

Marriage has great appeal for apple country friends

Nine Colborne-area couples have been wed 439 years

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Ahh, togetherness.

That wonderful, secure feeling we've all experienced with sweethearts, family and friends.

So warm. So precious. So ... temporary.

Unless, of course, you're a Honey from the Big Apple.

No, not New York. We're talking Colborne, Ont., here — the town with the 10-metre concrete-and-plaster "world's biggest apple" towering over a popular diner at exit 497 on Highway 401.

At the core of this apple country, 90 minutes east of Toronto, are the Honneys, the Pooles and the Hutchinsons — a magic circle of nine couples who've been pals since childhood.

How strong are the ties that bind these steadfast people?

Add it all up, and they've been married 439 years. An unbroken line from the Fightin' '40s to the Nervous '90s. Lots of kids. Lots of fun. No booze. No deaths. And no splits.

How did they do it?

It began with good ol' country hardball. Seventy-five years ago, when Babe Ruth was the toast of that other Big Apple, two Northumberland County farmers became friendly while playing Saturday baseball in Colborne.

Before long, Gordon Honey, Lorne Hutchinson and another pal named Arnold Poole were getting their families together to socialize. While the parents talked crops and played cards, their children forged friendships.

These relationships were only strengthened by the Great Depression. While the parents struggled to survive, the kids breezed through the 1930s: Swimming in Mill Creek on the Hutchinson Farm, romping through hayrides on the Honey's back forty and square dancing nights away at the Pooles'.

"We'd never let a birthday or any family occasion go by without some kind of celebration," recalls Ruth (Poole) Harren of Warkworth, "because we felt the more we got together, the happier we'd be.

"Sure, it was tough times, but we kids didn't know it. Everyone was in the same boat."

And many were in the same one-room school: Cramahe Township S.S. No. 9, where a no-nonsense teacher named Doris McLaughlin (still fit and feisty at age 85 in Applefest Lodge near Brighton) ruled eight grades and taught five Honey kids the Three Rs.

By the time the war came along, some of the girls were off to teaching and nursing schools. Several of the guys wanted to join up, but the recruiting office said they were needed on the farms. An exception was Lorne Honey, who became a tank crew gunner with the Governor-General's



Horse Guards and saw action from Normandy to the Rhine.

After the war? Hey, time to pair off and get hitched. When the last wedding bells pealed in 1958, this was the lineup:

OLD FRIENDS

Myrtle (Poole) and Don Ducie. Now married 55 years.

Tom and Frances (Honey) McDonald: 53 years.

Lois (Honey) and John White: 53.

Clarnece (Hutchinson) and Esli Herrington: 52.

Bessie and Lorne Honey: 50.

Ruth (Poole) and Earl Harren: 50.

Marie (Honey) and Ken McGill: 43.

Connie and Leslie Poole: 43.

Amy and Lyle Honey: 40.

Whew! How's that for 'til-death-do-us-part solidarity? As Ruth Harren reminds us: "In our day, a promise was a promise."

Right, Ruth. And there are no friends like your old friends.

(Now don't get the wrong idea here. Though one partner in each couple came from the original three-family circle, their spouses are all "outsiders" with no blood connections).

Not that everyone stayed all that close through the '50s. Those were the job-seeking, mortgage-paying, child-rearing years when some couples moved away from the family farms.

Mind you, they didn't move *that* far. As Frances McDonald of Colborne explains: "I could never handle those highrise apartments in Toronto. After two days, I'd be jumping off the balcony."

Yessir, country life suited them fine — even if Ruth and Earl didn't get hydro on their Warkworth-area farm until 1952. "We heated baby bottles on the Coleman lamp."

Anyway, the whole gang just kept boppin' along, right through the '60s and '70s until most of the kids were grown and married off and things seemed pretty secure. That's when Frances had this idea . . .

"Hey," she thought. "Why not get the whole gang together for a euchre party? Just like the old days."

It happened 12 years ago, right there in the old house on Alfred St. And a good time was had by all. "Some of our grown children wondered what all the hootin' and hollerin' was about," recalls Frances.

STILL TOGETHER: Nine couples, shown in 1938, left, and last year, became fast friends as children in the Colborne area. They get together annually for a potluck dinner and euchre.

"They couldn't believe the punch was non-alcoholic."

Since then, that potluck dinner and five-table euchre session has become an annual event, with a different couple hosting each year and all the wives bringing their most delectable dishes.

This year's bash is scheduled for Lois and John White's place in Ottawa on Aug. 15, where the gang will share a few belly laughs over early days on the farms.

"Remember when Frances and Tom first got the indoor plumbing? We'd all sneak out the doors and windows rather than walk down the hall — because everyone knew where you were going!"

And, somewhere between Saturday night euchre and Sunday morning church, they'll shake their heads over the ways of the younger generation: "We've had a number of divorces and break-ups among our own children. It hurts."

But they won't bother speculating over the reasons for their own amazing 439-year matrimonial streak.

"Explain? Who can explain?" laughs Frances. "I guess we just like each other."

"Or maybe it's all the apples we eat."

LET'S TALK: Do you have a story to share about an unforgettable person or incident that has somehow touched, changed or enriched your life? Call 416-869-4874 any time. Or write to me at Gamester's People, George Gamester, Toronto Star, One Yonge St., Toronto, Ont., M5E 1E6. Fax: 869-4322. E-mail: ggamest@thestar.ca