

Getting Milked: Bovine Beauty Queen Kicks Up Scandal

Pearl the Cow Goes Missing:
Couple's Bet on Fame
In Dairy World Turns Sour

By ELENA CHERNEY

URBANA, Ohio—Chris Nelson fell in love with Pearl at first sight, and his wife Joyce was thrilled.

Pearl had shiny hair, great legs and a near-perfect body. Her image graced the cover of magazines. She had an international reputation as a beauty queen.

Pearl was the Holstein equivalent of a Hollywood star, and the Nelsons believed buying her would be their ticket to the bovine big time. "It's the prestige," says Joyce Nelson, 42 years old. "Some women like diamonds. I like cows."

Instead, Pearl has brought scandal to the Nelson farm and kicked up controversy in the normally quiet world of cow shows. An ill-fated plan to ship Pearl back to Ontario to get her pregnant has turned into a fight over her ownership. The Nelsons say the Ontario breeder tried to keep the cow. The breeder says the Nelsons improperly took Pearl away before she could give birth.



Pearl

Pearl, meanwhile, is cooling her hoofs in quarantine in the Nelsons' barn, pending an investigation by the U.S. Department of Agriculture into whether she entered the country without documentation.

"It's like some cow soap opera," says Connie Sliker, an Ohio Brown Swiss dealer who lives a few miles from the Nelsons.

The tale offers a peek into the big
Please Turn to Page A8, Column 3

Dairy Queen Vanishes, Brings Scandal to Owners

Continued From First Page

business of North American livestock shows. Even though dairy farmers are struggling, prices for show cows are climbing. According to Holstein World magazine, the average price for high-end cows at the country's top five sales jumped 16% last year, to \$10,340.

Competitors are groomed by professional fitters at a cost of about \$125 a day. Udders are closely clipped so veins stand out, and hair along the cows' backs is groomed, often with hairspray or even fake hair, to give a straighter appearance.

The Nelsons, small dairy farmers who rely on Mr. Nelson's income as a truck driver, made their big bet two years ago. They borrowed \$65,000 to buy Pearl from her Canadian owners. "I could have spent \$65,000 on a car," says Mrs. Nelson. "I get a lot more pleasure out of a cow." The couple wanted to own a winner, and also figured they could make money by breeding Pearl.

The troubles started only days after they took possession of Pearl at the 2001 Ohio Spring Show, where she was crowned Holstein Grand Champion. At the Nelsons, Pearl fell ill. Exploratory surgery led to treatment for a liver problem.

Still, the Nelsons, who milk only about 25 cows, believed they could build their business on Pearl's fame. They placed a full-page ad in an Ohio Holstein association magazine with Pearl's picture and the caption: "The Rarest and Most Exquisite Pearl is a Black Pearl." They had Pearl's image emblazoned on matching jackets.

Yet Pearl had another problem: She couldn't conceive. The seven-year-old had previously given birth three times but had also suffered a miscarriage. The Nelsons hired a veterinarian to inseminate and "flush" Pearl for embryos, which can sell for thousands of dollars to breeders who have them carried by another cow. Four flushings at a cost of \$300 apiece failed to produce embryos. More alarmingly, efforts to impregnate Pearl

also failed.

By the fall, the Nelsons were worried. A show cow needs to calve about once a year to keep her looks, which include a full udder. At shows, judges look for a cow's "conformation" to ideal proportions, for straight legs and an udder that doesn't sag. Such traits indicate longevity as a milk producer, breeders say.

The Nelsons called John Martin, one of Pearl's former owners, in Woodstock, Ontario, for help. The Nelsons agreed to hand over a 10% ownership stake in Pearl in exchange for an insemination.

Mr. Martin, who owned one-third of Pearl before selling to the Nelsons, says he never wanted to part with Pearl in the first place but was outvoted by his other partners. He and his veterinarian, John Draper, who inseminated Pearl in May, agreed to split the 10% ownership stake.

Since Pearl had miscarried once before, the Nelsons agreed to leave her on Mr. Martin's Ontario farm until her pregnancy was well-established. But a few months into the pregnancy, Mrs. Nelson called Mr. Martin demanding that Pearl be sent home. Mr. Martin says he stalled, saying that moving the cow would have jeopardized her pregnancy and imperiled his 5% stake. He also believed the Nelsons would try to wrest back full ownership in the cow, he says.

Indeed, in December the Nelsons claimed full ownership of Pearl, seeking a court order forcing her return to Ohio. An Ontario Superior Court judge ruled the cow should stay put until the partnership could be dissolved at trial.

A trial date was never set. When Mr. Martin awoke on Jan. 9 to milk his cows, he found Pearl's pen empty. Ohio agriculture authorities found Pearl at the Nelsons' two days later.

Mrs. Nelson says she and her husband have no idea how Pearl made the 250-mile journey back to Ohio. "I went out to milk and she was just standing right outside her pen," Mrs. Nelson recounted recently, seated in her cow-

themed kitchen. When pressed, Mr. Nelson, 43, concedes that he drove his truck through Ontario from Michigan to Buffalo, N.Y., on Jan. 9—but says he was passing through with a load of alfalfa hay. "It's strictly coincidence," he says.

Urbana-area farmers are skeptical. The scandal was the talk of the annual banquet of the Ohio Holstein Association's local chapter, where Mrs. Nelson collected an award for milk production earlier this month. Pearl "didn't just walk all the way from Canada," said farmer Tonja Graves. "I can't believe [Mrs. Nelson] is here. I wouldn't have shown my face."

Still, some neighbors sympathize with the Nelsons' thwarted dreams. Even the most expert breeders say they run into problems getting their cows pregnant. "Despite science, a cow's a mysterious thing," says Tony Broshes, of Stan-Mar-Dale/Express Show Cattle, a farm near Urbana.

In the latest twist, an Ohio State University veterinarian, Dr. David Anderson, confirmed last week by ultrasound that Pearl is no longer pregnant. Dr. Anderson says Pearl has a condition frequently linked to miscarriage in cows. Dr. Draper, the Canadian vet who inseminated her and owns 5% of her, says he examined the cow three times early in her pregnancy last summer and the cow "was certainly pregnant."

Mr. Nelson says if Pearl is no longer pregnant, he has no reason to honor his deal to give a 10% stake to the Canadians.

Mrs. Nelson still hopes to turn a profit by breeding the high-priced cows she started buying five years ago, including Winnie, which she bought for \$18,000 as an embryo. But Pearl may be out of the game. She has arthritis, and her now-notorious breeding problems could detract further from her value.

Mrs. Nelson insists Pearl could still be a contender. Yet she adds: "Part of me looks at her and says, 'are you worth it?'"