

Scotch Highlanders at home in Northumberland

BY SHEILA MILLER

SUNBURY — An ocean apart from the heathered hills of their native Scotland, nine Scotch Highlands graze contentedly on the clovered pasture hills of the Hugh Wilson family farm, R3 Sunbury.

These long-haired, shaggy cattle have called the 45-acre Northumberland County farm home for the past two years, moving here from Royalton, Vermont with the Wilson family in 1978.

According to Wilson, who has a dental practice in Hummels Worf, he started raising the Scottish breed in 1973 primarily because they require little maintenance.

"Scotch Highlanders could stand the winters in Vermont without losing any weight from cold stress," said Wilson. "The winters here are a piece of cake for them."

Wilson told how in Vermont, the Highlanders were able to take shelter inside a three-sided lean-to, but only did so during severe ice storms. The rest of the time, he said, they preferred to weather the snow storms to roam the pasture.

After one winter storm, Wilson recalled he couldn't find his cattle.

"Everything was covered with a foot of new snow, and I couldn't see any of the cows. Then I notice some steam coming off mounds of snow. When I called the cows the mounds stood up and shook off. The cattle weren't even phased by the 12-inches they were wearing."

Wilson attributed the cattle's seemingly oblivious attitude to the elements to their "all-weather coats." He pointed out the fine, fluffy fur that underlines their shaggy, long hair coat. The color of the hair, ranging from white to black, seems to have no bearing on its effectiveness to cast off rain and snow.

The Wilsons' Highlanders are mostly light red in color. However, one of the bulls is a brindle, with red and black hair. Said Wilson, the lighter cattle seem to keep cooler than the darker-colored cattle.

Wilson also boasts the Highlander's disposition. He craftily slipped a halter around four-year-old Frosty's enormous horns and took son Sawm and neighbor Jeff Reitz for a ride.

For all their gentleness, Wilson said his cows are excellent mothers and they're "fertile as rabbits." Their horns that served them in the wilds of Scotland still aid them in warding off any unwelcome visitors. And, the cows are back in heat within 45 days after calving, he added.

Naturally hardy animals, Wilson pointed out hoof rot is virtually unknown to the breed. He explained the cattle came from an area in Scotland where 110 inches of rain falls every year.

After getting over the original expense of purchasing the cattle (American-bred females start at \$1000, bulls at \$1500),

they are relatively easy to keep.

Wilson said his cattle are on a low-grain diet, with cattle being fed a grass-legume hay from late in December until the pastures come back in Spring. They are fed a grain ration six weeks before they calf. A free-choice mineral supplement is available for the cattle, and a grain creep gives the weaned calves that little extra they need to grow.

"The Highlanders are good foragers," said Wilson. "They finish easier with the fat distributed throughout the muscle rather than around the outside. Their warm hair makes this outer layer of fat for insulation unnecessary."

Wilson stressed the fact that he feels Highlanders are a good source of crossbreeding bloodlines.

Crossing the Scotch cattle with Angus, Herefords, Shorthorns or any other breed gives the cattle breeder a wealth of hybrid vigor, he said. Proof to his claim is a tall, well-muscled heifer whose ancestry includes a Highland sire and a dam who is half Charolais.

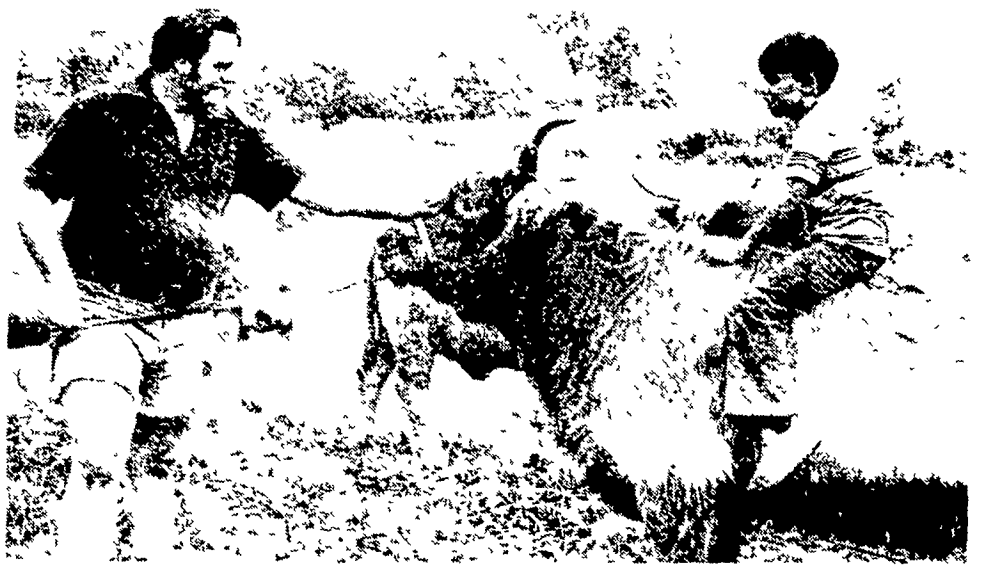
Wilson noted that in the Scotch Highland breed, the cattle are beginning to move away from the short-legged, boxy animals and through breeding are beginning to get the stretch and height more desirable in the modern beef animal.

In his own small herd, Wilson too is working for the improvement of his favorite breed. "If the cows are not ideal mothers, they're not in my herd. I'm selecting for height, length, and mothering ability."

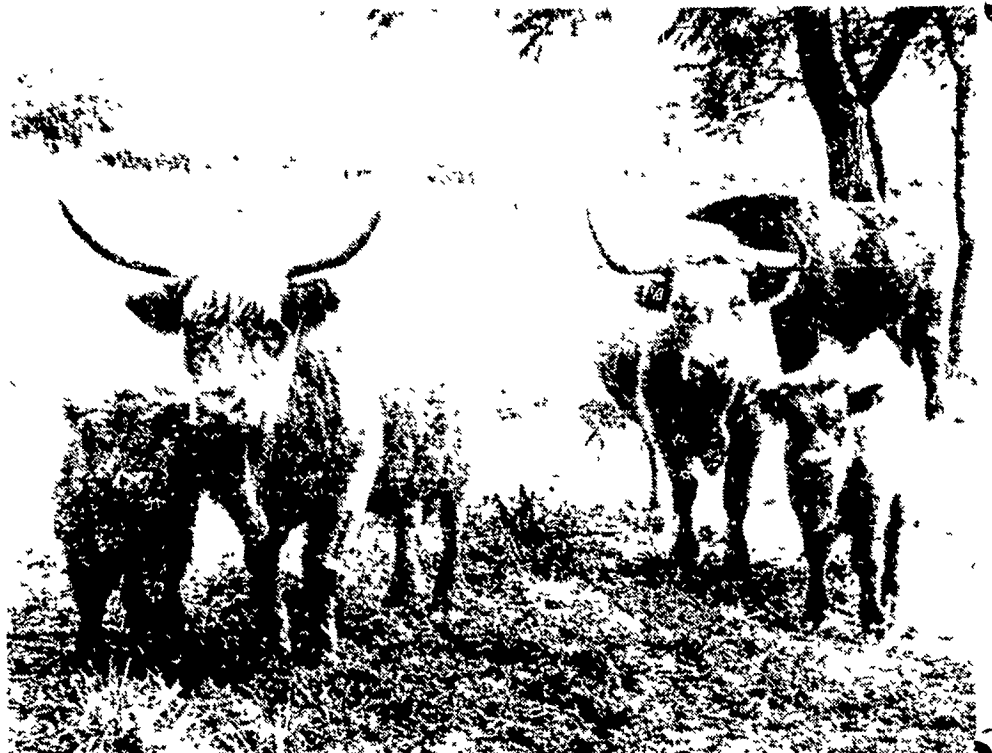
Wilson said, he'll be travelling to West Virginia to pick up a new addition to his herd next week — one that will add some more leg to his calves.

In a recent study conducted in the United States and Canada, statistics back up Wilson's personal observations about the merits of the Scotch Highland breed.

The study revealed that 94.5 percent of potential cow conceptions in the surveyed herds resulted in the birth of a calf. Of those calved, 97.37 percent were born alive and 94.37 percent were successfully weaned. The



Hugh Wilson pats gentle Frosty on the head while they take a break during neighbor Jeff Reitz' ride.



Scotch Highland cattle are noted for their mothering ability. Wilson claims his cows have a calving interval of 10½ months.



The long horns that adorn the Highlanders at one time served as weapons against predators in the wilds of Scotland.



Looking out from under a shaggy foretop, this yearling bull surveys the comfortable life on the Hugh Wilson Family Farm near Sunbury.

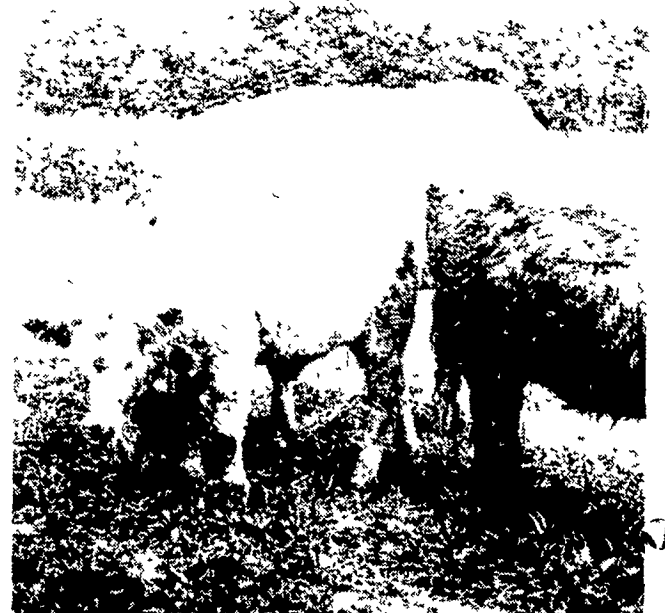
survey also showed that only 1.29 percent of the cows required calving assistance.

With a recorded history that dates to the Twelfth Century, the Scotch Highland were first imported to America in the early 1900's. They have found favor in both the East and the West, in both farm and ranch circumstances where winters are tough.


Their resistance to weather extremes was demonstrated in Colorado, this past winter, where what were termed "wild weather conditions" contributed to many entries in the Fed Beef Contest, at the 1980 National Western Stock Show in Denver, not attaining a necessary choice grade. The Overall Grand Champion Carcass winners, Highland-crosses exhibited by Don Stroh and Sons, Elizabeth, Colorado, never went off feed due to the cold and graded choice.

Highland-crosses have persistently figured in the winning columns in the national competition since 1969.

Numbers of Scotch Highland cattle are not "generously abundant" in America. The American Scotch Highland Breeders Association is helpful in assisting interested parties get in touch with prospective suppliers. Inquiries should be directed to Executive Secretary Gloria Allen, Route 2, Box 403, Kalkaska, Michigan 49646.



This crossbred heifer shows the benefits of hybrid vigor, said Wilson. She was sired by his Highland bull and is out of a half-Charolais dam.



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