

A pasture sits empty, virtually devoid of anything living, unless you count the grasses, which went dormant months ago as winter set in. While it's -16 Celsius—a relatively balmy winter temperature for Northern Alberta—the wind is howling at about 50 kph and shooting cold like darts into any exposed skin. ¶ Even the cattle up here don't venture into the open. They choose instead the shelter offered by a sizable stand of poplar and spruce trees. That is, until they hear the tractor. ¶ Like some sort of dinner bell, the sound of the engine bounces off the frosted landscape and calls the cows from the bush. They stream out of the woods faster than one would expect in this kind of cold, only to turn back when the wind hits them.

It's only a temporary delay, though, as the herd waits for the two tractors to begin spreading oats and shredding hay. And when it's time, they—some 600 cows and a few calves—barrel forth and line up, with rears facing the wind. As rancher Chris Sloan says, "Our cows are pretty hardy. Smart too."

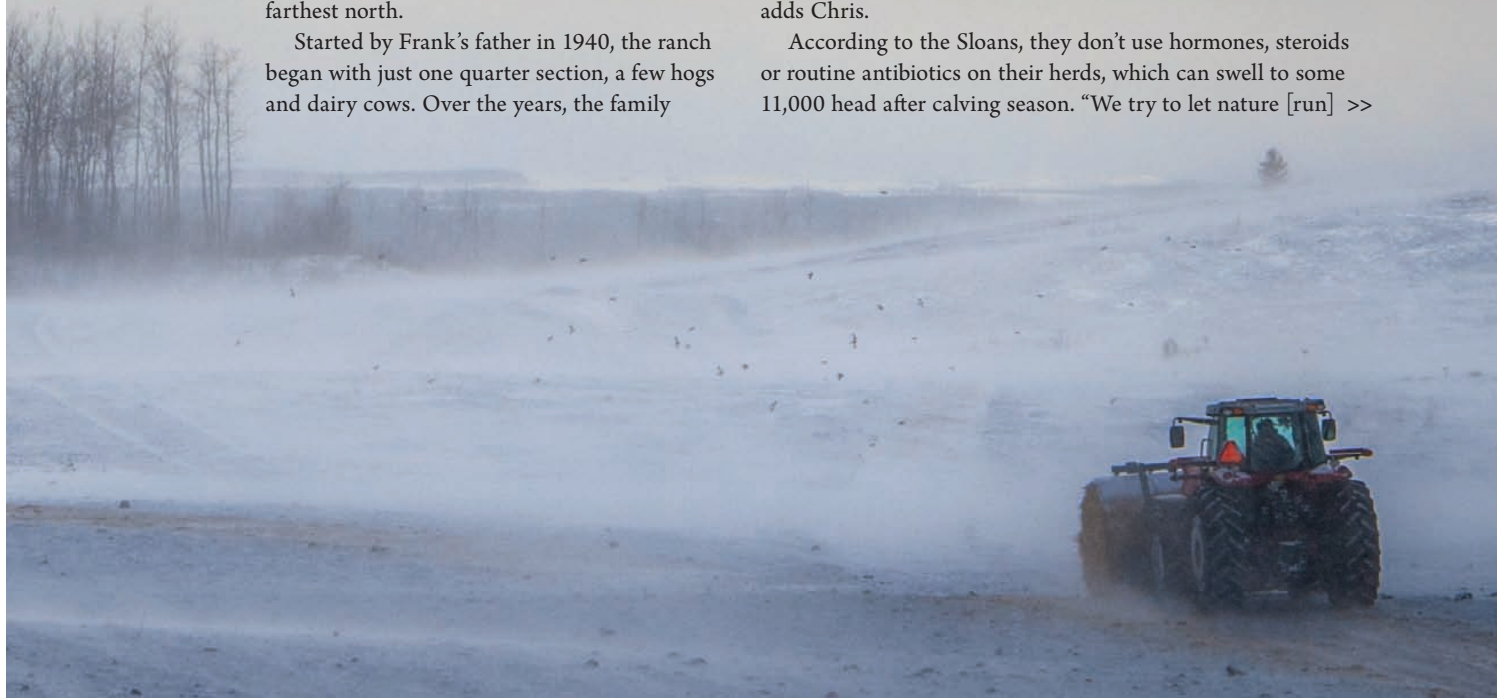
Chris, along with his brother Frankie and their father, Frank, run Sloan Cattle Company, a cow/calf operation north of St. Paul, Alberta. With some 30,000 acres owned or managed by them, they believe their ranch is among the 20 largest such concerns in Canada. Of those 20, they're among the farthest north.

Started by Frank's father in 1940, the ranch began with just one quarter section, a few hogs and dairy cows. Over the years, the family

switched to beef cattle, growing from about 1,000 heifers in the mid-90s—around the time Chris and Frankie joined their father full time—to today's count of about 6,000 breeding cows.

The Sloans' pastureland is spread over some 130 km, while the land on which they grow hay—producing as much as 35,000 round bales in years past—is as far away as 150 km. "One of the challenges of having [so many] cows," says Chris, "is finding the feed for them. We fight as hard as we can to graze six months out of the year and feed six months. That's why we make so much hay and bale so much straw," as many as 1,000 bales a day, adds Chris.

According to the Sloans, they don't use hormones, steroids or routine antibiotics on their herds, which can swell to some 11,000 head after calving season. "We try to let nature [run] >>



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