

The Last Word

with Ted Brown

Old ghosts of the past— an appreciation of those who went before

Over the past year, I've found myself hooked on a television series.

The government-owned TVO public television network has been running back to back series entitled Victorian Farm, and just recently Edwardian Farm.

Filmed in England, the six-episode Victorian Farm series documented three historians who go back in time to relive the day-to-day life of Victorian farmers for a full year.

For 12 months, they lived everyday life on a small farm in Shropshire, as it would have been in the mid-19th century. They used period equipment and tools, dressed in clothing of the day, and used original recipes to cook and building techniques to repair their buildings.

Ruth Goodman, an expert on social history, assumed the role of a typical farmer's wife, taking on such challenges as making butter and cheese, or cooking various dishes made from bizarre parts of the animals, all on a coal-fired cooking range in the rebuilt Victorian cottage.

Archaeologists Alex Langlands and Peter Ginn also took part, rebuilding the cottage in which they lived, as well as raising livestock and crops, utilizing only Victorian-era equipment and techniques from 1885.

The success of the series spawned Victorian Farm Christmas, and in 2010, the 12-part Edwardian Farm was broadcast in England. Once again, all three took a 12-month challenge using tools and techniques of the Edwardian era, that late 19th century time leading up to the First World War.

The series is now available online, by searching the TVO website.

I must admit, watching these series was mesmerizing for me. As I watched the three historians resur-

rect the old ways of doing things, many times I found myself in step with them, knowing full well the procedure they were working on.

And it wasn't because I'd done it personally- it was because I'd heard of these techniques as a kid, or, better still, saw the same equipment that they were using, hanging around the farm.

The Edwardian Farm series was the most interesting to me, simply from a recollection point of view.

They were 'living' in the early 1900s, the time of my grandfather's childhood.

As they worked the land, as they planted the seeds, and as they cut and hauled the hay off the fields, I recognized the old equipment they used.

That was because we still had many of the same pieces of equipment on our farm when I was a boy.

Our earliest seed drill had wooden seed boxes and

"...watching both the Victorian and Edwardian farm series has been like a walk down memory lane."

tall steel wheels (about three feet tall) and the hay rake on the series was very similar to our old Massey Harris rake which had been converted from a horse hitch to a tractor hitch.

I raked my first field of hay with that same old side delivery rake.

I remember the old horse-drawn mower which was sold when I was a kid- almost a perfect match for the one featured in the TVO series.

The early 1900s saw the introduction of the internal combustion engine-powered tractor, replacing teams of horses, as well as the old steam-powered tractors. The one featured on the show was an early McCormick-Deering.

Just before my time, my father and grandfather had a 10-20 McCormick-Deering tractor. The old steel wheels are still at home on the farm, a testament to when the tractor was converted from steel wheels to the more popular and efficient rubber tires.

In the times leading up to the First World War, and after, during the Great Depression, farm equipment and techniques didn't change very much, partly due to the



fact the old equipment was built so strong it would last forever, but more so, because farmers of the 1930s simply had no money to spend on new equipment.

Because of that, many of the pieces were still in use when I was growing up.

On the Edwardian series, the crew harvested their field of oats, cutting them with a grain binder, and drawing in the sheaves of grain to be put through a threshing machine to separate the grain from the straw and chaff.

There is an old grain binder buried in the straw, at home in the barn.

I never saw a threshing at home in my time- my grandfather bought a John Deere combine the year I was born- but I do recall some neighbours still having the local 'thresher' come in- usually Wilfred Bird, who farmed the property immediately opposite the Gellert Centre on Main Street South.

Wilfred would draw his threshing machine to the farm, set up, and then an army of neighbours would gather to thresh that farmer's crop. Once finished, he'd move to the next neighbour, and so on.

There are still remnants of horse plows at home- same as in the series, and some of the old 'bones' from a hay tedder and a dump rake are still laying in the scrap pile.

I like to think of these bits and pieces as old ghosts of the past.

And watching both the Victorian and Edwardian farm series has been like a walk down memory lane.

At home, I work in the barns, or walk around the fencerows and the scrap pile- repeatedly seeing evidence of both eras of farming in the British Commonwealth.

I can only imagine the amount of work my forefathers had to put past them every day, often working against the weather, or perhaps a mechanical breakdown, which could set them back days or weeks, depending upon the origin of the parts.

At the same time, as I watched the series, I was also struck by how life in those times seemed so much simpler. For the three historians on the series, their world evolved around a very small acreage- or at best, to the nearby village, usually to access the train station.

At Brown Farm, I'm sure my forefathers' world didn't extend much beyond the train station in the village of Limehouse. On special days, perhaps to Acton or Georgetown.

Watching those TVO series, I must admit I've had a renewed appreciation of those who went before.

And with that respect comes a distinct feeling of responsibility to the land and buildings- and most importantly, a pride of ownership.

