

9.1 Changes in farm life

Today perhaps three or four Canadian families out of every 100 is a farming family. In 1885, when the first Canadian transcontinental rail line was completed, 60 families out of every 100 were farm families and the agricultural settlement of the west, and even of major areas of Eastern Canada, was only starting.

Canada is rapidly leaving behind the days when a close acquaintance with the farming experience could be said to be typical of the majority of Canadians, either through direct on-farm living experience or through having living relatives with that experience.

The census year showing the peak number of farms was 1941, with 733,000 farms. In 1981 the number of farms was 318,000 yet the volume of agricultural production was about 175% greater in 1981 than in 1941.

The 1940s marked the beginning of a time of major technological change. From 1921 to 1941 the number of farms changed very little and the introduction of the internal combustion engine, replacing horses, was gradual. But in the 10 years from 1941 to 1951 the number of horses on farms declined by twice as much as in the entire 20 years from 1921 to 1941. Altogether there was a reduction of 3 million horses by 1960, when the transition was essentially complete.

The increase in farm size and reduction of farm numbers has continued. Other changes, added to the use of petroleum and electricity for fuel, have included major varietal improvement, development of highly effective pesticides, control of animal health through antibiotics, broad improvement in poultry and livestock through breeding, improved efficiency in feeding, and greatly expanded use of fertilizers. All of this has meant huge increases in the capital requirements of farming in buildings, machinery and equipment, and in production inputs produced off the farm — fuel, electricity, fertilizer, pesticides, seed and veterinary and other services. Specialization in farming has become more and more characteristic of the industry.

The modern history of food production in Canada has therefore been one of constant and sweeping change, begun by the lure of new lands, driven by scientific and technological advances, shaken by

drought and depression, and challenged by the crisis conditions of two world wars, and in recent decades by the rising food needs of an exploding world population. One perspective on Canada's agricultural history that should not be forgotten is that the democratic aspirations of the nation were reflected in its homestead and other land settlement policies and programs that established the family owned and operated farm as the basis of agricultural development.

The drama of the last 100 years in Canadian agriculture has taken place on hundreds of thousands of individual farms — the farmer's home and place of business — through the combined efforts of homemaker and farmer: in cultivation, animal husbandry, food preparation and preservation, community organization and co-operation. It has also taken place in the laboratories and in the experimental plots and greenhouses of the scientists, on the drawing boards of engineers, in the work of extension specialists and elected officials of the community, and in agricultural schools and colleges. It has taken place in the advance of the science and technology required to transport, process and preserve the products of the farm and to ensure their quality and purity. It has taken place in battles against plant and animal diseases. It has taken place in the patient work of animal breeders, on and off the farm. It has taken place in efforts, still not altogether successful, to protect and improve the physical and nutrient capacity of the topsoil which is the very foundation of the industry.

Along with advancing technology, the urbanization of the population, and increasing incomes have gone massive changes in food processing and distribution. The costs of transportation, processing, packaging and retailing have risen and the farm gate price of farm products has become a declining proportion of the final consumer price. When the costs of food processing and distribution are added to the costs of inputs produced off the farm, the proportion of the consumer food dollar that represents a return to the farmer's land, labour and capital will be found to be little more than 10%. The bulk of the economic activity involved in supplying the food the consumer eats takes place off the farm, contributing to employment in towns and cities.