

CHAPTER 9

AGRICULTURE

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 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 318,361, yet the volume of agricultural production was about 175% greater in 1981 than in 1941. In 1986, there were 293,089 Census-farms.

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. 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, have included major varietal improvements, 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, fertilizers, 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 family-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 efforts of the entire farm family: in cultivation, animal husbandry, 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 to protect and improve the structure and nutrient capacity of the soil which is the very foundation of the industry. Throughout the 1980s, there existed a growing awareness of the problems of urban encroachment on the most fertile of Canada's agricultural land and of the very great need to conserve for the future the soil and water resources.

Along with advancing technology, the urbanization of the population and increasing incomes, massive changes in food processing and distribution have also occurred. The costs of