A family photo

Robert Armstrong took this picture of Jenny and Will Foster and Hattie and William Hitchcock with their children at the Foster home adjacent to the Cheltenham quarry. Photo courtesy of Ella Harding, a daughter of Hattie and William Hitchcock.

Fire was always a threat on farm

Fire was one of the most dreaded disasters to strike a farmer in days gone by. Fire departments did exist but distance and slow transportation usually saw them arrive at the scene too late to save much.

Mary Matthews remembers when her father's barn went up in flames. It was just at noon hour on Sept. 13, 1930. The threshing was just done and her father came into the house to phone a neighbor and warn him that the machine would be there after lunch.

To this day no one knows what caused the fire. It just seemed to explode. the men were all in the mows and had to jump out.

Mrs. Matthews remembers that the bull was the only beast in the barn and someone said to let him burn. The fire was moving so quickly it was dangerous to try to go into the building. Their hired man decided to chance it, however, and he got him out. Surprisingly enough he came without a bit of fuss.

Angus McEachern also remembers the fire. He lost a Sawyer Massey 3650 separator in it.

"Only people who were there would realize how fast it went," he says. "I was standing by the steam engine watching my watch to blow the whistle at noon. Someone yelled fire and I shut off the engine. I don't know if I ever did blow the shitle. I had a brand new drive belt on the machine and I thought I could save it. I cut it off the pulley because I couldn't go in and get it, but it was too heavy for me to pull out so I lost it."

"Alfred Gordon went down to get the horses out of the stable that we used on the water tank and the flames were coming down the feed holes. There was a brand new corn binder sitting on the dump at the back of the barn but it was so hot so fast we couldn't save it and it burned. Even the pigeons were flying out of the top of the barn and dropping down dead with the heat."

Mrs. Matthews says the fire trucks were called from Acton and they brought out an old pump.

"It hadn't been used in 50 years but they threw it in the creek and it worked," she says.

While there was nothing they could do to save the barn the firemen were able to save a nearby drive shed.

"We soaked big, heavy quilts and they wrapped them around the men to protect them from the heat so that they could keep the hoses on the shed. They stayed all night because the grain and hay smouldered all night inside the foundation and they had to watch it."

Mrs. Matthews says her father had 45 to 50 head of holstein at that time and about 25 of those were milking.

"We borrowed ropes from the neighbours and tied them along the fence in the back lane to milk them that night," she says.

Since all the feed was gone and there was no shelter for the stock Mrs. Matthew's father, A.G. Clarridge, auctioned off all his cattle. The barn had been insured and during the winter it was replaced with a steel barn. (That barn burned to the ground during the winter of 1957 again without loss of livestock, and it has again been replaced by a metal barn.) In the spring Mr. Clarridge began buying stock again.

The Clarridges came to their farm on the west half of Lot 28, Concession 4 in 1904. They had one daughter, Myrtle, at that time and the other five sisters were born on the farm.

Mr. Clarridge shipped milk to the City Dairy in Toronto and took his milk to the station in Acton to catch the 7 a.m. train. Mrs. Matthews says her father probably sent six or seven cans a day. Each can held eight gallons and weighed 100 pounds. Although they had no cooling tanks such as modern farmers do the milk was icy cold when it came out of the vat in the milk house. There was a spring in the vat and the fresh water flowed around the cans all the time.

Making maple syrup was an annual event on the Clarridge farm and neighbors remember Mr. Clarridge's mother carrying buckets of sap to the kettle in the bush on a yoke over her shoulders.

"She was a hard working women," one old neighbor remembers. "She made syrup right up until the year before she died at 87."

Mrs. Matthews says they tapped about 125 trees and boiled the sap in an old black kettle on a stone fireplace they had built right in the bush. Her father used the auger and the girls pounded in the spiles. Although there was no building around the kettle they had a shelter of sorts built out of boards. It takes 40 gallons of sap to produce a gallon of syrup and they made 15 to 20 gallons a year.

"We gave a lot of it away to our friends. You didn't sell things the same way then," she chuckles.

Firewood to keep the kettle boiling was just dead limbs and trees which they gathered up through the bush. They collected the sap once a day unless it was running very heavily for some reason or it looked like it might rain.

Mrs. Matthews says that her father and two neighbours, Archie Mann and Lou Atkinson who both lived on the Fourth line, had the first telephones out of Acton

Threshing done by steam engine

Threshing grain was a big summer job for many farmers in Esquesing Township. For Frank Ruddell it was a way of life for more than 39 years.

Mr. Ruddell, 86, was raised on lot 13, Concession 5 of Esquesing Township. He has lived on the Sixth of Ashgrove since 1924.

His early memories of threshing begin with a custom thresher arriving at his father's farm to barn thresh during the winter.

Work would begin about 7 a.m. and go through until 6 p.m. The milking was done before and after the threshing. A tank of water for the steam engine had to be filled in the morning and again during the noon break, he says. It took about 10 men to handle the grain and two men came with the machine to run the thresher and the steam engine.

The Ruddells got fed up with using a custom thresher because of a wet season in 1926, Mr. Ruddell says. It was so bad the end of the harvest was brought in on sleighs in the winter.

After their threshing they had to help the thresher move to Wilfred Bird's farm across 10 Sideroad to lot 12 on the Eighth Line. They left home about 11:30 a.m. with two teams of horses, one on the steam engine and the other on the thresher, and didn't arrive until dark. They had spent the whole day unhitching a team to put both teams on one machine and haul it out of the snow, then reversing the process as the equipment moved from drift to drift.

At one point the community of Ashgrove formed a syndicate of 20 to 25 farmers and bought their own threshing machine to be run by a hired man but Wilfred Bird bought it out in 1924 or 1925, Mr. Ruddell says.

The Ruddells bought their own thresher in 1927 at Eden Mills. It had no strawcutter so they only did a bit of stook threshing with it. Mr. Ruddell, his father, and his three brothers all owned a share in the first machine.

About two years late, however, he decided he wanted to start up on his own and he went to Seaforth and bought his own Waterloo machine. It had a strawcutter.

Most threshers had 24, 28, or 33 inch cylinders, he says. His was a 33 inch cylinder. It was about 33 feet long from the feeder to the back of the machine and was about as big as any machine around.

Mr. Ruddell used a two-cylinder Rumley tractor to power the thresher at first. Then he got a six-cylinder Rumley. In the end he was using a Minneapolis Moleen tractor to turn the belts.

The stook threshing season usually began the end of July and he did custom work up and down the Sixth and Seventh Lines for 39 years. He says he used to make about $1,000 a season from his custom work.

"Stook threshing was the beginning of the breaking up of community help," Mr. Ruddell says. "I've seen so many hard feelings start over threshing. Farmers helped each other but if the rain came then there'd be trouble. They'd say 'I helped you and now it's raining and I'm sitting here watching my crop get ruined.'"

One year one of his customers told him "next year I'm going to get a guy to thresh for me who doesn't kick up so much dust." The next year a hail storm came through and the farmer lost his whole crop except for four loads he had cut with the binder before the storm struck.

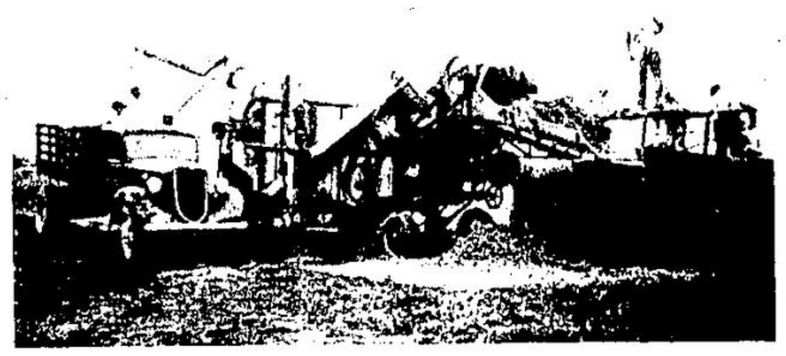
"I reminded him about it," Mr. Ruddell chuckles, "and he agreed with me that this thresher hadn't kicked up so much dust but he also pointed out that 'the bugger didn't leave me any oats'."

Mr. Ruddell did a bit of custom corn cutting until he fell off a silo and wound up in Guelph hospital for three weeks. After that he left corn cutting for others. He also cut wood with a buzz saw and snowplowed farm lanes, he says.

Mr. Ruddell clearly remembers hydro arriving in his part of the township in 1947. Although farmers around him on the Fifth and Seventh Lines had power there was a small patch on the Sixth Line that had been missed for some reason. A waiting list of names of people applying for it had been in existence for some years but it was never acted upon. Then when World War Two broke out expanding hydro service was forgotten.

It wasn't until the end of the war that Ontario Hydro turned its attention back to local people and began again to look at expanding service in the rural areas. Suddenly it was decided to scrap the old list from pre-war days and start fresh looking for new customers. Mr. Ruddell says it was announced that anyone wanting hydro would have to go to Brampton and make out a new application. He was there the same day the announcement was made.

They told him he needed two more residents besides himself in order to get the line brought in. Then he and the two neighbors who also wanted power also had to cut the brush and dig the Hydro poles in order to get the line installed. He was ready and waiting with milking machines, a cooler and all types of electrical appliances by the time the power was turned on. He even had a freezer waiting to try out the relatively new method of preserving the year's garden produce.



Frank Ruddell operated this threshing separator for a number of years doing custom work on the sixth and seventh lines. This threshing was done in the field and the grain trucked to the farmer's grainery. Photo courtesy of Frank Ruddell.

A different potato race

Horses were just as much a source of pleasure to earlier Halton residents as they are to present ones. Not only did they haul farm equipment and transport the family, people rode them.

Stan Morrison, of RR 2, Acton, recalls the days of the potato races at local fairs with nostalgia. The race was usually part of the Friday evening entertainment at Acton fair and the prize was only $4 or $5. It was the challenge to man and horse that drew the riders, he says.

Contestants were given a three-foot long lath sharpened to a point with which to spear a potato. They lined up and at the signal raced to a large barrel full of potatoes. There each one attempted to spear a potato from the saddle and return to drop it in his own personal box behind the starting line. The trip was repeated as often as possible before the race ended. The winner was the rider with the most potatoes in his box.

While the process sounds simply enough, the tricky part was getting your horse close enough to the big potato box to get a potato. Contestants returning with empty sticks also attempted to knock the potato off an opponent's stick if possible and force him to go back and start again.

Contestants could be vicious and didn't hesitate to take a jab at a horse if the opportunity presented itself. His own horse, Lil, was Western bred as a cow pony and she could shoulder her way through the press of horses around the potato barrel with great efficiency, he says.

Contestants often wore the bruises to prove where they had been after a race and he chuckles as he admits to seeing stars after he got clouted