

Leduc fluke or satanic savagery?

A farm family suffers a media circus after six cattle die

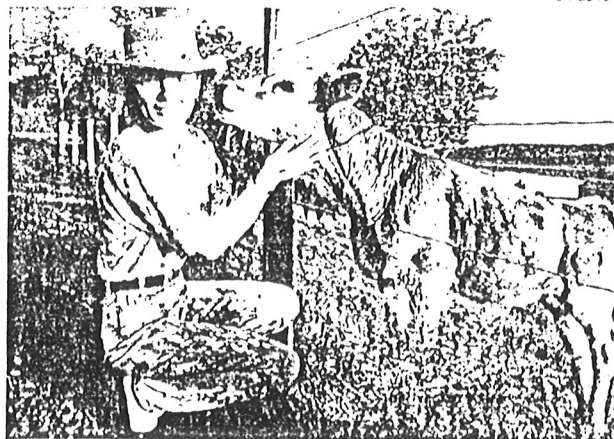
For 20 years Bossy the cow faithfully did what dairy cows are supposed to do, mind their manners and give milk. She was more of a family pet than a food source to Leduc-area farmers Roman and Doris Verchomin. But that relationship came to a sad and abrupt end on the morning of

deaths occurred naturally, as veterinarians and police insist.

The autopsy explanation for Bossy was that the aging cow had died of bloat and later been chewed up by coyotes. But on June 14 they found a 275-pound spring heifer calf dead in the pasture. They

JIM DEMERS

dragged it off to the edge of adjoining Saunders Lake, where, oddly, no magpies, coyotes or dogs touched it for a week. On June 21 they found another heifer calf dead. This time an autopsy reported the presence of the bacteria that cause the fatal bovine Blackleg disease. But on June 28 they found the fourth victim, also a calf. It had no skin on its body other than on its legs, and its head was simply a skeleton. They don't know how long it was there. Two hours after



Patricia Verchomin and friend:
Definitely a question of 'who,' not 'what.'

April 14th when they found her lying dead in the warm morning sun, her intestines spilling from a gaping hole in her backside and a bloody, 10-inch slash across her neck.

Two weeks ago another cow turned up dead on the Verchomin farm. It too had apparently been mutilated. This latest grisly discovery brings to six the number of dead cattle found on the 700-acre farm, four of which were found in one 13-day period in June. Utterly perplexed and despairing of police help, the Verchomins phoned the *Edmonton Journal*. They now wish they hadn't.

Newspaper reporters descended like flies. Camera crews showed up in vans at their gate and calls came from as far away as Manitoba. Then came the "lay experts." One old fellow claimed he had studied cattle mutilations since 1950; he blamed spacemen. A brown paper envelope arrived from someone asking if it was somehow connected to world over-population. A Lake Wabamun man told the *Journal*, "People are killing and mutilating cattle in bizarre midnight attacks so they can sell sex organs to American cults in exchange for cocaine." The Verchomins found the attention as bad as the mutilations.

Still, they say, with a herd of 140, six casualties in three months is excessive—and suspicious. They can't believe that the

finding number four they discovered number five, an 800-pound yearling heifer. It was missing an ear and its udder apparently had been removed with a perfectly circular cut. Finally, on July 16 they found victim six, again a large heifer, this one with a four-inch cut in its neck, one teat cleanly cut off, half its tongue removed and its anal area partially missing. An autopsy revealed it had a fatally abscessed liver.

Leduc RCMP Sergeant Peter Sopow has ruled out any human cause—vandals, rustlers or cults. None of the carcasses, he says, showed tell-tale signs of struggle or bullet wounds, and he hopes local people stop calling him and telling him their neighbour is a warlock. As for the mutilations, Leduc vet Wayne Sereda echoes a *Can Vet* magazine article detailing how animal scavengers often neatly remove the softest parts of a fresh carcass.

All of which leaves the Verchomins feeling frustrated, angry and mystified. Their herd is as healthy as any other, says their daughter Patricia. She says she has seen plenty of carcasses that have been scavenged by coyotes but never did they look like what was done to her parents' animals. "I definitely think this thing is a question of who, not what," she says. "And we want it to stop, it's so...senseless."

—Jim Demers



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