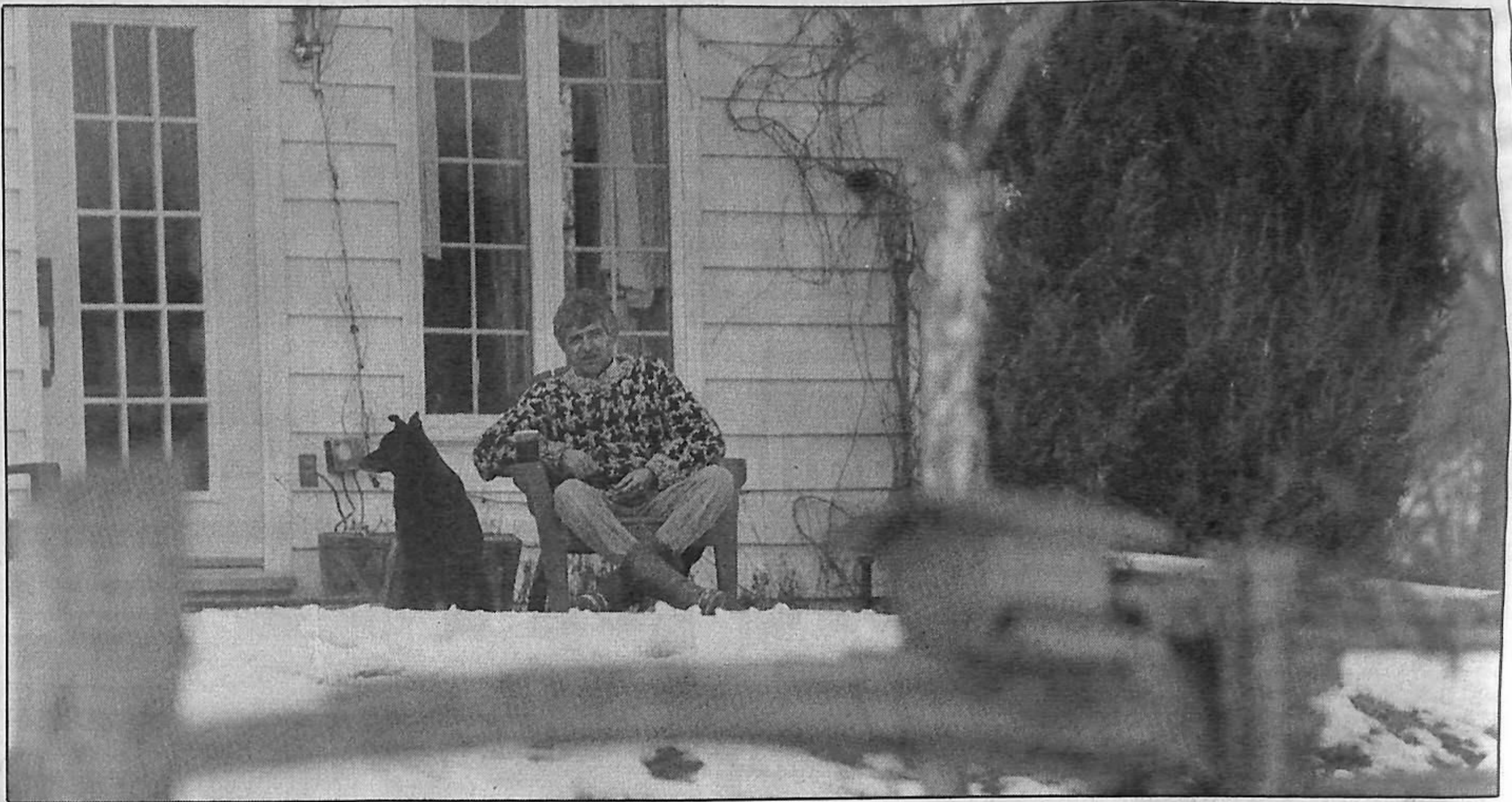


GREATER METRO



BORIS NIKOLOVSKY FOR THE TORONTO STAR

DOWN HOME: Teacher Barry Brabant enjoys some fresh air with his dog, outside the farmhouse at his 110-acre Salt Creek Farm.

City slickers flock to farms

Busy urban folk are buying land to escape stress

BY BORIS NIKOLOVSKY
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Just after busy Toronto editor J. P. Burchell bought a clapboard farmhouse and an empty barn on 100 acres of half-forested land last year, the well went dry. A week later, the pump broke.

But it's definitely been love since he started spending weekends near Warkworth, a pretty village five minutes by dirt road from his country property — where only wind or the yips-yaps of coyotes crack the night's silence in March.

The 25-year-old Toronto editor for Northern Cards Publishing is part of a steady trickle of urban rebels, who every week split from big city boardrooms to their beloved barnyards in the country.

"Conditions in the city are reaching the point where people yearn for it," says Pat Sturm, a local broker of Greenspace Realty, who primarily caters to city weekenders with enough cash and time to fill a craving for open spaces.

These weekenders seek the best of both worlds, leaving their high-stress jobs for peace and modesty in the country. They're less impressed by speedboats, than by spending idle dinners by candlelight, taking pride in the fruits of weekend labors — stripping a farmhouse down to its bare bones, spreading manure or doing some serious gardening, Harrowsmith style.

Other less hard-core types are happy with five acres and a house tucked away in the woods away from it all, says Sturm, who left the Beaches 20 years ago and is proof of the countryside's attraction.

As many Torontonians get ready to reopen their cottages — prime the Merc motors, wave next door to fellow Torontonians Joan and Bob before dropping the dock into the lake — these rustic rowdies have been escaping all winter.

They are weekenders that shun the cottage lifestyle for the privacy, beauty and a bit of

Sunday poop-scooping in a corner of rural Ontario about 90 minutes east of Toronto, on dusty roads near specks like Morganston, Dartford, and Salt Creek.

"This is the way we were meant to live," says Steve Stacey, a Toronto investment dealer who, with his wife, Stella, a teacher, runs a commercial deer farm on weekends, not far from Burchell's property.

Neighbors take care of the animals during the week.

Affordable even through the booming '80s, 100 acres of picturesque land with a farmhouse can come cheap at under \$150,000.

These city slickers live in peaceful co-existence with neighbors who have farmed the land for generations.

Often, weekenders provide land for lease to farmers forced by economics to farm more land without carrying the high cost of owning. Likewise, almost every weekender has been saved from the ditch or snowed-in driveway by a neighbor's tractor or a local's rural wisdom.

"It's a totally different attitude here," says Burchell, after an afternoon horse-grooming

lesson — which was attended by the instructor, three geese, five goats, two dogs and several neighbors — where else, but in the barnyard.

Burchell spends weekends pitching hay, mucking the barn and learning about the horses he bought last fall. This summer, he'll cut posts in the woods for pasture fencing.

"Once the spring comes, there'll be a lot of work to do," says Stacey.

He and his family spent two years on a sabbatical from downtown Toronto, renovating their 12-room farmhouse and setting up the farm for venison.

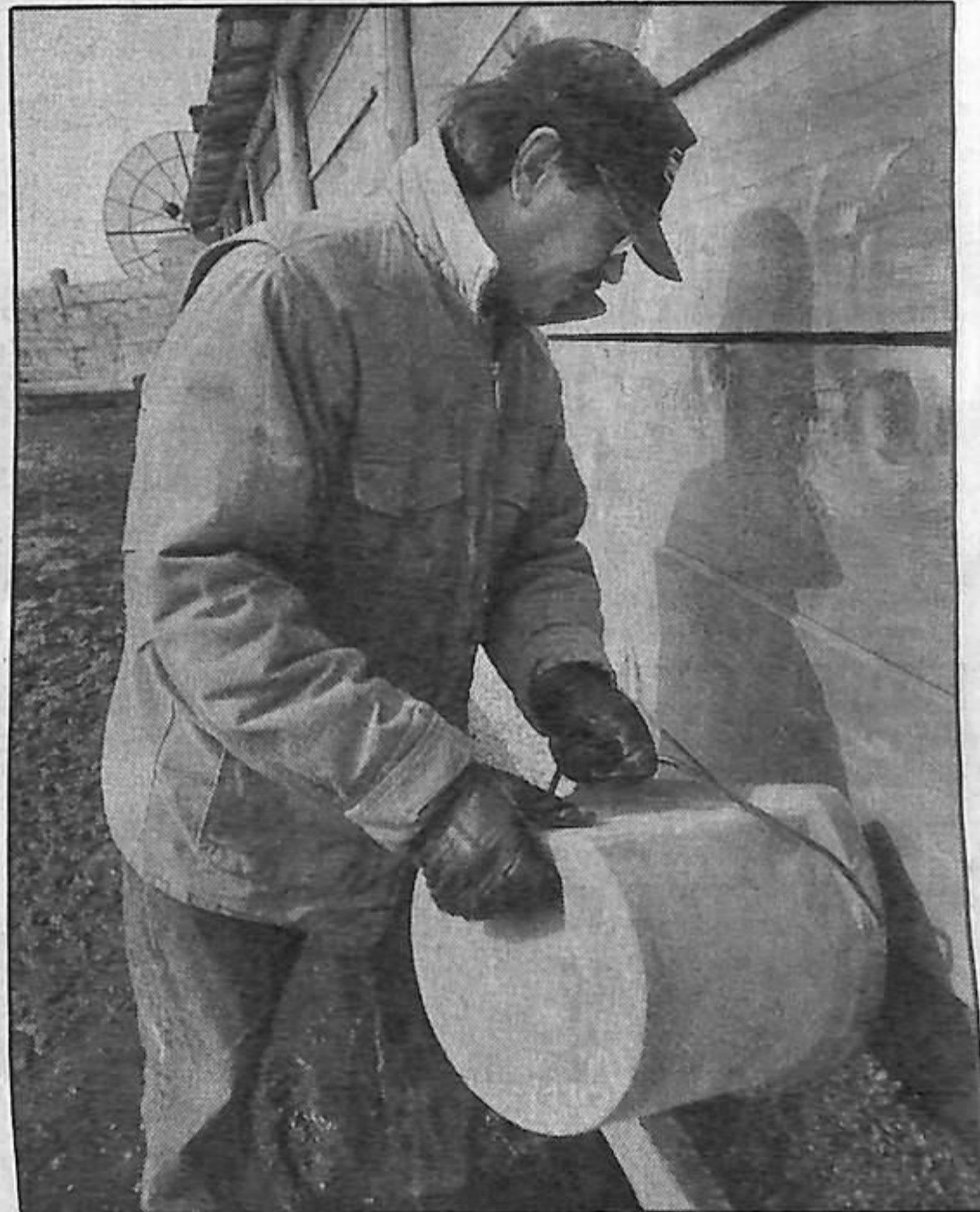
But there's not only possible profit in his farm, but the reward of stewardship for the land, he says.

"Whenever I get a chance to leave the city, this is where I come," he says.

Just a few kilometres away is Salt Creek Farm, a mecca for Barry Brabant, a 49-year-old Toronto school teacher. A river snakes through his 110 acres of rolling land.

"I always wanted a place on a trout stream and people said, 'Dream on.'"

"And now look. All of a sudden, here I am."



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FEEDING TIME: Investment dealer Steve Stacey fills up the trough with feed for the deer on his farm.



HORSE PLAY: Editor J.P. Burchell gets a sniff from one of his horses on his farm near Warkworth.

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