressed Norman was with it. He says that Norman had semen ordered from Irish Mist by the time the calf was a few days old, even though the Canadian Shorthorn Association had not accepted the Irish cattle into the herdbook yet. John is quick to point out that virtually every female in today's herd carries at least 2 crosses of Highfield Irish Mist, and there are several that have him 5 or 6 or more times in their extended pedigree. He says he is never concerned about this inbreeding, as it has never failed them. He says that this is one bloodline that seems to work better the more concentrated it gets in their herd.

Norman Brown was a student of Shorthorn pedigrees, and was always watching new bloodlines that appeared. John recalls that Norman was impressed with the photos of some of the HS Rodeo Drive x\* offspring he saw in the American Shorthorn breed magazine "Shorthorn Country". In 1991, Huberdale Farms of Lipton, Saskatchewan consigned a Rodeo Drive x\* son in the Agribition sale. John says he fully expected that this bull, Huberdale Rival 5A x\* would be coming back with Norman, even though he had never mentioned purchasing him. He recalls some breeders

telling Norman that he probably was making a mistake, but he was determined to test him in their herd. The next spring Rival x\* was turned out with a true sampling of the herd and the calves proved to be excellent. Rival was used for several years and many sons were sold to commercial producers. Several daughters remain in the herd today.

John says that they have used some appendix bloodlines in their herd and have many animals that are registered in each the closed and the appendix herdbooks. He says he judges cattle on their individual merit rather than which herdbook they are in. A bigger concern to him is birth weights, and he feels that Shorthorn breeders have to be very conscious of this if we are going to gain a bigger share of the commercial bull market. He says it is often difficult to keep the birth weights at acceptable levels, especially from some of their biggest cows, but it is important and he is always trying to use bulls that will produce moderate birth weight calves.

Over the years, they have used artificial insemination in the herd to introduce new bloodlines. They also use A.I. to reintroduce some of the genetics from some of their former herd sires that bred well for them. John says they also have used embryo transplant on their best cows and still has embryos in storage from some of the great females that are now gone. He says he intends to use these embryos to bring back these genetics that worked so well for them in future years. They have used numerous bulls through A.I. and have often used some of the best A.I sired bulls in their herd. John says that he has never been afraid to use home bred bulls as some of the greatest bulls they have ever used have been ones they raised. Two of their present herd sires are home bred bulls, and when you see the calves, it is easy to see what he is saying.

John is a real believer in retaining cow family names on his females. The majority of the herd stem from some of the cow families they have found to be superior breeding lines in their herd. The Betsy's and the Madge Heroine's originated from two females they purchased in one of the Golden Harvest Sales in Saskatoon in the 70's. They were Scotsmorr Roan Betsy x and Gemvale Madge Heroine x. The Florence family originated from a Florence female purchased from their neighbor, Jack Wright's Colehill herd. The Muffin's originated from another Scotsmorr female that was straight Four Point breeding from the good Elmer Berg herd in Alberta. The Kate family goes back to the full Irish female, Highfield Kate 3rd. John recalls purchasing a female a few years ago that the breeder had changed the cow family name on. He says that they promptly had her name changed back to the original cow family once

they had the registration paper sent to them. John says that new female lines are added to the herd from time to time, however, they have to compete with their other cows to gain the right to stay there. They have to produce or they go down the road.

When asked about some of the sires that have worked well in the herd since he became involved, John lists off several names. When you look at the list, you can see that they have been blessed with some excellent breeding bulls. Kenmar Ranger 74K x was the first bull he mentions and he says that this bull sired excellent calves of both sexes. He was a son of Four Point Ranger x and was purchased from the herd of Harvey Fulton and Sons, Birtle, Manitoba. A son, Poplar Park Ranger 36N x was kept and he also worked well. This bull was Reserve Grand Champion at the 1984 Royal Winter Fair in Toronto, as well as Junior Champion at Agribition the same year.

Gemvale Ivor Pacesetter x was purchased on the phone, from a Golden Harvest Sale, as they were busy harvesting. He was a 3/4 Irish bull sired by Sandy Creek Ivor and from an Irish Mist dam. John remembers that they wondered what they had done when the bull arrived, however, they used him and he turned into a tremendous breeding bull for them. His genetics can still be found in the backgrounds of many of the best females.

Poplar Park Mist 4R came along next and this bull was a product of breeding Scotsmorr Roan Betsy x to Highfield Irish Mist. Mist 4R was a very impressive bull who bred extremely well and left many excellent sons and daughters. There were many excellent herd sires produced from this bull including Poplar Park Western Mist x, who sold to Charlie Campbell, Lumsden, Saskatchewan, and who was Grand Champion Bull at Agribition after breeding 80 cows as a yearling. John still has semen from 4R and goes back to it from time to time to reintroduce the bloodline in his herd. JT Titan x was a son of Mist 4R who had a great show career and an interest was sold to Glenford Shorthorns, Neudorf, Saskatchewan. Titan grew into a massive easy fleshing bull and his influence is still evident in the herd today. Poplar Park Extender, a son of Titan x, was retained and this bull is still considered by many breeders to be one of the best Shorthorn bulls they ever saw. Not only did Extender have a great profile, but he was a great breeding bull and the herd still has some wonderful daughters. John remembers taking Titan x and Extender to a Beef Field Day to display them. While there, the bulls were weighed. Titan x weighed over 3000 lbs. and Extender, his son, was well over 2800 lbs. Huberdale Rival 5A x followed along with a home bred son of HS Instant Enticer x called

Poplar Park Elite x. Both these bulls worked well in the herd. In more recent years, two bulls were purchased from the herd of Lorne Carter, Spy Hill, Saskatchewan. Flying C Manitoba Red x was sired by a Poplar Park bull who was a Seven T's Greg x son out of their good Florence 5W female, who also was the dam of JT Titan x. Flying C Foundation x was sired by JT Challenger x, a son of the Australian Moombi Powerplay x and Florence x. Another Powerplay son, JT Powerplay 26E was also used with excellent success. There are many daughters of these bulls in the herd today and they are proof that these sires produced the right kind. Present herd sires include JT Jeff 44J x, a son of Homedale Flash x and a Spry's Cyclone x dam, and Kenmar Thunder 75Jx.

The Thompson's have been able to develop a good bull trade and annually send bulls to the Douglas Test Station and more recently to the Gunton Test station. Most of their bulls sell out of the yard by private treaty. They have also been very active in Manitoba Shorthorn Association events and have supported shows and sales throughout Canada. For many years they have shown and sold at Canadian Western Agribition in Regina. Susan recalls the story of the year their first child, William, was born. John had sent the show cattle to Regina and had stayed home because the baby was due. William arrived just after 2 a.m. the morning of the show, and she said John thought he could still make the 8 a.m. show if he left right away and drove straight through. She says John missed that show, and one gets the impression that there may have been a more noticeable gap in ages between their first child and the next three, if he had gone.

On January 12, 1998, Norman Brown passed away suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 80 years. He had remained active on the farm until the day of his death. John says that other than having his appendix removed at age 8, he had never spent another day in a hospital. You can tell that he is still missed by the family, however John says he probably went just the way he would have wanted to. Norman left a legacy of knowledge and integrity that won't soon be forgotten.

If you visit the Thompson farm, you won't find an elaborate, expensive set of facilities. You will find a very practical operation. You will also find a set of Shorthorn cattle that you won't soon forget. You will find a family that works together and has fun together. You will find a friendly warm family that welcomes you into their home. You will find interest and enthusiasm about Shorthorn cattle from the oldest to the youngest family member. You will leave the farm feeling good and knowing that you would like to go back again.