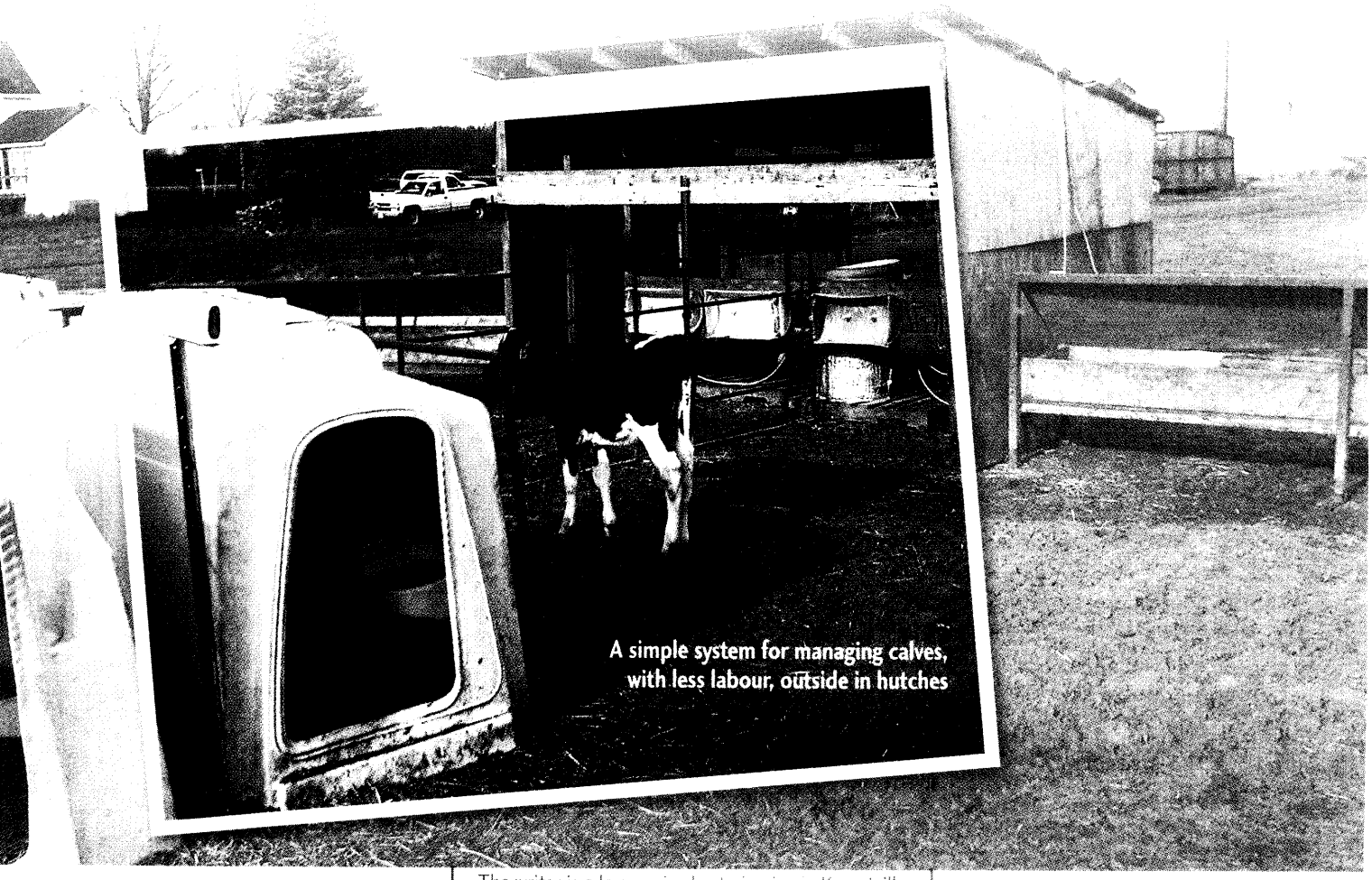
A BETTER CALF-REARING SYSTEM?

A farm has combined the health of calves outdoors, with some labour-saving technology in a simple system

FOR DECADES, SCOURS AND pneumonia were the scourges of raising calves. In those times, calves were raised indoors.

It was not a question of whether the calves would get sick, but only when. It was thought that raising the calves separately from the cows and heifers could be an important part of the solution to these health problems. Calf barns were built of all descriptions, with every type of ventilation system imaginable.

For the most part, these calf barns were an improvement, but the problems persisted, particularly pneumonia. In the 1980s, calf hutches were developed, in which calves were raised outdoors. Hutch rearing of calves had a tremendous impact on pneumonia incidence, and treating calves for pneumonia became a rarity on farms that implemented this type of calf housing.



A simple system for managing calves, with less labour, outside in hutches

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Hutches became commonplace, but did not become universal because they required that the calf rearers go outside to feed, water, and bed the calves regardless of the weather. Great for calves, but not great for the people caring for them.

As farm sizes have increased over the last few decades, labour issues have become more prominent. Availability and retention of good farm labour has often been a problem. Farms are left with more or larger tasks, but often with the same labour force they had before expanding. Therefore, farms have sought out labour saving strategies, devices and technologies.

Recently, two calf feeding systems have been developed to help address these labour issues: free choice acidified milk, and robotic calf feeding systems. Calves often thrive on these systems because they are allowed access to a much larger quantity of milk or milk replacer, and more frequent meals than they had previously. As with beef or dairy calves that have unrestricted access to their mothers, growth rates can be impressive.

But, when these feeding technologies have been adopted by farms, the calves have gone back indoors into a warm or cold housing facility. Not surprisingly, the health problems came with them, particularly pneumonia. It can be a "one step ahead, two steps back" development.

A dairy client of mine may have designed a calf-rearing system that captures the best of all worlds: low labour requirements, rapid growth rates, and a low incidence of disease in calves. They developed this strategy solely to reduce labour on the farm. They have had a long history of very good calf and heifer performance: low disease rates, very good growth rates as evidenced large framed heifers calving on average at less than 24 months of age, and with above well above average first lactation performance.

They have designed a completely outdoor system of two pens for the pre-weaned calves. The pens are constructed using commercially available steel gates that are readily available at agricultural supply stores.

Calves are assigned to pens based on age. Within these pens they have placed calf hutches, which they previously used in a traditional hutch based system. The calves have unrestricted access to the hutches in their pen.

The calves also have unrestricted access to acidified milk in a small open-front hut, with one nipple per pen. This fall they are replacing the acidified milk system with a robotic feeder to further reduce labour. The robotic feeder will be located inside a small insulated building adjacent to the pens. Calves also have access to free choice water in heated water bowls, and to free choice calf starter in small covered bunks.

Thus far, the facility has exceeded all expectations. No calves appear left behind. All calves appear content. Growth rates have been astounding. Disease rates have been minimal. Animal welfarists would be pleased because the calves are able to socialize.

This innovation (beyond the robotic feeder) is inexpensive, easy to design and build, can be readily adapted by any farm, and most importantly, does not compromise calf health and performance. This can be a "win-win" strategy for both farmers and calves. Only time will tell.