

Tomatoes: The Fruit of His Labour

by Janine Roelens-Grant

Clair Sherk has lived on the family farm all his life, except for three years when he tried his hand at tobacco farming in the Delhi area. The family farm is located west of Albuna on the 9th concession in the heart of Essex County. Here, Clair and his wife, Bonnie, have raised their son Tim and daughter Dana.

Clair started farming with his father and his grandfather. In the early years, they grew strawberries, raspberries, peaches, potatoes, tobacco, and raised some cattle. Today, he farms with his son, Tim. They farm 800 acres, of which 130 are tomato crops. The remaining acreage is cash crops - soybeans, corn and fresh green beans. And, they have diversified even more with their plug (tomato seedling) and lawn care operations.

"I enjoy what I do or I wouldn't do it," said Clair. "But it has been rough in Essex County in the last four or five years with droughts, floods and bacteria canker. And it does make you wonder what you're doing sometimes." He admits, "I too would have packed it in if it wasn't for my son." His son is the fourth generation of the Sherk family to continue on the family farm.

The plug industry in Ontario, Clair emphasized, has taken over from the Georgia transplants. Today, close to ninety per cent of the seedlings needed for Southern Ontario tomato farms (for the Counties of Essex, Kent and Norfolk) are now grown in Ontario.

"The tomato varieties grown are picked according to the requirements of the processors. There are about fifteen varieties grown," explained Clair, "some for earliness, some for lateness, some for pizza sauce, and so on." Clair added, "the fast food industry and the need for pizza sauce has helped out the tomato industry."

Clair has three sources of hired help - Mexican Mennonites, Mexicans and Jamaicans. The Mexican Mennonites live locally and have their own housing and



A tomato harvesting machine showing the tomatoes coming up from the field on a conveyer belt.
Photo courtesy of the OMAF Film Library

transportation. While the Mexicans and Jamaicans are offshore labour and have to be flown in. "You adopt these people while they're here," Clair said. "You supply a house, transportation for them to get their groceries or to go the doctor's office, and you guarantee them so many hours a week." "If it weren't [for this hired help]," Clair commented, "I don't know what we'd do on our farms."

When asked about changing technology with respect to tomato farming, Clair ex-

plained that by using the most modern planting technology (lazy-susan or carousel plug planters) a farmer can reduce the number of individuals planting by 50 per cent, and increase his daily production by 15 per cent.

Machine technology for harvesting has also seen many changes. Clair bought his first tomato harvester in 1978. The tomatoes which came up from the fields on conveyor belts still had to be hand-sorted. Eventually, harvestors were equipped

Tomato Farming: Changes in the Last Quarter Century



20 to 25 years ago:

- more tomato farmers
- 25 acres or less
- 5 to 6,000 plants per acre
- single rows planted
- controlled sprayings
- larger, sloppier tomatoes
- all hand-picked

Today:

- fewer tomato farmers
- five times the acreage
- 12 to 14,000 plants per acre
- twin rows planted
- spray only when needed
- smaller, meatier tomatoes
- all machine harvested