

January 5, 2004

EDITORIAL OBSERVER

## Holstein Dairy Cows and the Inefficient Efficiencies of Modern Farming

By VERLYN KLINKENBORG

**S**ixteen years ago, I met a Holstein cow named Juniper-Mist Bell Paula. She lived in splendid solitude in a stone-walled paddock on a venerable Massachusetts farm. Bell Paula was, in fact, more chicken than cow. Her job was to produce eggs, not milk. Several times a year, she was given hormones that caused her to super-ovulate — to release many eggs instead of one. These were flushed from her, fertilized and implanted in receptor cows as near as the next stone paddock or as far away as China and Japan. The reason was Bell Paula's milking record. At the time, an average Holstein in America — the ubiquitous black-and-white dairy cow — gave some 16,000 pounds of milk a year. Bell Paula could give 31,000 pounds a year when she was still being milked.

If Bell Paula represents one end of the Holstein spectrum — the long-lived queen of the hive, so to speak — the Holstein in Washington State that was found last month to be infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or mad cow disease, represents something much closer to the middle. She was unusual only in the disease she carried. When it became clear that she was unhealthy, she was slaughtered. And, under a testing regime that was changed only last week, her carcass, once tested, was presumed to be safe and fed into the system, instead of being held until the test results were in.

There was nothing anomalous in that Holstein's slaughter. Beef cattle and dairy cattle represent two different types of animal, but their fates are identical. What most Americans do not realize is that nearly every dairy cow eventually becomes either hamburger or the cheaper variety of steak when her profitability drops. Holsteins are frequently culled for slaughter when they are between 5 and 6 years old. When you figure that a Holstein first gives milk when about 2 years old, that means a productive life on the dairy farm of about three years. In that brief life span, everything is done to maximize yield, including the regular use of antibiotics and the feeding of high-protein concentrates of the kind that used to contain meat and blood meal from other Holsteins, a practice that has since been banned.

After poultry and pigs, the dairy industry has become one of the most concentrated forms of agriculture in America. The old mental picture of a herd of Holsteins standing hock-deep in pasture bears no relation to the way milk is produced in much of America. Some herds, especially in the West and Southwest, number in the thousands, which means the animals spend their lives in barns on cement where they are milked automatically, in some cases on huge rotating platforms that look like something out of science fiction.

For all their adaptability, even Holsteins can put up with only a certain amount of this. By the time they mature, at around 5 years old, many begin to break down from leg and foot problems. Dairy organizations distribute locomotion charts to help workers assess lameness, which can lead to reproductive failures — another reason for culling animals. Other cows begin to fail from the stress of carrying an udder that can weigh as much as a full-grown man. To prepare them for slaughter, the cows must be given time to get any residue — the word

means traces of drugs — out of their systems.

As always, the goals of industrial agriculture create a perverse logic. Instead of adapting the agricultural system to suit the animal, we try to adapt the animal to suit the system in order to eke out every last efficiency. We may take it for granted that dairy cows will eventually be slaughtered. But strange as it sounds, it makes greater financial, ethical and social sense if we subscribe to the cows' notions of efficiency, which do not include living on concrete or eating anything but grass and grain, rather than to ours. The animals would be healthier, their milk would be better, and we would not have to worry quite so much about what was in our food.

At some point Americans will begin to judge agriculture not by its intentions but by its unintended consequences. The intention in the dairy industry has always been to streamline, modernize, automate, all in the interest of greater profits. But the consequence has been to concentrate power and money in the hands of a few, to drive down prices and to create a national surplus of milk that forces small dairy producers out of business. That, in turn, frees former dairy land for development, for suburban sprawl. The consequence has also been to breed an animal that can barely sustain the way she is forced to live.

The river of milk in America brings with it a river of ground beef made from dairy cows, a river that is almost impossible to inspect adequately in a deregulated industry. The problem isn't just a concentration of meat. It's a concentration of political power that hamstring any calls for closer inspection. The industry has been quick to point out that far more people die from salmonella and E. coli than from mad cow disease. That's not exactly a reason to stand up and cheer.

It's possible that the Washington State Holstein may have had the only case of mad cow disease we come across. But if so, it will have been luck rather than good planning. According to the philosophers at Cow-Calf Weekly, an online journal for the beef industry, "Perception is reality." That's the sort of thing one says when the reality is too unbearable to look at.