

Lewis Thomson was 16 when he set up first stall

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Farmer brings 65th crop to market

By Donal O'Connor
staff reporter

This Saturday at the Stratford Farmers Market, Lewis Thomson will be offering his customers and friends free cake, punch and coffee along with his usual array of potatoes, tomatoes, carrots, beets, beans, cauliflowers and turnips.

"I want to show my appreciation for the people who have bought from me over the past 65 years," says the silver-haired farmer who has harvested and sold "pretty nearly anything that will grow in Ontario" since he was a youth of 16.

There's no question about how old he was when he appeared for the first time with his own stall at the farmers market, which until 25 years ago used to be located in the city's core at the current location of the Woolco department store.

"I had to get my dad to drive me the first day because I didn't have my licence," Mr. Thomson recalls. "I got my licence for the next Saturday."

That first day, in August of 1928, his father drove him to market in his 1924 Ford family car. After that, he drove the Ford to the market himself, until 1931 when he purchased a used 1928 Ford Coupe with a rumble seat, took the seat out and installed a pickup back.

There've been several vehicles since, including a '35 Chev pickup. But now Mr. Thomson can be seen early each Saturday morning driving from his farm nine miles south of Stratford to the market area at the Fairgrounds in his grey van.

Among those helping with the stall this Saturday — and with the distribution of goodies under the tent he will be setting up — will be daughters Jane, Wendy, Jeanette and Carole, all of whom have at one time or another helped harvest or market the family crop.

When he first started selling produce, Mr. Thomson recalls, the price of an 11-quart basket of beans was 50 cents. It now costs \$3 a basket to get them picked, he says. And potatoes were 25 cents for a six-quart basket "delivered anywhere in the city."

One of his bicycle delivery boys, Mr. Thomson remembers, was Vincent Quinlan, who is now a physician and heart specialist. And another recollection about the old market square is that things weren't as organized as they are now.

For some reason, for example, the authorities refused to allow farmers to book a vending place in advance. It meant coming very early in the morning — or even spending the night at the market place — in order to guarantee a favored spot.

"I slept on the cement many times so I would have a spot," says Mr. Thomson, recalling that at one time he and another farmer were rivals in trying to secure a particular space.

"Stratford has been my stomping ground all my life. People can't

understand why I don't go to Woodstock as well, but I have nothing to go to Woodstock for," says the man who continues to enjoy his Saturday morning chats with his Stratford customers and who marks his 80th birthday Sunday.

If his friendliness and practice of giving an apple to his future customers have kept him in good standing with market shoppers over the years, his offerings of turnips have been responsible for a certain recognition as well.

What is now Lewis Thomson and Sons wholesale had its beginnings in 1938 when Lewis Thomson began exporting the root vegetables to Michigan. "I grew, waxed and delivered them by truck."

In 1955 he began exporting turnips to Florida to Publix Market which then had 28 stores. It now has 350, he notes. "Hundreds of tons of turnips go all over the U.S."

The export end of the family farm business is currently operated by son Ron Thomson while Mr. Thomson's other son, Carl, takes care of wholesale distribution of produce to restaurants and food stores in Stratford and the surrounding area.

A principal local customer, Mr. Thomson notes, is the Lori-Jo store in Stratford. "It's the only place in town which can sell you real fresh farm produce," he claims.

Usually assisting at the Thomson stall at the farmers market are Don Olson, who has been a helper to Mr. Thomson for about 15 years, Dorothy Smith and Paula Purcell. And when the need arises, he knows he can call on his sons, says the senior Thomson.

"I just love the work and I love the people that I talk to at the market — some I talk to seriously, some I just like to aggravate," he adds with a laugh.

While Lewis Thomson acknowledges he's had his share of hardships — he lost "two of the best wives you ever saw" and an intended wife to cancer — he says his philosophy is "to talk about things that will make you feel a bit happier . . . I like to think and talk about things that lift you up."

Farmers Market to mark 25 years at fairgrounds

It's almost 25 years since the Stratford Farmers Market was moved from its former downtown location to the fairgrounds, and the occasion will be marked Aug. 22 with music, a barbecue and some special visitors.

"We're proud of our record and we want to recognize that fact," said Brian Gropp, general manager of the Stratford Agricultural Society which controls the fairgrounds.

The 1939 Casino Band will set the mood with some lively music for a couple of hours, he said, and among the VIPs expected to show up at the market is Bob Chorney, of Sault Ste. Marie, the executive director of the Public Farmers Markets Association.

The Stratford market, Mr. Gropp noted, is one of the oldest in the province, dating back to 1855 when it was located at the apex of Downie and Wellington streets.

In 1857, when a town hall was built on the land which had been sold to the municipality for the market, the hall was called The Market Building and half of it was used to provide additional space for the weekly outdoor market. When the city hall was destroyed by fire in 1897, the market was moved entirely outdoors into an adjoining square.

About 15 years later it was moved to a city-owned building on the southwest corner of Albert and Waterloo streets, behind the firehall. It remained there until 1967 when the Woolworth department store chain bought the land and farmers were forced to move to the



Lewis Thomson, who turns 80 on Sunday, shows a basket of green beans at his stall at the Stratford Farmers' Market. He's selling his 65th crop at the market this year and is offering a special treat to his customers on Saturday.

Photo by Donal O'Connor