

Agriculture is still important in Halton

By MAGGIE HANNAH
Herald staff writer

Agriculture is far from dead in Halton, where the number of farmers may appear to be diminishing but the quality of their produce just keeps on rising.

So say Henry Stanley, the region's agricultural representative, who has at his fingertips an impressive list of statistics (see box, this page) which bear out his claim that the positive achievements of Halton farmers far outweigh the problems receiving most of the farm-related publicity.

"To me, agriculture is as strong or stronger than ever in Halton," Mr. Stanley says, "although this isn't perceived by many of the local politicians." While residents and politicians alike see the crops growing, what really sticks in their minds are the media headlines listing changes that are about to cost the area agricultural land, such as plans for a new subdivision, a hydro transmission corridor or a new highway.

"You don't see headlines saying that Halton shortborns won the premier exhibit at the Royal (Agricultural Winter Fair) or that Burnview Farms of Milton had the highest milk production record of any herd in Canada in 1977," he points out. "You don't hear that Halton and Peel have the top dairy herds according to Record of Performance figures or that more than 80 per cent of the herds are listed either with R.O.P. or D.I.H.A. (Dairy

Herd Improvement Association). And you can go on this way in every class of livestock."

TOP PRODUCERS

Halton is a top grain producer too, and Mr. Stanley proves it by pointing out that last year's world champion and reserve champion rye was grown by the Nurringtons in Halton. The only time Ontario ever won the wheat championship of the Royal was in 1954 and it was a Halton farmer who took the title.

Halton also had a number of extremely well-organized pick your own fruit and vegetable farms which do a fine job of marketing their produce, Mr. Stanley says. Since we are close to large population areas the market is good for such operations and we meet the public's needs very well.

The farmers who have made headlines are the complainers, he says. The successful farmers are busy farming rather than complaining.

In spite of all the good things he can say about Halton farms he admits that there are more progressive agricultural areas in the province. The uncertainty of the past quarter century has held Halton farmers back with expansions and changes which they might have invested in had they been sure how long they would be able to continue farming.

UNCERTAINTY

The arrival of the speculators along Highway Five in Oakville in the mid-1950s started the uncertainty and it increased as they gradually

bought up properties throughout the country. The Ontario government bought large tracts of land, especially in the Oakville area, which added to the theorizing about the county's future. Urban residents wanting to buy rural lots because of the county's scenic beauty added to the pressure and towns expanded, also swallowing up farm lands. These worries were compounded by a lack of planning at the local and county level to protect areas for agriculture in the long range future.

At one point, farmers had grave problems with estate taxes, gift taxes, and succession duties. Even transferring their farms to their children was tricky. The situation was finally rectified by legislation passed this year to abolish gift and estate taxes on farms.

Regional government hasn't helped Halton's farmers much to this point, Mr. Stanley notes, because none of the councillors are farmers or have any real

appreciation of agriculture.

"To be fair some of them are concerned," he says, but since they have no solid base in farming they can't really appreciate the problems of the bona fide farmer and they tend to over react to the negative comments coming out about agriculture."

The regional plan, although not yet approved, offers some hope for more stability in Halton's agriculture, he says.

One of the positive things he sees for the future is the 10-member agricultural advisory committee made up of a cross section of farm people to advise regional council on matters to do with agriculture. This will give the farm community direct input on council decisions and their suggestions will be accepted as valuable where it involves the rural community.

HIGH CALIBRE
One of the reasons Halton agriculture is of such a high calibre is because so many of

her farmers are college grads or have at least had post secondary school training of some sort. Many of Halton's part time farmers are in this category, Mr. Stanley says. There are a lot of professional people such as doctors who are farming this way and doing a good job.

While the part-time farmer may have been looked down upon at one time, Mr. Stanley feels they are good for the community.

"They're producing food on the land, buying goods and services in the community, hiring people. They have money and ability and to me they're an asset," he says.

There is a trend in Halton at present to renting farm land. Probably up to 40 per cent of the land being farmed is rented, he says. This means that some farmers are working up to 2,000 acres. While some people may question the wisdom of such an operation, Mr. Stanley feels it's good to see

the land cultivated rather than being left idle to grow weeds.

Higher grain prices have resulted in an increasing number of farmers growing cash grain crops. Rent here is a bit lower than in some other areas of the province because there is a quite a bit of land held by speculators which is available for farming. The government is giving tax rebates if the land is rented so this should encourage even more speculators to lease their property.

FULL MARKS

Mr. Stanley also gives full marks to the Halton Federation of Agriculture for taking such an active interest in both local and provincial issues. Members spend hours delving into issues which will involve farmers not only here but all over the province, he says, and they are standing up quite strongly for the bona fide farmer.

The 4-H movement is also a priority item in Halton and since the club leaders are very

competent, the young generation can't help but have a good start if they aim towards farming as a career.

Labor was a problem at one time, but most Halton farmers

have gotten around it by using machinery instead of manual labor. The only place where the labor shortage is still serious is in certain fruit and vegetable operations, he says.

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Census lists more farms

Hay continued to rank as the Halton's major field crop during 1976, when the most recent agricultural survey was taken in the region.

Additional statistics from the same period counted 796 farms in Halton, ranging in size from less than three acres to more than 1,600 acres. A total of 662 farmers each had sales exceeding \$2,500 during 1976, when some 117,000 acres were under cultivation.

Comparison with 1971 census figures indicated a growth of 15 farms and 12,000 acres over the years, with Halton Hills gaining 13 of those new farms, raising its total to 276 and comprising 43,000 acres.

Figures for Halton's other area municipalities show both substantial losses and gains in acreage, with 42 new farms being established in Milton between 1971 and 1976 and Burlington losing 27 farms. Oakville similarly lost 13 farms during the same period, but, like Burlington, gained in the number of acres being farmed.

While Milton gained 4,000 acres during the five-year period, Burlington gained the same amount and Oakville found another 1,000 acres.

In order of popularity, the major field crops in Halton during 1976 were hay (with 156 farms involved), mixed grains, cob corn, wheat, oats, barley, silage corn, vegetables, nursery stock, tree fruits and small fruits.

Beef production involves the largest number of Halton farmers where livestock is considered. In total, 446 area farms are raising beef cattle, compared to 191 raising chickens, 152 raising dairy cattle, 127 raising pigs, 61 raising sheep and 146 raising turkeys, geese and ducks.

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