

A helping hand to Cuba

A DFO BOARD MEMBER RECENTLY HOSTED FARMERS FROM CUBA, PART OF A PROJECT HE'S HELPING WITH IN THAT COUNTRY

By SUZANNE ATKINSON

THE FIRST TIME DAUGHTER Morgan manufactured a fencing staple out of a u-shaped three inch strand of fence wire, Jim Millson was amazed.

But he wasn't surprised when she explained that Cuban farmers who spent much of the past summer touring Ontario, had shared the trick.

"They don't have anything. They would never be able to get fencing staples," the DFO board member and development volunteer explains.

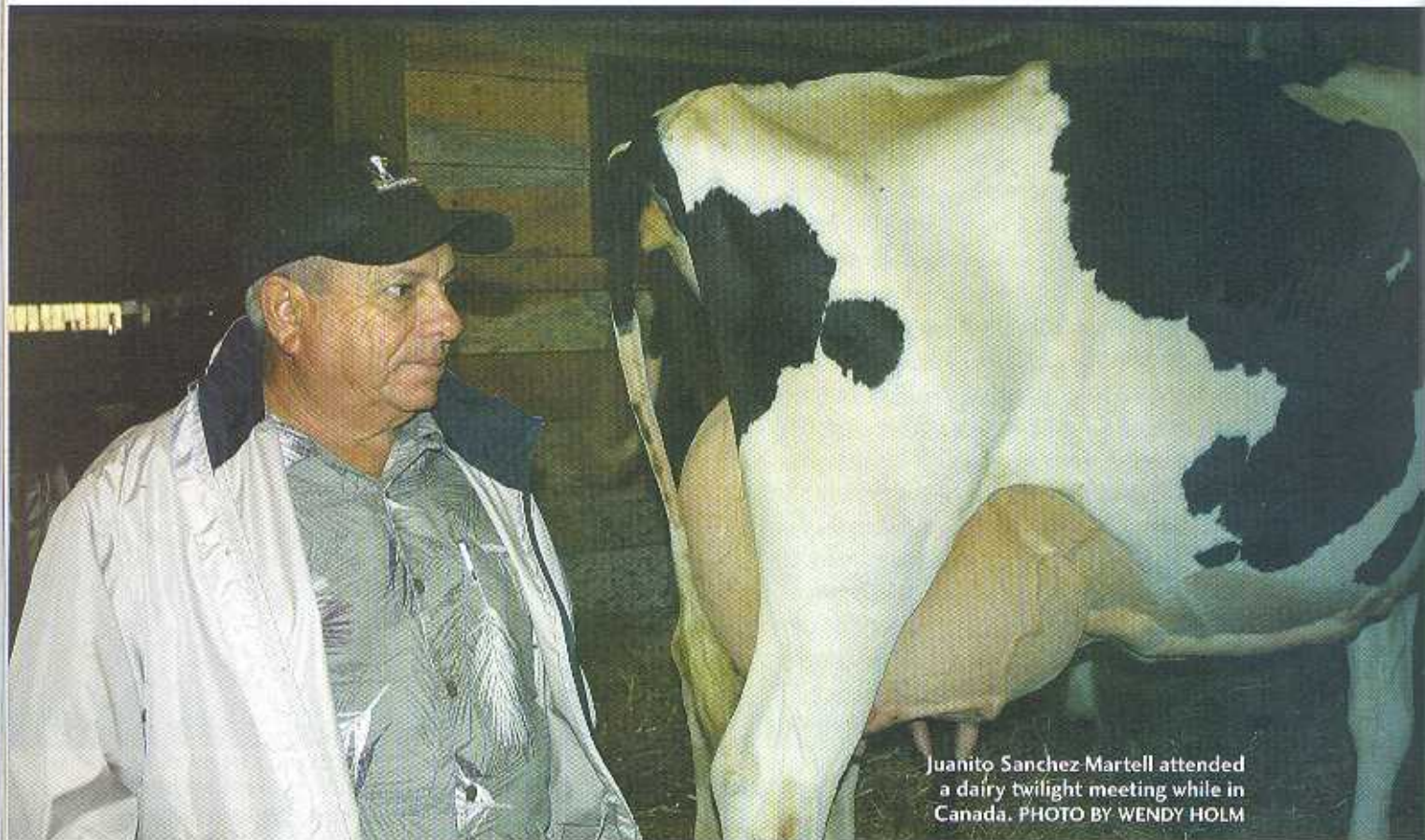
What makes Millson, wife Gladys and the whole Solina-based Landomills Holsteins family experts on Cuban dairy farming?

The past four years they have spent time raising money for and volunteering with a dairy farm and agricultural co-operative in Havana.

Millson has been visiting about once yearly over those four years and this past summer hosted two Cuban dairy farmers who toured a variety of agricultural operations throughout central Ontario.

"It's a very hands on project," explains Millson who is attempting to raise \$20,000 over the next 18 months.

"I admire how they're open to new ideas and open to try new things. They're good students. They try to merge what they want to do with what we want to see



Juanito Sanchez-Martell attended a dairy twilight meeting while in Canada. PHOTO BY WENDY HOLM

happen. But they implement on their schedule," says Millson.

The Cubans were visiting to learn more about calf rearing - specifically the growing of ration crops such as sorghum and cassava.

Millson says they dedicate one teat to the raising of calves for about eight to nine months primarily because there is no available starter ration.

Cuban farming, he says, is a study in sustainable farming. The industry has become self-reliant since losing Russia as a major trade partner.

"They are a world leader in food sovereignty by necessity," says Millson.

The one-year dairy project at the agricultural co-operative 26 Julio in Havana province began in 2004 with \$75,000 in Canadian International Development Agency funding. But Millson and his peers have continued it themselves, raising funds, shipping pallets of supplies and sharing their expertise.

"We've continued a relationship to this day. We continue to collaborate about capacity building of their farm," explains Millson, the region 3 Dairy Farmers of Ontario board member.

"It's a good little project."

Over four years the Millsons and a group headed by BC agrologist/

economist Wendy Holm have helped the co-operative of beginning dairy farms bring water to their mountainous farm, learn about animal husbandry and improve basic milking skills. They've incorporated solar fencing, established rotational pastures and improved the concept of intensive pasturing on the island. They've increased feed availability to the dairy herd by allowing only the top producers to graze the choicest, select pastures.

"We've helped the famers be more sustainable. In Cuba everyone needs something. They're always working with limitations," says Millson.

With 60 farmers in the co-operative, a delegation: Juanito Sanchez Martell and Marta Suarez Ramirez visited Ontario. Along with several dairy farms they also fit in visits to Niagara Falls, a water buffalo farm, a dairy goat operation, twilight meetings and the ice cream-producing Kawartha Dairy.

When not shadowing the Millsons in their daily farm chores, Juanito and Marta also had time to visit a Junior 4H Show in Orono, tour Brighton's environmental sewage treatment wetlands, visit a rotational pasture (Tim Prior, Brussels), drop in on two livestock auctions, visit Oeds Geertsma's dairy and

egg farm in Lucknow, and take in the historic - and still functioning - Tyrone Mills, reports Holm.

While the project is due to wind down in 18 months, Millson doesn't foresee pulling out himself. He sees opportunity for the Ontario town of Brighton to partner with a Cuban community to recycle water through a constructed wetland.

And it is that dedication to the project which Holm finds so rewarding.

"Cuba is unique," explains Holm. I don't know of any other country with such a strong co-operative core. It's unique to have the opportunity to make a difference to create a model," she says, explaining that Cuba had enjoyed "strong agricultural extension," and she calls the work of her group "just propping up the table."

"Farmers are naturally helpful. The Millsons have two children who are able to take over while they are away... they're taking what they know and what the Cubans know and creating a whole new hybrid way of sustainability."

"They're ambitious enough to want to dream. Cubans are pioneering and inventive. They've had to be to survive," says Millson. ☐

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