



I YAM WHAT I YAM: Spinach farmers Lorne and Peggy Collins with their daughter Doreen Alexandris. They would not trade the farming life for anything. Paul and Mark Collins (not present in photo) also farm with their father. *Photo by Rebecca Ring*



HARVESTING THE CROP: This homemade spinach harvester cuts eight rows of spinach at a time. The spinach is then poured via conveyor belt into the bins, which are hauled to the on-site packing facility. *Photo by Rebecca Ring*

Rockwood spinach farm a rare family business

Collins family grow, sort, pack spinach

By Rebecca Ring

The Canadian family farm is going the way of the Dodo. They are being replaced by large corporate factory farms and put out of business by the importation foreign produce. One thriving family farm bucking the trend is local spinach producer, Lorne Collins and Sons Limited.

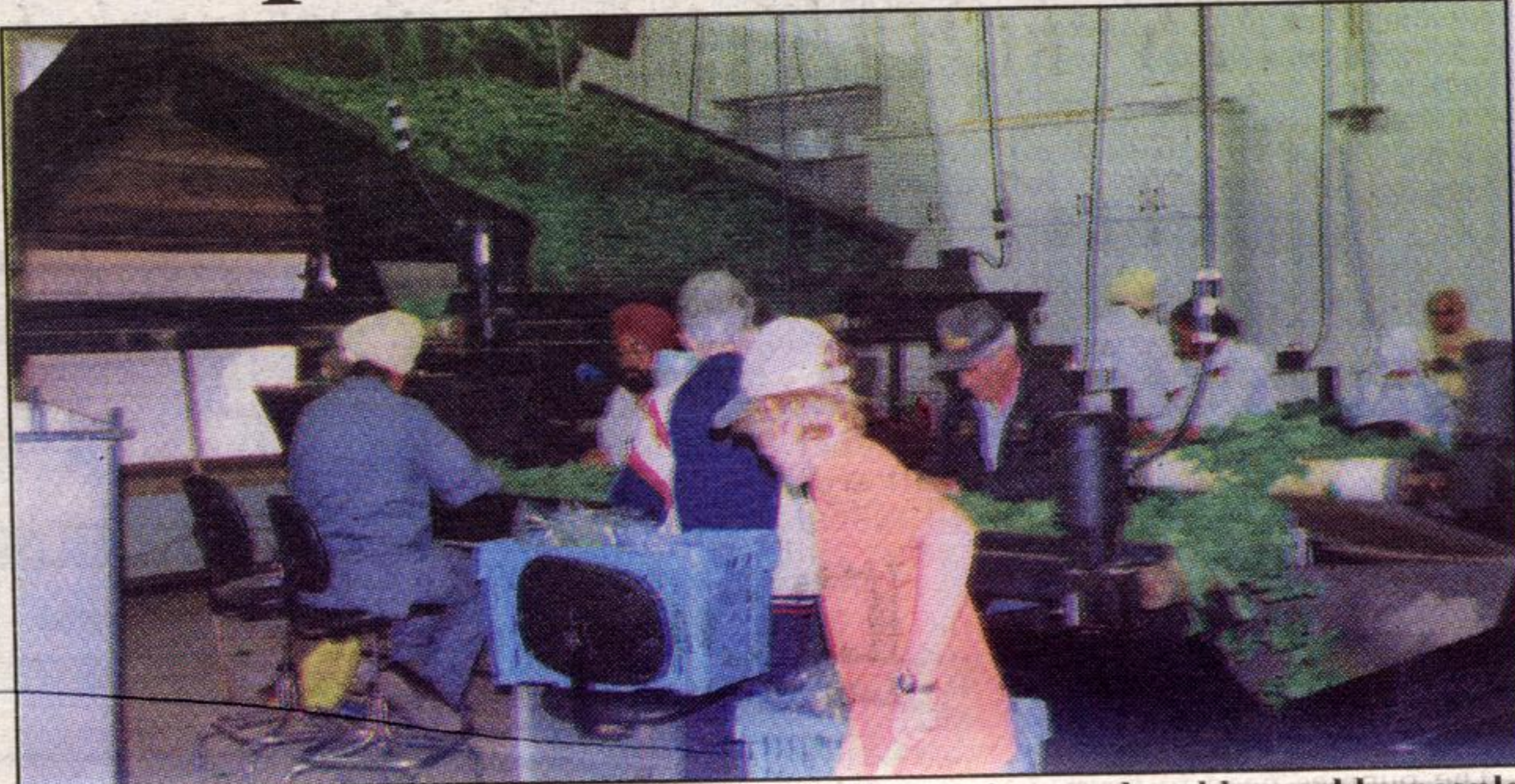
Lorne, his wife Peggy, sons Paul and Mark, daughter Doreen and their families, grow spinach, sort it and pack it in bulk. It is then transported, packaged and distributed by the buyer, Ippolito Produce. It is sold in stores under the brand name Queen Victoria spinach. You can also buy it direct from the farm on Wellington Rd. 26, north of Highway 124. They built a cottage-style shed for self-serve farm gate sales, where you can also help yourself to recipes.

The Collins family know spinach. Lorne Collins has been in business for 47 years. He learned farming from his father on their family farm in Huttonville, west of Brampton. They grew a variety of produce which they sold at the food terminal in Toronto. Things were very different then. The food terminal was just west of the CNE and in those days, the whole area was open space and agricultural land. The city started at Sunnyside and Parkdale. His father also farmed fields he rented near Islington and Queensway.

Lorne remembers when the 427 was a dirt road. He said that rapid development along the lake corridor has resulted in the loss of much of Ontario's prime agricultural land. He warns that if things continue in this way, then local produce such as the Niagara peach will be a thing of the past.

Specialize in Spinach

As farming changed to monoculture, Lorne and his father specialized in spinach. With increased reliance on farm machinery, from seeders to harvesters, the cost of growing different types of



PREPARING SPINACH FOR MARKET: The spinach is sorted and bagged by people and machines, then packed with ice in boxes for bulk sale. Only the best quality leaves are sent to market. *Photo by Rebecca Ring*

produce became prohibitive as machinery is specialized to the product. For example, a tomato picker cannot be used to harvest spinach.

The Collins' bought their first mechanical spinach harvester in 1958. Before that, it was picked by hand. They employed mainly Portuguese and Italian immigrants. Now, their employees work on the packing line, operating equipment and removing any weeds and rejects that got past the shaker. The shaker is a sorting machine that removes the bulk of weeds or under-sized leaves. The workers are mainly East Indian and Pakistani immigrants.

Peggy said they have a hard time finding help as farm work is becoming increasingly unpopular in Canada.

As their family and the market grew, the Collins struck out on their own and bought their current farm in 1975. It had belonged to the Thaker family since the mid 1800's. The last generation of Thaker children born on the farm were not interested in taking it over as all had moved to cities, secured employment, and became used to a different lifestyle. The last generation of Thakers to farm the land had to sell when they became too elderly to operate it.

Peggy said that Mr. Thaker died shortly after putting it up for sale. Perhaps the idea of walking away from it

broke his heart, so he never really did. The original house is still standing and Doreen lives there with her family.

Peggy and Lorne live in a new house they built on the property. In 1997, they bought the farm across the street, bringing their property to over 200 acres of prime agricultural land, bush and wetlands. They also rent several hundred acres, so they farm over 600 acres.

Having the farmed land spread out helps the Collins contend with weather conditions. One area may be hit with hail while another is spared. Spinach is very sensitive to rain or hail damage which tears the leaves. Lorne said they were lucky with the storm that hit last Friday, because the rain came straight down with little wind so the spinach fared well. However, he expects to lose about 25%

of the crop as low-lying fields were flooded, which drowned the spinach roots.

Although the weather has never been exactly the same from season to season, Lorne said that he and others his age have noticed patterns becoming more extreme. He said this may be due to climate change or maybe instant, worldwide communication is making us more aware. He added that even in the day of horse and buggy, if rain had hit Finche Ave. like it did last Friday, it would have completely wiped out farms and they would have heard about it. He said he never heard of tornados in Ontario until more recent years, now they seem to hit several times a year.

Collin's survivors

In the face of weather, market and economic changes, the Collins are survivors.

a taste test and found the Collins' salad size spinach to be sweeter and more flavourful than baby spinach bought at a supermarket. They bought a new shaker to separate the spinach into different sizes which will be up and running in the near future. They are also in the process of converting 20 acres to produce certified organic spinach. The rest is treated with pesticides to meet the "perfection" demand in the market place.


Many consumers will not buy produce with a harmless blemish on it, which means the supermarket will not buy blemished produce from the distributor, who will not buy it from the grower. The Collins did not previously use insecticide until perfect looking, unblemished produce became a market demand.

A family must put its heart and soul into their farm. The Collins have certainly done that, fostering a love of the land and farming life in their children. As a result, their children have returned to the farm after finishing their education. This is indeed rare.

Lorne said "As long as I can keep my head above water and keep my family with me, I don't care how much money you can make roaring to Toronto at 5 in the morning. I wouldn't want to change [our lifestyle]. The whole family's been with me - what more could a guy want?"

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