

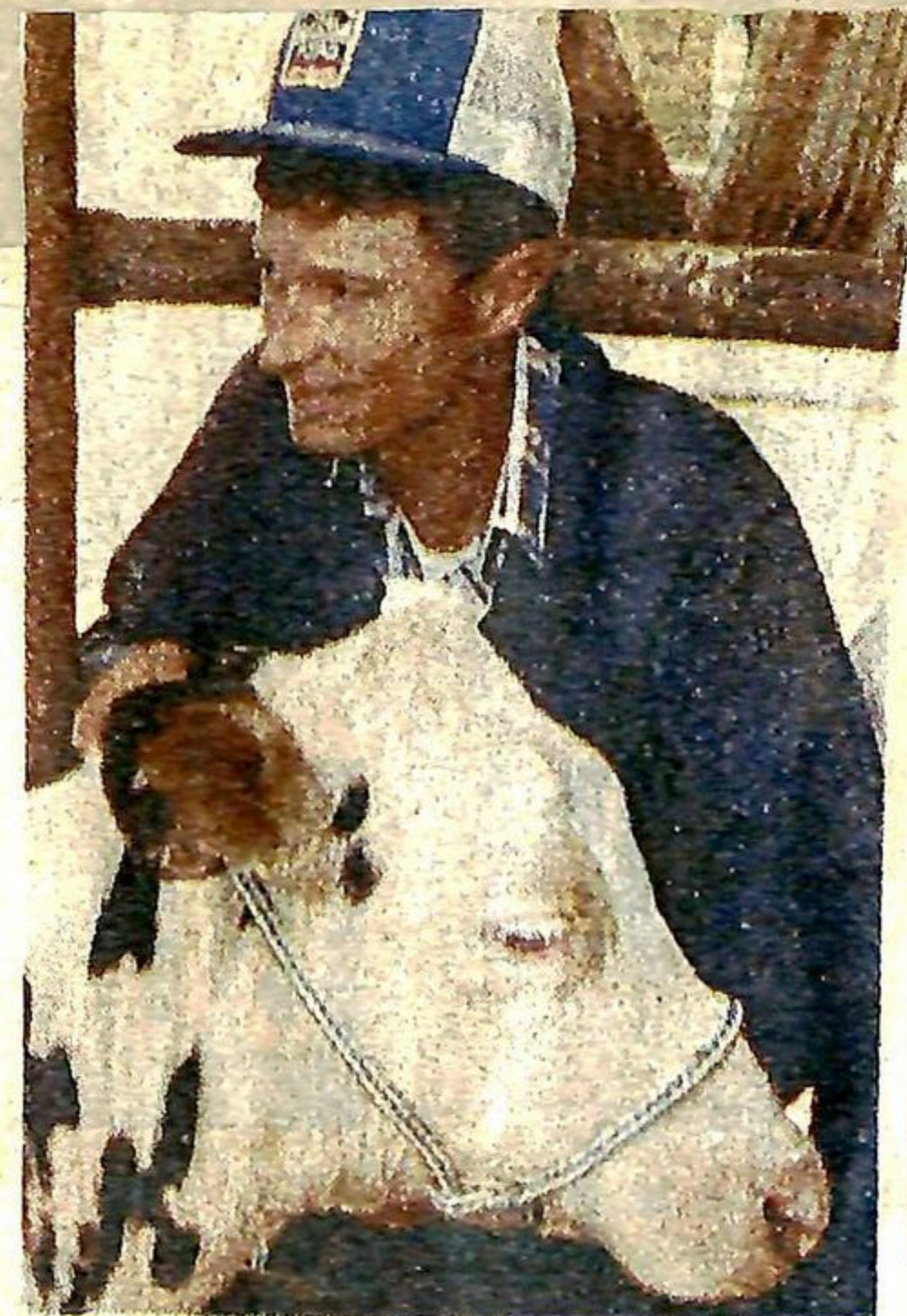
# Cities pose dilemmas to rural neighbors

1990

Problem of Annexation  
- Will good farmland  
disappear?

## FARMLAND

London is creeping ever closer to the farm of David and Julie Armitage and it's got the London Township couple wondering whether they'll have anything to turn over to their sons. The land has been in the Armitage family for decades but now, like hundreds of other Middlesex County farmers, they find themselves in the middle of a controversy over what should be done to save prime agricultural land from urbanization. **Page A13**



Farming is tough enough now, says one farmer, without the extra headaches of worrying about encroachment from cities.

ARVA — You get the feeling right away David and Julie Armitage are in farming for the long haul.

That is, if London doesn't get in the way.

Gut-wrenching investments have been made, including the purchase of a second farm parcel earlier this year. There are healthy cows in the barn.

“Prime agricultural land should be protected. We are going to have to co-operate with other ministries to come up with a plan that cannot leave farmers out of the picture.”

— Agriculture and Food Minister Elmer Buchanan.

And good crops are in the field.

There's even early talk their sons, James, 11, and Richard, 13, may enter farming some day.

Then there's tradition. The farm has been in the Armitage family for decades. "It was dad's farm and grandpa's farm before that," says David Armitage, 40.

But the city is creeping northward and the Armitages fear it will soon start gobbling up neighboring farms as it punches its way through London Township.

Most of what London is seeking in annexation talks with Middlesex County is undeveloped agricultural land.

Three unanswered questions remain: How much farmland will it get? Whose? What will happen to it?

**IDEA OF MOVING:** "It's just the idea of moving, or giving up farming," said Julie, when asked if they would sell to the highest bidder and relocate if a developer came knocking.

Already, property values are starting to rise, partly as a result of speculation and uncertainty over how successful the city will be in its expansion bid. That's good and bad. People could make a lot of money, but higher prices prevent farmers from expanding to stay competitive.

The Armitages bought some extra farmland this summer and could make a profit if they flipped it. They won't. They figure farmland on London's fringe soon will be beyond the reach of ordinary people so they bought while



Dave and Julie Armitage wonder whether their sons, James, 11, left, and Richard, 13, will be able to carry on the family farm into a fourth generation.

## HOUSING FARMLAND

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they could.

They milk about 30 cows and grow field crops. They own about 80 hectares (200 acres) at RR 1, Arva, most of it just a stone's throw from Highbury Avenue. The nearest convenience store is just a few minutes away.

**COMPLAINTS FROM URBANITES:** But annexation could bring an increase in complaints from urbanites concerned about farm smells and noise, said David, who also dreads higher taxes.

"Farming is tough enough right now," he said. There are the added headaches of urbanization on his doorstep.

They don't want to farm any closer to

city limits and hope London makes better use of space inside its boundary before it spreads out over the countryside.

The Armitages, like hundreds of other farmers in Middlesex County, are in the middle of a controversy over what should be done to protect farmland from urbanization.

□ **Elbert van Donkersgoed**, policy director with the Christian Farmers' Federation, said development must be directed away from the province's top farmland.

Redevelopment of older city neighborhoods and building on small parcels of undeveloped land should be the wave of the future, he said. "Cities are healthiest when they grow up instead of out."

Cities are now winning the battle over the best agricultural land, he says. It forces farmers to relocate on lower

quality land.

□ **Brigid Pyke**, president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, agrees intensification — a catchword describing the trend to make greater use of space inside cities — is only part of the solution when it comes to saving precious farmland.

But she said consumer education is important, too.

She said people shouldn't be misled into thinking Ontario has so much farmland that it can pave it without facing consequences. One of them is the need to import more food.

She said that, of all the land in Ontario, only between three and four per cent of it is used to grow crops. "That's it. That's what we farm on."

Other analysts say farmers are often forced to sell off a portion of their land to shore up sagging incomes and must not be blamed for trying to make a dollar.