

A barnyard conversation with the Little Red Hen.

January 2000 Column, Country Life in B.C.

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- Cow: Merry Christmas, Little Red Hen! And a Happy New Year to you!
- Little Red Hen: (peering around the corner of the barn) Hmmph! Merry Christmas, Cow. Though I can't for the life of me think what there is to feel cheery about this new year. Supply management is on the block... Subsidy's become a dirty word...
- Cow: Well, for one, most of the girls made the cut this year and we're all still together! Heifers're beginning to pull their weight. Butter fat content's up...
- Little Red Hen: (shaking her head and settling down in the tractor seat) Not your strongest point, Cow...
- Cow: Look what just happened up the road! Could've as easily been us, ya know!... At least our farmer's still shipping our milk and...
- Little Red Hen: Ha! Holstein Acres is just the beginning... Do you have any idea how much milk you girls'd have to pump out to justify \$40 grand an acre pasture? That's what old Albert got for that place... With Holstein Acres next door, can Jersey Shores be far away?...
- Cow: But surely we won't ALL become subdivisions! People still need milk! I'm certain the best of us will stay... We have all those ribbons... Years and years of ribbons... Some of us are third generation Grand Champions with daughters coming up strong and...
- Little Red Hen: But who is going to buy your milk, Cow?
- Cow: (frowning) Dairies, of course. My goodness, Hen, don't you know anything?
- Little Red Hen: (patiently) Yes, but what happens when the price the dairy offers is less that our farmer needs to pay the bills around here?
- Cow: But such a thing can't happen under supply management...
- Little Red Hen: Then how do you explain the fact that it is?
- Cow: But our dairy is a co-op... Farmers would never cheat other farmers!
- Little Red Hen: Uh, guess you've too busy worrying about the WTO stuff to follow this one, but there's are some real changes happening down at the dairy... Dairyworld is about to merge with Parmalat Canada...
- Cow: Camelot Canada? Has a nice sort of ring to it...
- Little Red Hen: Not Camelot, Parmalat.
- Cow: Farm-a-lot? Still doesn't sound too bad to me...

Little Red Hen: Listen up, Cow! Parm-a-lat Canada.

Cow: Oh. Well, at least its a Canadian company...

Little Red Hen: A subsidiary, my dear Cow, a subsidiary... Created in 1997 when Italian dairy and food conglomerate Parmalat Finanziaria SPA moved into Canada and snapped up Ontario's Beatrice Foods AND Ault Foods. With yearly Canadian sales of over \$2 billion and operations in 27 countries, Parmalat is currently in take-over talks with Australia's dairy farmers to secure a dominant share of that market.

Cow: Holy Farmer! Sounds like a lot of fire-power.

Little Red Hen: Quite. Maxima Foods, child of the Dairyworld/Parmalat merger, will control close to half of Canada's fluid milk production, process 1.4 billion litres of milk a year and rack up \$1 billion in sales.

Cow: But wait a minute, doesn't this have to pass muster with the Canadian government? The Combines Branch, maybe?

Little Red Hen: Sure. But I'll wager the whizzo's in Ottawa'll approve it anyway, arguing it doesn't effect competition "at the regional level."

Cow: Cause there wasn't any to begin with?

Little Red Hen: Something like that. Oh, once upon a time there were lots of regional dairies. Remember Foremost? Closed in May 1996. Dairyworld's Ice Cream Division? Shut down and moved to Edmonton the same year. Lucerne's ice cream, yogurt and cottage cheese division? Up and moved to Edmonton in 1997 and 1998. Except for Island Farms and some independents up Armstrong way, Dairyworld was the only game in town.

Cow: So now we're producing Italian milk? Makes me feel kind of exotic!

Little Red Hen: Dairyworld still holds half the shares of Maxima. But in the global soup of mergers and acquisitions, it's a toss up who calls the shots. Today it's the shareholders of Parmalat, the power broker in the Maxima "partnership". Tomorrow it could well be the shareholders of the conglomerate that owns Parmalat. One thing's for sure: the pressure for higher profits to fuel shareholder returns will only increase... How long can it be before our farmer feels the squeeze?

Cow: Jeeze... So let me see if I've got this right... First Feed Freight Assistance collapses and our farmers get hit with higher grain costs. Then we lose another 2¢ or so a litre joining the Western Milk Pool. Then we find out that while Canada is cutting farm support to the bone, other countries are racing to create "green" supports that reward sustainable farming. This fall, Canada loses the WTO challenge by US and New Zealand over domestic over-quota milk policies. Now you're saying we've got more problems? This is enough to put us girls seriously off our production, you know!

Little Red Hen: Quite... Earth knows, we hens are facing the same problems! And they ask us WHY we pace back and forth across the driveway... We're worried to distraction, that's why...

Cow: Who will save us, Hen? Who will make our case to the politicians? Who will put the starch in their political souls and the honour and integrity in their political

hearts? Who will speak out for Canada's farmers? Who will help us fix this mess before its too late?

Little Red Hen: I don't know, Cow, but I'm going to find out. And in the meantime, I want you to do a little something passed on to me by Helen Horn from the Farm Women's Network...

Cow: Anything, Hen...

Little Red Hen: Ask our farmer for a roll of nice, shiny 1/4" gold metallic ribbon and some tiny safety pins. When you have that, ask the barn mice to make up a whole slew of gold ribbons. You know, like the AIDS ribbons? A single strand bent back on itself to form a small loop and held together with a tiny safety pin?

Cow: OK, then what?

Little Red Hen: Then we'll see how many we can get to wear them... Farmers. Agrologists. Consumers. Produce managers. Politicians. Teachers. Kids in grade school. A small gold ribbon for Canada's farmers.

Cow: Sure. But, such a tiny thing. How can this help, Hen?

Little Red Hen: Trust me, Cow. As Margaret Mead once said "...Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has..."

NEXT MONTH: WHO WILL HELP CANADA'S FARMERS? WHAT THE LITTLE RED HEN FOUND OUT...