

1996 LINCOLN UNIVERSITY CENTENNIAL AWARD

M.H. & S. Lemon

Background

Mark and Sally Lemon farm an intensive, border dyked property at Lauriston in Mid Canterbury. Between 1982-1996 the Lemon property has been visited each year by BComAg and BAgSc students as part of their field study programme.

Mark's contact with Lincoln University started in 1972 with his involvement as a student in the BComAg degree. In 1975 he graduated with that degree specialising in Farm Management and Valuation and commenced work as an appraiser with the Rural Bank in Invercargill. In May 1979 he shifted north to the Rural Bank in Ashburton and started to look for a property to put into practice the knowledge and skills he had learned about sheep farming whilst advising others. Mark had enough confidence in agriculture and of his own management ability to burden himself up to the eyeballs in debt with the purchase of Hughenden; a 133 ha property of shallow top soil over gravel, but with Border dyke irrigation. Co-incidentally, the property had belonged to his Grandfather 3 decades earlier.

The property prior to the Lemon management had been overcropped, the soils were in a low state of fertility and the border dykes and fences were in bad repair and there was little to no shelter.

The first task of the Lemons was to upgrade these facilities; made more difficult because the financial state of the Lemons was such that they commenced farming without any capital stock or plant. All development including purchases of stock and plant had to be financed out of income. As you can imagine the early period of their farming enterprise required stringent budgeting and financial control and this is where Mark's experience as an appraiser with the Rural Bank stood him in good stead. Suffice to say, that prudent farm and financial management ensured that in 1992 the property became debt free. Since 1992 surplus funds have been used to develop some off-farm investments and in both 1994 and 1996 extra land was purchased resulting in a doubling of the farm size. Mark in 1997 is once again in debt, however, the scale of his farm has increased and there is an increased opportunity for diversification.

From a student learning perspective the Lemon property was an ideal first farm to visit to develop an awareness of the basic factors involved in pastoral agriculture. The visits usually occurred in the 2nd or 3rd week of the first semester (early March) when differences in plant production between dry and irrigated land was at its greatest and choices in stock management between growing lambs vs flushing ewes is crucial to success. Students became aware and developed, probably for the first time, an understanding of soil water holding capacity and wilting point and the use of the 24 hour clock automatic border dyke system, and its costs and management.

The farm system adopted successfully by the Lemons from 1980 to 1996 was based on crossbred ewes with a lambing rate of 130-140% and the sale of all surplus stock to the works. The system whilst appearing simple required precision in timing of events to enable a consistently high output of both wool and meat to be achieved. Mark's meat return of 350-380 kg meat/ha/an and wool returns of 95-105 kg wool/ha/an gave students a bench mark from which to evaluate all other pastoral sheep farms visited during their period at Lincoln.

From a human interest standpoint students each year were fascinated and stimulated at how Mark and Sally with limited cash were able to finance and manage such a large debt and survive successfully.

Although farming was their main focus, Mark and Sally also involved themselves in local community projects and sports clubs. Sally has been a relieving teacher at local schools and Mark is the current Chairman of the Winchmore-Lyndhurst Irrigation Scheme and a member of the Mid Canterbury Enhancement Society looking to further develop irrigation use in the area.

Mark and Sally Lemon deservedly wins recognition for their contribution to Lincoln's field study programme for hosting University field trips over a 16 year period. Their consistent high level of farm management and stock performance and their positive contribution to student learning makes them worthy recipients of the Lincoln University Centennial Award for 1996

D.G. Elvidge