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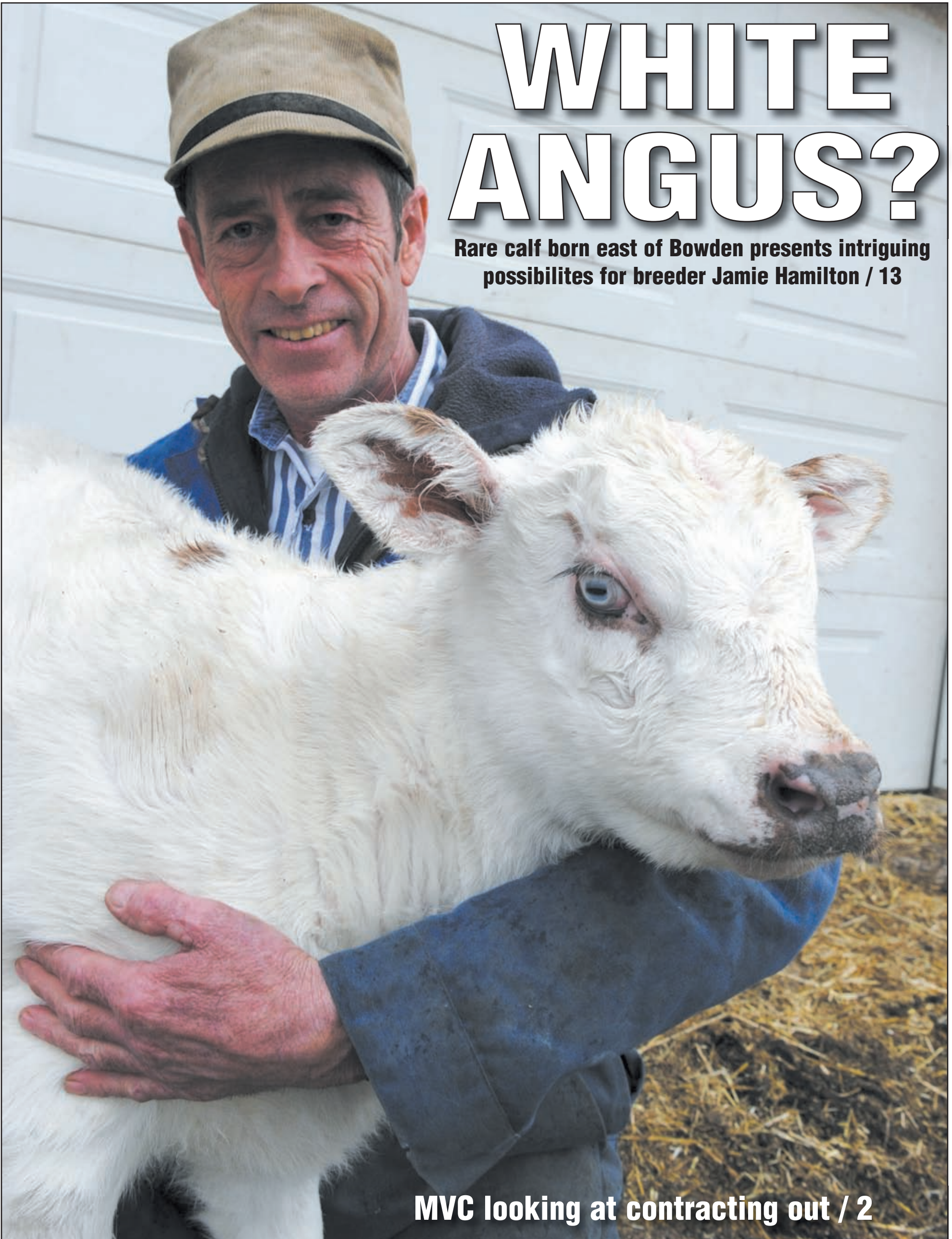
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WHITE ANGUS?

Rare calf born east of Bowden presents intriguing possibilities for breeder Jamie Hamilton / 13

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May 18, 2010
Volume 5, Number 20

White Angus calf turning heads

John Gleeson, Mountain View Gazette



The Hamilton calf checks out a barn cat at the family farm, east of Bowden. Her owner says her vision, hearing and overall health are excellent.

Albino might be too strong a word for the white calf born last month to purebred black Angus parents on a farm east of Bowden, but the "almost albino" is rare enough to turn heads.

"A lot of people do a double-take when they see it," said Colton Hamilton, president of the Alberta Angus Association.

Officials from the national Angus association in Calgary said none of their members contacted had ever seen or heard of an all-white Angus, and Hamilton, whose uncle Jamie bred the rare calf, said it was a first for him too.

"You know there's always a possibility ... but I've never encountered one," he said.

"It's something, definitely."

Named for their solid coloration and one of the counties in northeast Scotland where the breed originated, black and red Angus cattle sometimes have white patches around the udder. But Jamie Hamilton's calf, a female named Haiti, is completely white except for a reddish stripe at the nape of her neck and black around her muzzle and eyes.



Carla Victor/Mountain View Gazette

Haiti with her purebred Black Angus mother.

Those darker areas, says University of Saskatchewan Prof. Sheila Schmutz, "may fit better with this calf having a giant white spot than it being a complete albino."

Considered a leading expert in cattle colour, Schmutz said the calf could darken up over time.

"When a mutation occurs that makes the melanocytes or pigment cells not move into all areas of the body one could get the 'almost' look of an albino," Schmutz wrote in an e-mail from Switzerland, where she was on a working sabbatical.

"That the hooves got darker since it was born may indeed indicate that the pigment migration was delayed and it may get pigment other places yet too. This phenomenon of after-birth pigment development is the norm in the Dalmatian as anyone who's watched the kid's movie knows," Schmutz said.

Coming up just shy of being a complete albino might be a lucky break for the white calf, since albinism is not generally a prescription for good health.

"Complete albinism – no pigment on any hair, skin, eyes, hooves, etc. – is very rare in most animals. The calf (would) be sun-sensitive and may have imperfect vision and/or hearing. Some also have lower fertility," Schmutz wrote.

Jamie Hamilton, Haiti's owner, said the calf appears to him to be an albino – "mainly because of the eyes" – but there have been no signs in the animal of weaker than average health.

"This calf has really done well," Hamilton said of Haiti at three weeks. "She's growing leaps and bounds, lacking nothing in performance to this point."

Haiti's hearing and vision are also excellent, Hamilton said.

"It's a good, healthy looking animal," said Hamilton, who has a 70-head herd nine miles east of Bowden and started breeding black Angus with his father in 1978.

Haiti "could be a little bit of publicity for the black Angus breed," Hamilton said.

"It's hard to know what she'll look like a year from now but if she keeps coming the way she is, I'll probably breed her, yes. I'd probably go with a son of her sire."

And the result?

"If I was a betting man, if it was a black bull I'd say it would be solid black."

But a new white Angus line, though it "would be a long way along the road," isn't something that Hamilton has ruled out, noting that red Angus, distinctively coloured due to a recessive gene in black Angus, "started with one" back in Scotland.

"In my mind to develop a white line of Angus – it would be interesting to play with."

Hamilton made the discovery early one morning when he was checking his cows in the pasture and saw one off by her self.

"I saw a clump of white behind her and thought it was snow. Then I got closer and saw it was a white calf."

Although there's "not a thing different" between Haiti and other black Angus calves, the herd did not accept her at first – and after she was knocked into the fence a few times, she had to be kept separate in the barn for her own safety.

"The other cows didn't like that calf," Hamilton said at the time. "We'll see what happens when we kick her out with the whole herd."

Last week Haiti was turned out with the herd and Hamilton reported she fit in just fine.

Still, Haiti's initial rough reception brought out her owner's sympathy in a line that could be part of a future white Angus marketing campaign.

"An animal isn't supposed to be judged on colour," he said.

While apparently unheard of in Angus cattle, albinism has shown up in other breeds, Schmutz wrote.

"There is a DNA test for albinism in Brown Swiss or Braunvieh cattle that we developed in our lab some years ago. Albinism is now virtually eradicated in that breed ... There is an albino Holstein in Ontario that was kept as an intact bull by its owner and this year two more albino calves were born but I was never told if the mothers were related to the bull or not."

Ocular albinism or "white eyes" as many Angus breeders call it, though rare, "has appeared now and then in this breed for many years. We are actually trying to find the gene causing this right now," wrote Schmutz, who requested 20 tail hairs be sent to her lab if the calf exhibits signs of the condition.