

Halton Hills farmers facing crisis

By JANET DUVAL

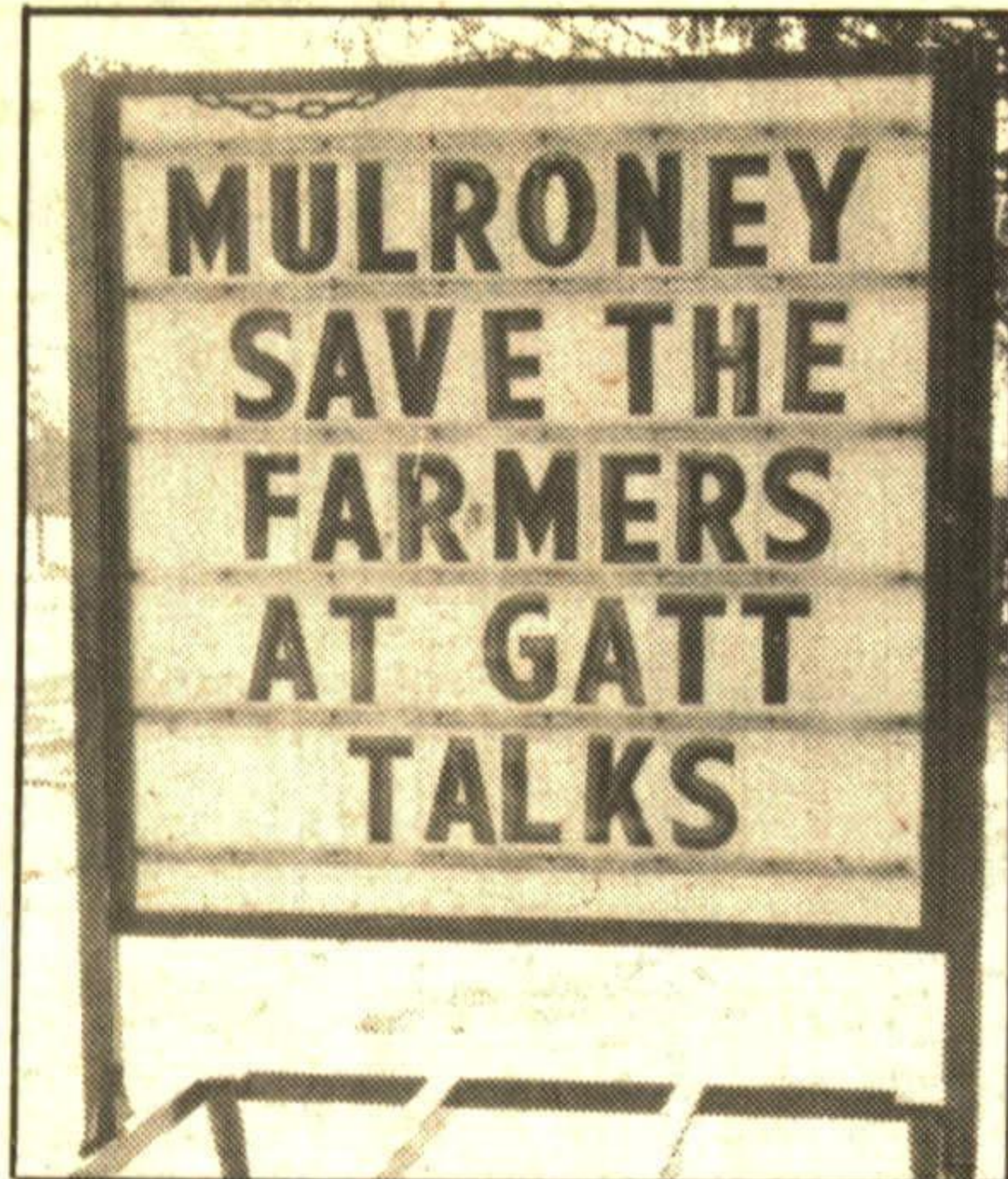
Local dairy farmers, facing what they call the biggest crisis in Canadian agriculture in decades, are joining a national campaign to convince Canadians the family farm may be doomed.

"Agriculture in Canada will be a ghost town without the supply management system we have now," says Bob Kerr, a sixth generation dairy farmer in Ballinafad. "I'll be forced out of business if our government signs the next GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) agreement in Geneva."

Norval farmer Paul Laidlaw agrees.

"Our quota system is the envy of the world. We don't overproduce, we don't cause a world glut, and we're the least subsidized dairy farmers in the world. Some of the best cattle in the world come from Halton county. I hope our government doesn't sell us down the river."

What the farmers fear is the removal of Article 11 from the GATT agreement, which protects marketing boards and prevents milk product imports. Without Article 11, they say, Canada will be



flooded with cheap American surplus milk products, and they'll be out of business.

"The U.S. government pays their dairy farmers billions for their surplus milk, then dumps it down the drain or makes it into skim milk powder," says Laidlaw. "The U.S. dairy farmer is the most subsidized in the world."

To protect the Canadian quota system, which they say provides a constant milk supply at a fair price, they plan several lines of attack.

At a meeting this week, Halton's

45 dairy farmers will be preparing letters to all their local suppliers from Co-Op to the IGA asking them to lobby Ottawa in support of Article 11.

"We pump \$6 million a year into the local economy," says Don Brander, chair of the Halton Milk Committee. "We buy fuel, feed, insurance, veterinary services, machinery, new barns, and groceries. That generates a lot of jobs here."

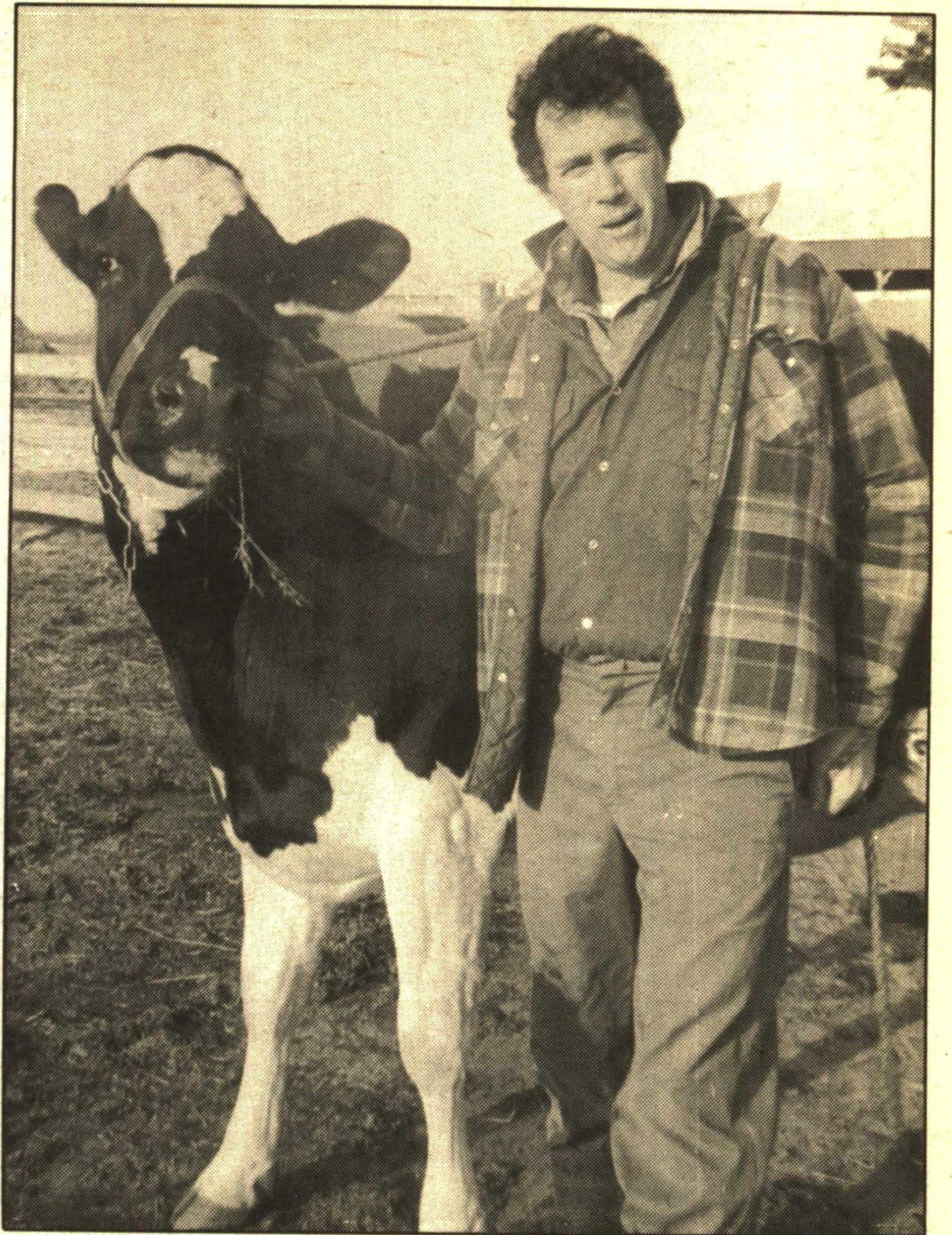
William Neilson Limited in Georgetown with 450 employees handles 20 per cent of the Southern Ontario fluid milk market.

"If we lose Article 11," says Vice-president of marketing Robert Burch, "we'd be concerned for our bi-product business here, yogurt, sour cream and so on."

Fluid milk, the core of Neilson's business, would still be protected, he says. Neilson's no longer makes ice cream which would also be imported in quantity if Article 11 goes.

Burch supports supply management, but calls for improved efficiency in the system, from the farm producer to the retailer.

"They must focus on reducing



Paul Laidlaw, a Halton dairy farmer is worried that Canada may not win its position at the GATT talks and a flood of U.S. imports could result. Left, a sign at the farm entrance of Harry Brander on Winston Churchill Blvd.

wastes and costs," he says.

Full page ads by Ontario dairy farmers have been appearing in major daily newspapers. On February 21, thousands of Canadian farmers will descend on Ottawa to press their concerns.

"Every bus in the province is booked for that day," says Brander. And there's to be a Town Hall meeting with Halton-Peel MP Garth Turner on March 4.

Turner says he's right behind Halton's dairy farmers.

"Supply management works. I support the government's position, to strengthen and clarify Article 11."

But, he says, we are one of 108 nations at the GATT talks, and we don't have much clout against countries like the U.S., which doesn't like our quota system.

The worst case scenario, he says, would be tariffication. If we are forced to scrap supply management, we could put up a temporary tariff wall against American imports, but under the Free Trade Agreement, we would have to drop that wall within a few years. That, the farmers say, would ruin them.

Although they are highly efficient now, they can't compete against large dairy operations in

warmer U.S. states. There, says Jeff Nurse of Ashgrove, farmers don't need insulated barns, they pay lower taxes, there's a cheap labor pool willing to milk cows for \$5 an hour, and the government buys their surplus production.

Could large corporate farms replace deserted family farms? Not likely, says Jeff Nurse. "The family farm is more efficient because there's more cheap or unpaid labor. My wife helps, my kids help. It's a good life, but I'm not encouraging my sons to get into farming."

Farming requires a tremendous investment in cows and land, says Paul Laidlaw. "I'm up every day at 5:30 a.m. We work 365 days a year, including Christmas. We don't have our hands out to the government. We just want a decent return."

At this point, it's unclear whether the farmers' campaign is working. A few days after their ad appeared in Toronto papers, Turner's Georgetown office reported no calls from concerned citizens.

And while many local farmers will be on the buses to Ottawa this month, Paul Laidlaw can't be one of them.

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