

Family's past not its future

Life on the farm is changing. Tradition no longer dictates whether a farm gets passed on in a family.

Farmer Glen Brown isn't quite sure where he'll be in 10 years. But he'll lay odds it won't be on the Markham land his family has farmed for the last 60 years.

He's not even sure he'll still be farming — but if he manages to stay in the agriculture business, it will likely be a long way from the Town of Markham.

The Brown brothers own 150 acres at Elgin Mills, east of McCowan, and have farmed that land for 60 years. Glen, 51, and Fred, 58, work another 200 acres on smaller plots they rent in and around Markham. They own another 150 acres in Uxbridge, "an hour-and-45-minute-drive by tractor."

But times have changed since their parents, Frank and Ila, bought the "home farm" in 1937 and worked it with their seven children. When they died, the farm was left

equally to their kids. But five of the seven have different careers and are leading different lives.

"Fred and I own the business," explains Glen. "The rest of the family has shares in the land. But the land is worth so much it's been years since we could afford to buy them out. So when we're done, the land will have to be sold."

A farming education

At one time Glen's son Ken and Fred's son Russell worked the land with their fathers. They each took a two-year associate diploma in agriculture at the University of Guelph and came home with the education and theory to back up what was supposed to be their life's work.

But it didn't last. "I worked for five years with my dad," recalls Ken, 27. "I grew up on the farm, I've been there since day one. But I really felt I was just

putting in time. There was no interaction with other people. I just felt stuck."

The hard part was telling his dad. "I just came right out and said it, said I'd decided to do something else," said Ken. "He was okay. He just said I should do what I had to do."

So he did. He's apprenticing to be an electrician. He's worked for a Scarborough company for more than two years now. He's bought a house in Uxbridge, with his new wife, Unionville's Trisha Welch.

Meanwhile, around the same time, Russell was offered a Tim Horton's franchise and, like Ken, decided to take a chance.

And that changed things for their fathers.

Livestock sold

The Brown's 800 hogs were sold in 1996. Being the most work for the least profit, they were the logical ones to go first, Glen said.

The 250 acres of rented land the Browns worked for more than 10 years — south of Major Mackenzie at McCowan — was sold in January to Mattamy Homes. It has been cleared, waiting for builders to arrive.

And as of Oct. 3, the Markham Fair weekend, their dairy herd will be history as well.

Both brothers are over 50 now and they are tired of the constraints of dairy farming. The cows have to be milked every day, twice a day, seven days a week. Although Fred and Glen trade off weekends, they are still very much tied down to the herd.

The decision to sell the 43 milkers and 100 calves wasn't easy. But again, it was a practicality they could no longer ignore.

"It will be a shock to us," he admits. "But we will still have some cattle we will breed and sell as milkers, as well as the cash crops — corn,

soybeans, wheat and hay." In one breath he says it might be nice having less to do, in the next he's worried about what he'll do to keep busy.

"If the two boys stayed, we may have bought 400 or 500 acres somewhere like Woodville and built a new dairy barn," Glen said. "But they didn't want that and that's fine. I always told them if they don't want to farm to say so. You can't do something all your life you don't really want to do."

And while the Uxbridge farm was bought by the brothers as an investment, which they intend to sell for their retirement income, the sale of the Markham land won't be without heartache.

"It won't be hard to sell the Uxbridge farm; it was for our retirement, it has no sentimental value," Glen said. "The worst of it will be the home farm, this land. It's been our home all my life, all my children's lives. It's our business, how we make a living. Selling it won't be easy. I don't blame people for gobbling up the land — they are the same people who are gobbling up the milk I produce," he said. "And the value of my land is high because of the people coming here, moving in next door."

Houses all around

"Progress is no one's fault," Glen said philosophically. "And there's nothing I can do to stop it. It's foolish to think we can stay here and farm forever. And I don't think I'd like to stay with houses surrounding me on all sides."

It may not be for another 10 or 15 years, but the next generation of Browns will be leading a very different life than they are today.

And even they are uncertain whether that's a good thing or a bad thing. All they know is progress is progress.

— Kathleen Griffin

In their own words

I don't blame the people for gobbling up the land — they're the same ones gobbling up the milk I produce.

— Glen Brown

I milked cows until I was 72. I grew up on a farm, nobody needed to tell me how to milk a cow.

— Ruth Carr

When you're staring millions of dollars in the face, money that will be your children's and grandchildren's, what do you do? You can sit here until there are houses all around you, but is it much fun to farm in a subdivision? To take tractors on the road with all the traffic is frustrating and dangerous, no one wants to wait for you. Those are the things that force you out.

— Don Miller

The rural aspect of life here in Markham is gone. As far as I'm concerned, we're part of Toronto.

— Arthur Schickedanz

Ten years ago a deer in my backyard was a common occurrence, now it is only an illusion.

— from a university project by Trisha Welch

The 407 is probably going to be the last nail in the coffin.

— Bob Reesor

You don't do this kind of development without consequences. There is a price to be paid.

— Ken Prentice, on Milliken Mills

Of course, Class 1 land is also the best for development. In terms of sewers, pipes and roads, it's much cheaper to build on the best land than it is to fix drainage problems and blast rock. That costs developers a lot more money.

— Ray Valatis, rural planner, Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs

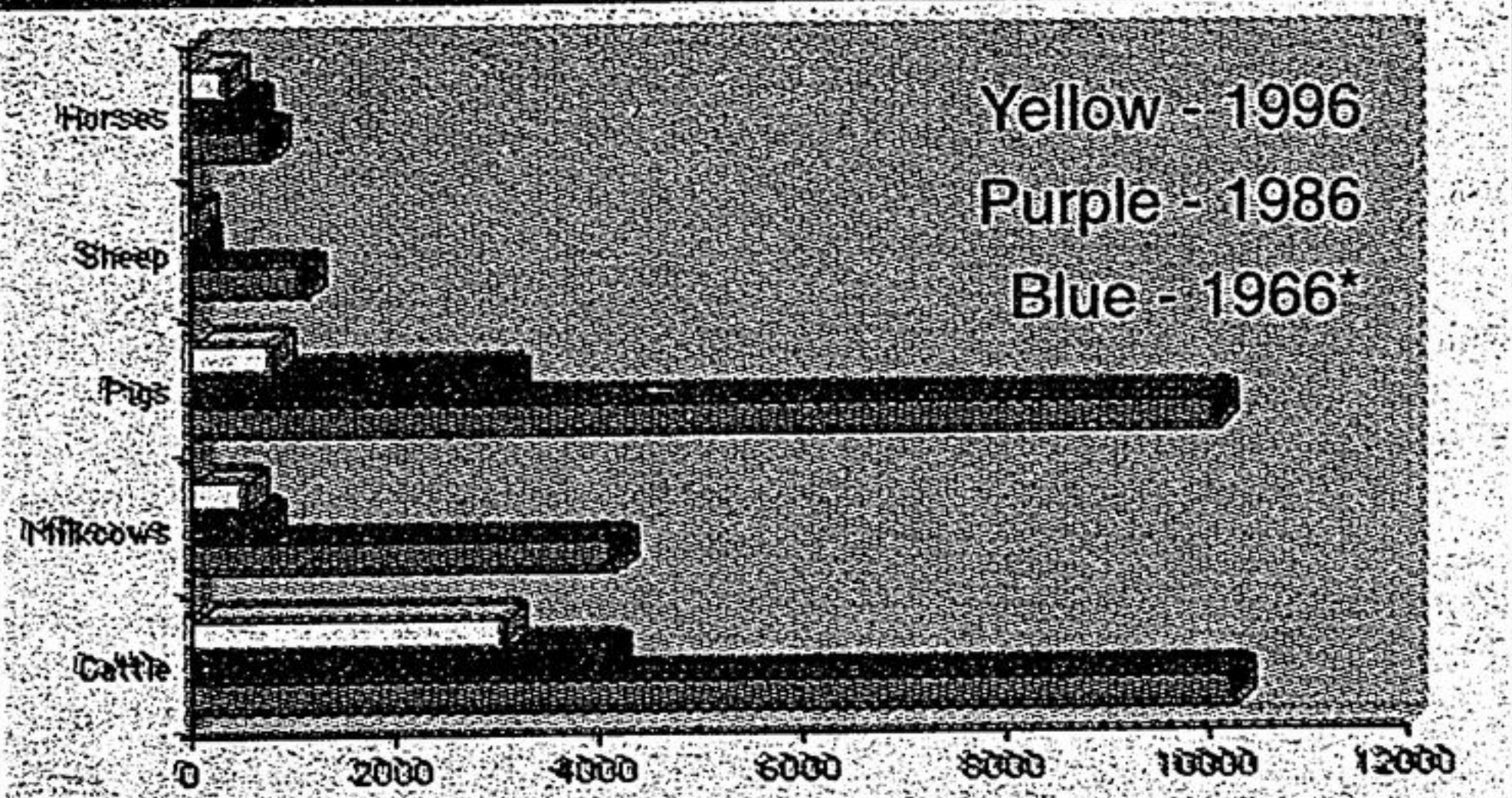
When it's gone, it's gone, never to be retrieved in our province. There's no bank of agricultural land sitting waiting for us when we run out.

— Larry Schut, resources and planning branch, Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs

We can't close our eyes to it. We have to manage it.

— Jim Baird, Markham director of planning

Farmfacts



This chart shows the dramatic decrease in livestock numbers on Markham farms from 1966 to 1996.

* The 1966 survey was for the Township of Markham, including the village of Stouffville and small hamlets.

Vanished life of Hagerman Corners

The neighbours were always there, and the land never failed. Back before there was a traffic light in Markham, Hagerman Corners and Milliken were places on their own.

Within living memory, they each had their own post office, a two-room schoolhouse, and a general store.

In old photographs, it looks like people were poor, but they weren't poor in what mattered most, Ken Prentice remembers.

"In one sense, we had the least of things, but in many respects we had the best of things," said Prentice, whose grandfather was Milliken's postmaster. Some of those best things were the fresh air, exercise, and neighbours who helped each other.

"I know, we never had much money. We were never hungry, though," recalls John Galloway, who ran the general store (later the appliance store) at Hagerman, a hamlet centred on 14th Ave. and Kennedy Rd.

Jean Deverill lived nearby, in an 1853 farmhouse built by one of the hamlet's founders, Nicholas Hagerman, and remembers when Galloway's first got ice cream. "I think the first ice cream they had was cherry custard."

At this time of year, Markham Fair time, farmers went to their neighbours' fields to help bring in the grain. The threshing went on for days, you couldn't do it all on your own. Deverill and friends from the area recall.

It was the custom, the retired teacher said, that the farm's owner built the stack himself after the dusty straw shot out of the threshing machine. "Oh, I can see it coming yet!"

Women made enormous amounts of food for threshers, who ate those meals at the Deverills' around the harvest table built by her great, great grandfather. The table is now in the basement of her new home in Stouffville, where Deverill and husband Bill moved in 1989.

When combines became part of farming, former Hagerman residents agree, something was lost. Farmers didn't get to know their neighbours as well.

"After that era, farming became a lonely life," said Elson Miles, a former Markham councillor whose family farmed near McCowan Rd. and Steeles Ave.

Hagerman people tended to marry other Hagerman people. They joined the Junior Farmers, which met in Unionville once a month, and had regular

dances. No liquor was involved. "We had a whale of a time," said Deverill.

Snow lay deep on the roads in winter. It was not a problem for farmers who all had a team of horses and a sleigh, but made a chilling walk to school for children. "You could step over the wires," former resident George Miller said of the telephone poles.

In 1959, an international plowing match was held on the Massey-Ferguson farm, recalls Bruce Couperthwaite born into another Hagerman farm family. Many locals still remember Clark Young, Deverill's uncle and a champion plowman, who became a consultant for Massey after he sold the company his farm in 1950. The company kept his 20-acre woodlot intact at Birchmount Rd. and 14th Ave. As a councillor, Miles, who skated on the Young's pond as a child, pushed to name the woods after the farmer. Today, not much remains of Hagerman, settled in 1794.

The cemeteries are still there. So is the Mennonite church, although its old congregation has moved away. The school on 14th is now The School, a posh restaurant.

The quiet village of Milliken became Milliken Mills, despite Prentice's father's objections that there was never a mill at Milliken.

"More has been lost than just farmland," argues Prentice, whose father and grandfather also sold farm equipment at Steeles and Old Kennedy Rd. "A sense of community has been lost, too." Now an investment firm manager in Stouffville, he offers advice to residents who would reclaim some of the benefits of old Milliken: Know your neighbourhood and your neighbours.

"Don't just let it be a bedroom," he said.

— Mike Adler



Jean Deverill



Elson Miles