

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1971)
Heft: 1624

Artikel: To keep a breed pure
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689294>

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The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER

The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

Vol. 57 No. 1624

FRIDAY, 27th SEPTEMBER, 1971

TO KEEP A BREED PURE

Why are the Swiss agricultural authorities so keen on keeping the Simmenthal breed pure, despite the fact that this does not appear to be the best economic proposition? In the course of an evening in the pleasant village of Bussy above Moudon (Vd) we tried to elicit the answer from the farmers. It turned out that none of them were really sure of the motivations of official policy.

Switzerland has four main breeds of cows. By far the most widespread and characteristically Swiss is the red-dish brindled *Simmenthal*. It can be seen on most of the Plateau and the even pastures of the country. The three other breeds are those of *Schwyz*, *Fribourg* and *Valais*. The *Schwyz* cow is the most engaging of the three. Its hide is brownish grey and it has good and faithful bulby eyes. The *Fribourg* cow can be mistaken for a Dutch cow. It is black and white. Its head is very dark and this lends to it a threatening look. The *Valais* breed is quite small, of a dark brown colour and suitable for high Alpine pastures.

The *Simmenthal* cow, however, remains the basic Swiss breed. Plenty of Federal money and effort have been spent on keeping it pure and free from foreign contamination. One former peasant claimed that the *Simmenthal* cows were nowadays not as beautiful as they once were. Their colours have passed and their hide is not as lush.

This same person believed that if the people from the Agricultural Office are so eager to control illegal imports of foreign breeds, it must be out of pride for the pedigree of the traditional *Simmenthal* breed. For him, the main official motivation was to preserve intact something belonging to the national heritage.

Common reasons for present policy

It is however doubtful whether the experts at the Department of Public Economy in Berne actually consider

the Swiss brindled *Simmenthal* as a work of art or natural site which it is important for the national community to preserve. This may be an aspect of the problem (important, I am sure, because of its emotional nature) but there ought also to be hard economic grounds.

The *Simmenthal* is not particularly bounteous in milk. Across the French border there are considerably more opulent cows. This has led a few years ago to a contraband of *Frisones* and *Montbéliard* cows. Herds were smuggled across the Jura. This was accompanied by a racket among dealers and French speculators who sold low quality cows to ingenuous Swiss peasants. Their low-grade material bred new generations of cows yielding no more milk than the traditional *Simmenthals* and many a *Vaudois* peasant made a heavy loss. Some of the herds passed across the border were seized by the Swiss customs, hitting further victims very hard.

Milk is not a lucrative business, especially if too much of it is produced in Switzerland. This was a powerful incentive for the Swiss peasant to acquire foreign and high-yielding breeds.

The main reason for the federal clamp-down must have been to keep a control of the country's livestock. It is not in fact forbidden to import individual foreign heads of cattle and mix *Montbéliard* and *Frisones* to the *Simmenthal* breed, but all these operations are strictly controlled, recorded and even registered in a computer.

Traditionally, there have been many reasons to prefer the *Simmenthal* to any other breed. It constitutes the ideal middle between milk and meat-type livestock, producing less milk than *Jerseys* or *Montbéliards* but more and better meat. The farmer with a *Simmenthal* stable could use his livestock either for milk or meat, or both, depending on circumstances.

Another reason to abide by a traditional breed which had taken centuries of selection to establish lay in the requirements of cheese-makers. If Swiss *Gruyere* and *Emmenthal* were to have their own distinctive flavours,

then the milk used in their preparation had to come from an unchanging and unique source.

New methods of breeding

The older farmers who still remember the days when their cows and oxes pulled a hay wagon, maintain that the best cattle for this purpose was the *Simmenthal*. If they tried another Swiss breed, like the *Schwyz* cow, they found that it was nervous, difficult to master and far less useful. The *Simmenthal* cow was also the animal most suited to the geographical and atmospheric conditions on the Swiss plateau. The grazing was right and so was the altitude.

These reasons have of course been changed. With vast co-operative societies fetching their products by lorry regularly, the Swiss farmer has not really got to worry about adapting his production to a milk or meat market, he is in a position to specialise in either. Now that his market covers the whole country, he can make money in both and be guaranteed an outlet for a production which he should optimise. Likewise, modern transportation and improved fodder crops can practically enable the Plateau's soil to yield a menu satisfying a Dutch prize cow used to the bounty of a Dutch Polder. Naturally, to keep a Dutch cow somewhere in the Canton of Vaud would cost more than to keep it in Holland. Its milk would therefore cost more than Dutch milk. Yet it may still cost less than subsidised Swiss milk.

It is now possible to breed foreign stock, but it is hardly encouraged by the costs. A farmer has to lay out 75 francs for an injection of *Montbéliard* or *Frisons* sperm, with no guarantee that conception will take place. For 30 francs, a non-private organisation will make an injection of controlled and prize *Simmenthal* seed and ensure that conception will take place. The farmer therefore has to spend considerably more to increase his stock by a higher-yielding head of a foreign strain.

Scarcely any farmers keep bulls

The Swiss Observer

Published Twice Monthly at
63/67 TABERNACLE STREET
LONDON E.C.2

Tel.: 01-253 2321

Telegrams: Paperwyse Stock London

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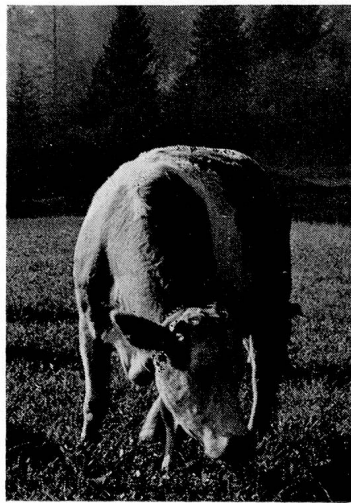
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It seemed to me that it was being kept and fattened for breeding veal livestock and later for home consumption. By being fairly small this Angus presented a great advantage. A heifer fertilised by it would be able to carry a calf, whereas the experiment would be impossible with a larger breed. This meant that the owner's cattle would be able to calve meety "half-Angus" calves at an early date, and thus calve more in their lifetime and produce more meat. A subtle calculation.

Spending a night at Bussy gave me a small taste of some of a Swiss farmer's problems. The owner of the Angus had lost a cow the previous week through "inflation". When it rains the rich fodder can ferment during the



*The Simmenthal Cow,
backbone of Swiss livestock*

cow's digestion and an expansion of gases make the unfortunate victim burst. The symptoms are immediately recognisable: the cow lies on its side, panting with a huge belly. The cure is to puncture it with a *trocard*, a kind of bradde, which will allow the gases out. If the cow is too sick to be saved, it is essential to kill it and retrieve its meat quickly because the meat of a cow that has died thus is invariably foul.

A villager explained to me two standard possibilities of breaking the law in farming, stressing that neither of them paid well. One was to water milk. He related the case of a farmer in a neighbouring village whose cows produced exceptionally fatty milk and who for a very long time managed to mix 5 per cent of water. He was eventually caught because the doses of the non-fatty contents of his milk was not right. His wife held a bistrot in Moudon but had eventually to abandon it owing to local reprobation and the continual teasing of customers. The man could not serve a drink without the villagers taunting him with remarks like "make sure there's no water in my wine!" He emigrated to a village at the other end of the canton.

Another temptation for farmers was to falsify their breeding record, in particular, to state that a calf was born of a prize cow in order to increase its price. The cattle contest is still an important institution. Farmers will lovingly nurture their livestock to win a prize at one of these numerous regional events. They no longer ornate the walls of their farmsteads with prize certificates as they used to. The system has changed. But the judges are still as punctilious as ever. A beautifully proportioned Simmenthal cow with a tremendous milk-yield record may forfeit a prize for a small white patch under the eyes or a muzzle that is not quite of the right colour.

Thus, the official judgment is intent on keeping the Simmenthal cow at a high standard. This may conflict with economic expediency, yet it does not appear to arouse the ill-feelings of most farmers.

(PMB)

COMMENT

CONFERENCES. CONFERENCES . . .

Delegates from 70 countries sat in the *Palais Wilson* in Geneva for the 33rd session of the International Conference on Education. They were briefed in the comparative world expenditure on defence, education and health. UNESCO statistics compiled since 1960 demonstrated that, in 1967, the world (excluding China) had spent 173 million dollars in defence, 120 million dollars on education and 53 million dollars on health.

Total defence spending has increased by 150 per cent in the eight years to 1968, soaring from 54 billion dollars to 132 billion (in 1960 prices) in that time. 120 billion of the increase was attributable to the military budgets of developed countries.

While these 200 educationists and eight ministers were being told such staggering figures, the 4,000 delegates to the 4th Conference for the Peaceful Uses of Atomic Energy were closing their session at the *Palais des Nations*. As far as the layman can understand, these vast international confrontations are there to establish common guidelines which the technical and scientific delegations will put into practice when back in their laboratories and offices. The environment and the problems of security were expectedly those on which the most emphasis was laid. Many papers were presented on an international system of control for fissile materials.

Two speakers, one Canadian and the other Polish, spoke in plenary sitting to remind their audience on their particular responsibility and of their special position in influencing their governments in making wise use of the

for breeding any more. The reasons are obvious. A prize bull sure to maintain the breed at its high level costs a fortune and can at best cover two to three hundred cows in a year. Add to this that it must be fed and transported to each "meeting". Things are done more scientifically today. In Pierre-à-Bot (Neuchatel) there is a sperm bank where the vital stuff is preserved indefinitely in refrigerated and chemical conditions. This means that a bull long since dead can continue to procreate.

A shot by a bull is rich enough to fertilise 500 cows and this explains why bovine procreators are in smaller demand today than they ever were. The travelling inseminator is a specialist from the Federation of Cattle Breeders. He has the record of the ancestry of the heifer he is dealing with and will inject a special matching semen. The calf that is born will also be registered if it is intended for milk production. In this way it is possible to optimise the selection process and learn more about its laws.

Peasant problems

The Pierre-à-Bot sperm bank depends on the Federation of Cattle Breeders, a semi-official intercantonal organisation created for the purpose of protecting the interests of farmers. Its computerised "genealogy" of classified semen will help to offer its innumerable customers the best service that agricultural technology can procure. The centre does not as yet handle semen from foreign breeds.

The only bull in the village of Bussy was a Scottish Angus. I failed to understand with assurance the object of the exercise. It must have been the only Angus bull in a hundred miles.