

Grow Your Own

By Sarah Moran Collier and Nancy Butler



This installment of *Grow Your Own* is in memory of George Ackerman, who died in August of 2014, at the age of ninety-two. He spent his entire life in this community, first at the Royal Street farm his father and mother owned, then at the Bond Road farm he bought from his grandfather, Hazelton Sloane Ackerman.

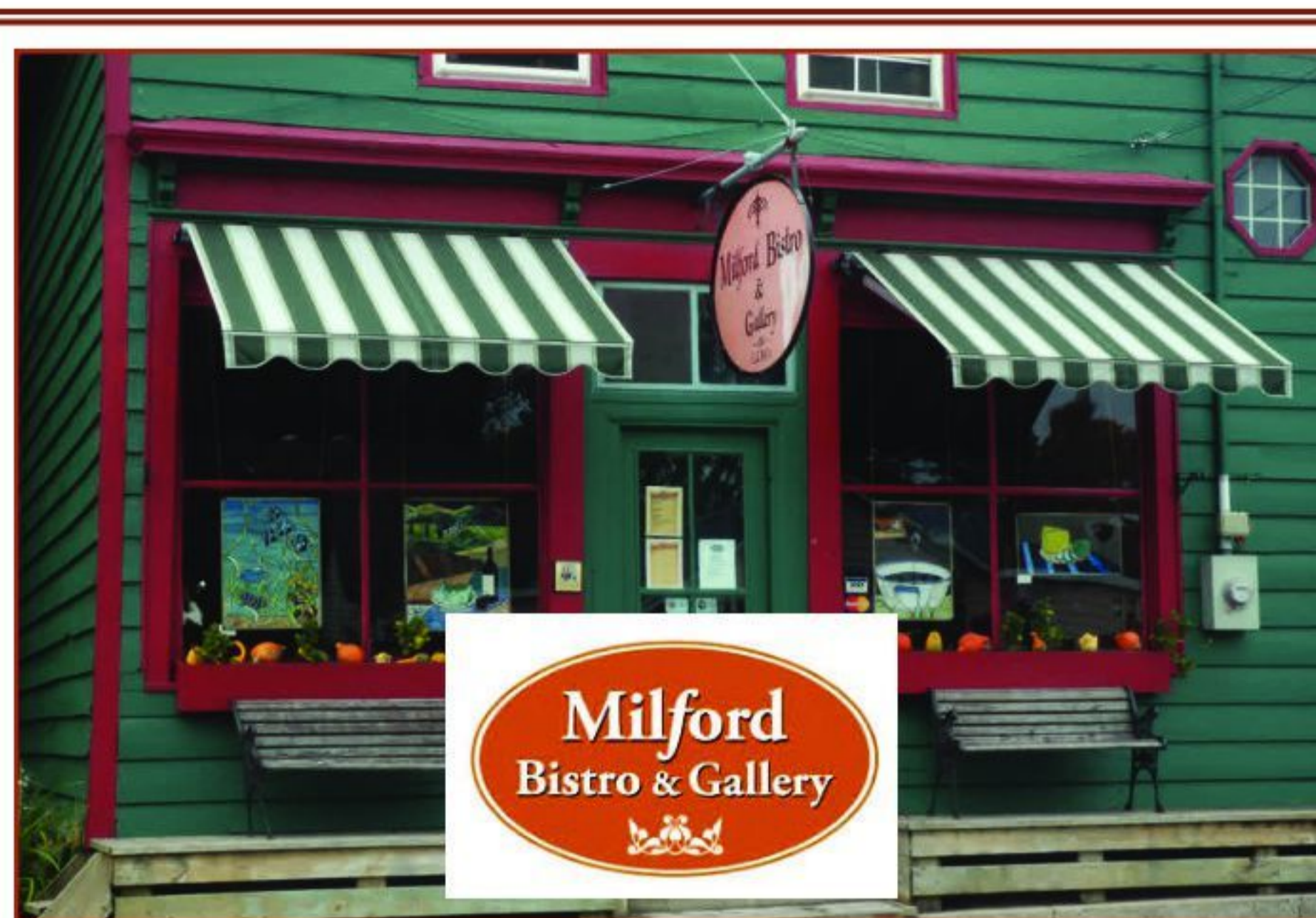
George was a gentle man, kind, smart, and generous, and it was a privilege to have known him. I met him when he was working in his sugar bush, just outside Milford. I was trespassing, yet he was polite, taking the time to say hello and chat. He would have been in his eighties at that point, long retired from his work as the dairy herd supervisor for Prince Edward County. He seemed much younger than his years, happy splitting wood, checking his sap lines, hauling the sap to the sugar shack for boiling in steel kettles.

I eventually asked George if he would tell me about his life in agriculture, about his childhood on Royal Street, about his family farm on the Bond Road, about anything he cared to talk about. He generously agreed to let me record our conversations.

So in 2011 we sat down in his living room and began our first interview. It was informal, and I didn't know very much about farming or the history of agriculture in South Marysburgh. Our conversation was a collaborative effort, with me straining to ask intelligent questions about farming, and George guiding me to topics and themes relevant to agriculture and to local history. That first day we laid the groundwork for subsequent conversations, more general discussions touching on some of the changes in farming practices, on the economics of farming, and new trends in agriculture. George knew his history; his memory of past events and situations was sharp and detailed, his descriptions evocative and astute. But he didn't live in the past, and didn't romanticize it. He was very informed about farming in general; he knew what was current, about new developments in agriculture, new issues.

George talked about the past in a way that illuminated vividly how much has changed. He showed me how different life was by focusing on crucial details, small, telling facts that condensed the broader changes. For instance, he recalled that the year he and Ruth were married (1947), their total monthly grocery bill was \$5.00. The only staples they purchased were sugar and salt, everything else came from their own farm, or was traded for with neighbours. It's a shock to realize how recently Prince Edward County farm families produced almost all of their own food.

Over the course of our conversations I gained an appreciation of how farming shaped every aspect of a family's work and social life, and how the drastic



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changes in agriculture brought by technology and science created broad social change. Most importantly, I came to realize how special George Ackerman was. I'm grateful I knew him, even though it was for a relatively short time. He was a model neighbour and a wonderful man.