

Will growth spell end for farming?

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The Schickedanz family runs the biggest agricultural operation in Markham on 300 acres they own at Major Mackenzie between Warden and Woodbine Aves. They have 750 head of beef cattle and also breed sport horses for Trakéner. Son Arthur works the farm with help from his sister Charlotte and five employees. And while the farm is really their home base, the family has diversified and is active in construction and development, both here and in the U.S. Because of that, the Schickedanzs have probably the best of both worlds - Arthur's brothers and cousins remain in the development industry and they may end up developing their own land.

"We still run it as a family farm, but our future here is limited," said Arthur, adding the family will eventually pack up and move somewhere else. Maybe north, maybe the U.S. He gives it 10 years, at the outside.

Bob Reesor said he used to lose sleep over it, but he's given up fighting for agriculture in the town.

"In my lifetime, farming in Markham will be gone," except for a few bits and pieces, predicted Reesor, 36, who works at Ontario Hydro and farms with his father on Reesor Rd.

That family farm was sold to the government in 1971, and Reesor maintains his father was told the area would be a greenbelt "forever."

Now, he said, probably the only reason there's still farmland in the eastern end of Markham is the government owned most of it.

Reesor said he fought the Cornell development at Ninth Line and Hwy. 7 and was on an anti-landfill committee - for one meeting - because a dump was going to consume farms and create noise and traffic. But developing

Cornell is just doing the same thing, he argued, adding he'd rather see a dump there; at least it's something useful.

"The 407 is probably going to be the last nail in the coffin," he added.

Political pressure to develop land is very strong, and "It doesn't mean diddly" when politicians serve up platitudes about preserving the land, said Burkholder.

"I'm not dreaming anymore about Markham staying in agriculture for generations to come," he said, wringing and twisting a cob of corn in his hands. "That is not going to happen."

The Roman family has lived in Markham since the mid-'50s. Mining magnate Stephen Roman was a world-renowned Holstein breeder and won numerous prizes at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair. Crops on the land, in the Victoria Square area, were strictly for the sustenance of the 200 or 300 cows they owned. The herd was sold in the early '90s, said his daughter, Helen Roman-Barber.

"My father was a genius at breeding Holsteins and I don't think any of us inherited those genes. Everybody wanted to keep the cows, but we realized it was not the right thing to do."

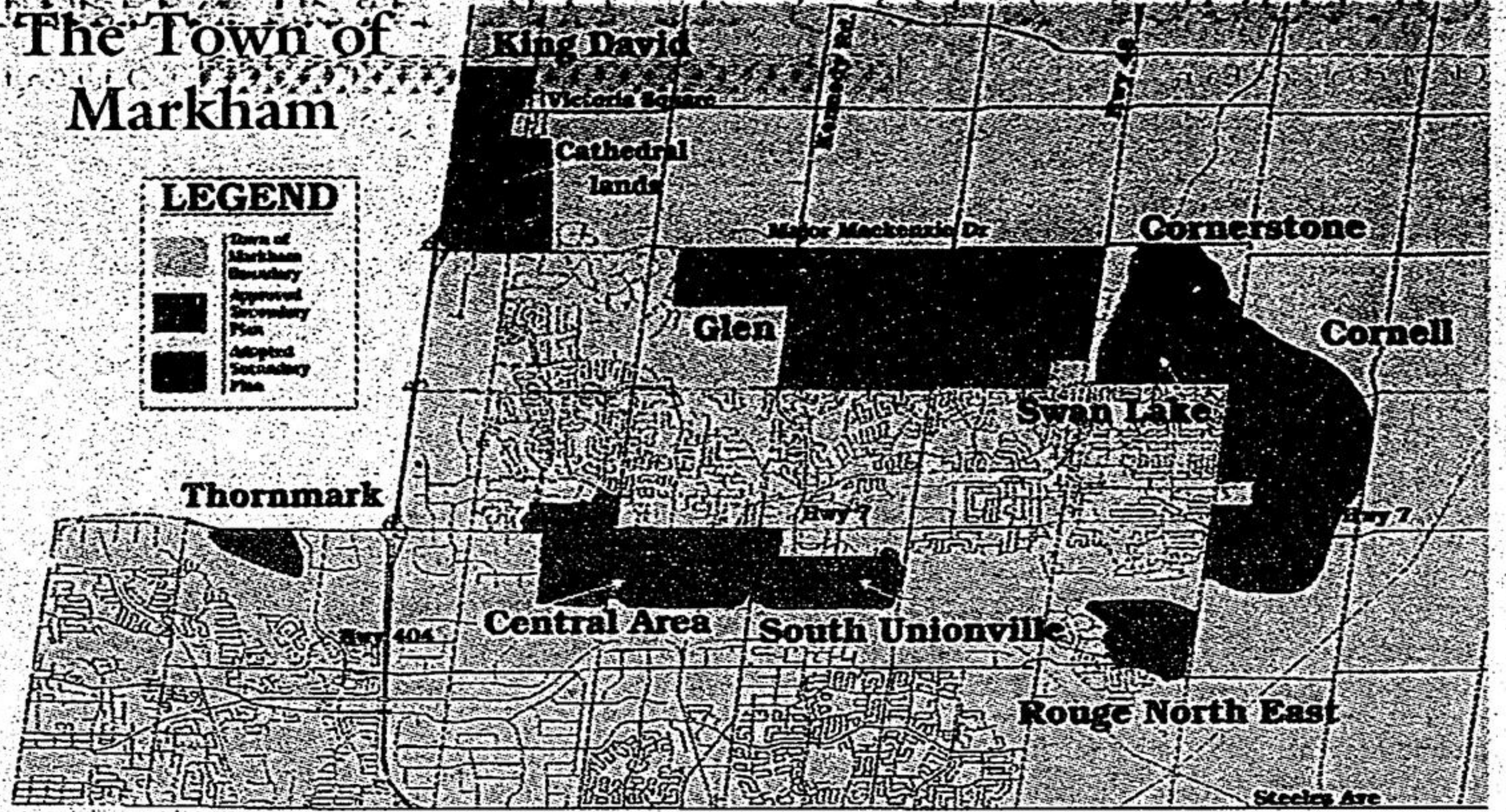
In the next 15 years, the 6,000 acres of prime farmland surrounding Markham will house close to 50,000 people. The benefits are more housing, services and increased commerce. The value of Markham's farmland has increased exponentially.

The effects on agriculture, however, will be devastating, farmers say. But most seem willing to stick it out as long as they can.

"With the value of the land, it's almost ridiculous to be here," said Schickedanz.

"But it's a good life and that's the bottom line."

The Town of Markham



This map shows the areas designated by the Town of Markham for future development. The green areas, all agricultural land, will soon be home to close to 50,000 people. The blue areas have yet to be approved by the region for development.

Families cope with new reality

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themselves. It was a massive amount of work - more than 100 cows, at least half milkers.

"Albert wouldn't have sold," she admits. "But I said to the boys I can't do this anymore, I want to get out of it. The deal closed in July."

"Brian will use the money to buy another farm," she said. "Barry will stay here and I'll stay with Barry. I have lived all my life within a mile of this spot and I don't want to move."

Of course, this is the saving grace for farmers struggling with this very same decision. The choice is made easier by

the fact the land is so valuable. People can retire on it. They can buy another farm. They can start a new life.

Don Miller and his wife Dee work the same 100 acres his family has owned since 1869 on their "home farm," Ashlane Farms, at McCowan, north of Elgin Mills.

Miller milked cows for 45 of his 67 years until seven years ago when he and his daughter came up with an innovative plan. Beverly and son-in-law Randy Lee bought 300 acres in Listowel, in partnership with Miller.

Miller raises young cattle and when they're ready to milk, he brings them

northwest.

"I've been milking since I was a boy. I've been tied down seven days a week and I'm ready to ease up. I didn't want to sell the cows and this is good for all of us," Miller said.

Miller is typical of many Markham farmers, indeed farmers all over this country. He's getting older. His children aren't working the farm and have pursued other careers. But he worries what will happen if he gets sick or takes a fall.

"We hope to stay as long as possible. After that, well, I don't like to think about it," he said. "I wouldn't like to live anywhere but here, but it seems inevitable that eventually this land will have to be sold. That's the sad part."

And he points out that while most farmers would like to stay, they just can't afford it. His daughter paid \$2,000 an acre in Listowel. The going rate in Markham, driven up by development and the insatiable demand for homes, is \$60,000 an acre. It's simply beyond them.

"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."

The Becketts are a well-known name in Markham agriculture and Markham history.

Their family farm, about 200 acres, is one of the most visible in town, on 16th Ave. between Kennedy Rd. and McCowan, and they have been there since 1917. Brothers Lawrence and Ross work the land as their father, Frank, and grandfather, Charlie, did in years gone by.

Although they intend to stay, the Becketts may be forced to make a decision before other farmers, those farther north, do. Homes are going up all around them.

"We have no idea what will happen in the future. We'll have to make that decision when the time comes," Ross said. But for the Becketts, for all of them, that time will likely be sooner rather than later.

~ Kathleen Griffin

Thousands visited Massey-Ferguson farm, but machine test track was off-limits

Only a few were allowed beyond the gate.

Massey-Ferguson kept its Markham test track off limits for more than three decades. Experiments were done there on the coldest nights of winter, strengths and weaknesses of competitors' machines were found, production errors were fixed, and new designs showed promise or the world never saw them.

"If you had no business being there, the barrier didn't go up," said Stew Allan, its manager for 30 years.

Massey-Harris, later Massey-Ferguson, put the track in a corner of its 1,000-acre Milliken farm in the mid-'50s, and it was serious about security. The giant manufacturer came to rely on what the crew was finding out, things other makers of farm machinery wanted to know too.

"In fact, we saw the odd helicopter flying around with cameras," recalled Bill Sutherland, manager of the farm.

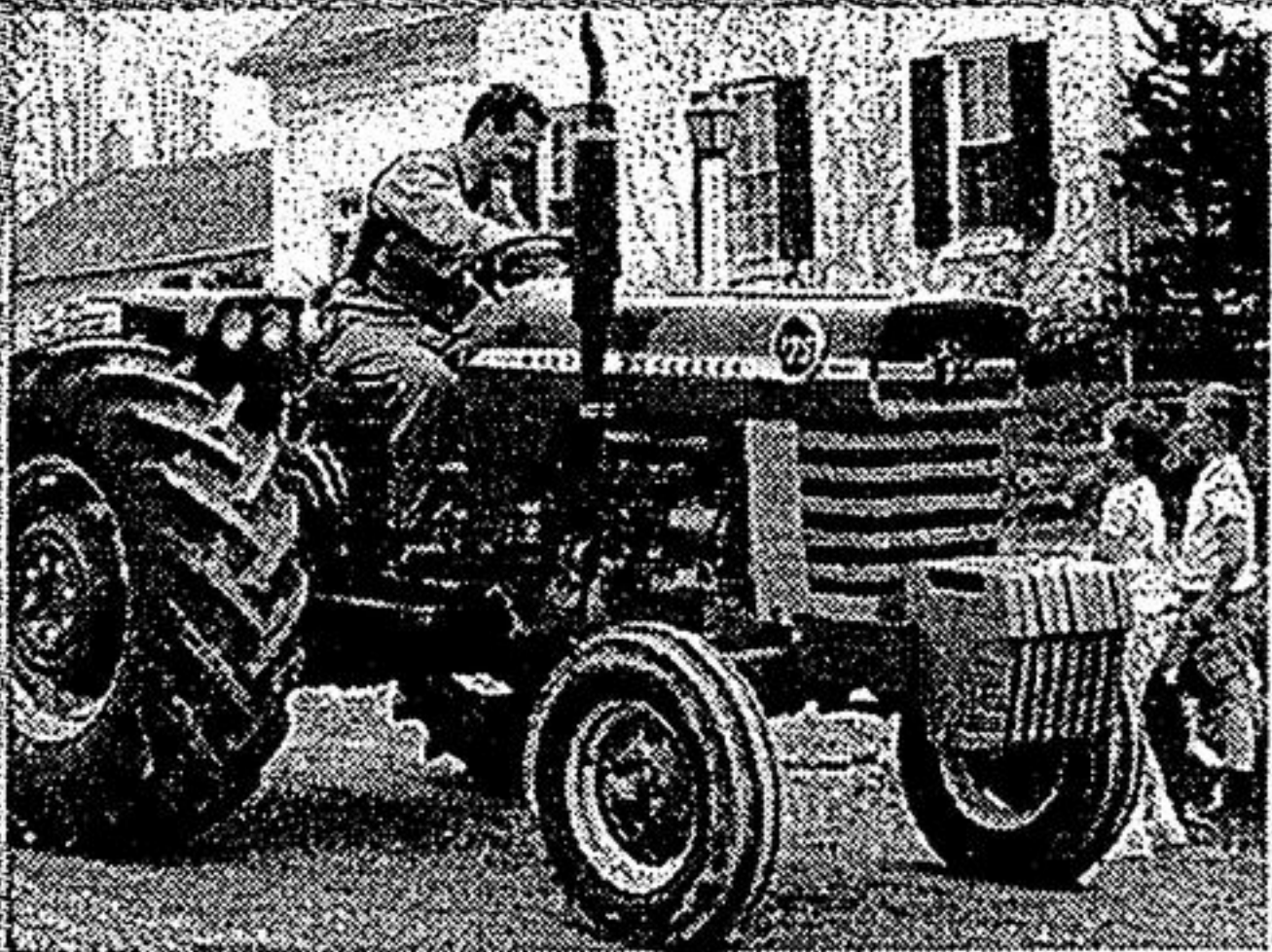
Outside the 14-acre track, the "M-F" farm east of Warden Ave. and north of Steeles was a showcase for bus tours and visiting farmers from anywhere, a training ground for salesmen, a convenient backdrop for promotional photos.

It was not a "show place," the company literature insisted, but "a practical farmer's farm where visitors are always welcome" - 4,000 came during some years, said Sutherland. It used the latest practices to save on time and money. It had prize Holstein and shorthorn cattle. In the '50s, company president James S. Duncan had a home not far from the beef barn.

But past the security gate, on the track, men bounced along as machines drove over granite blocks and steel pipes. Hooked to heavy loads, the tractors and combines slugged up and down a steep incline.

This was done night and day until the test finished - usually 700 hours straight. Often said Allan, the track ran seven days a week, 24

Markham's Farming Heritage



An M-F promotional shot from the 1950s showing the farm manager's house, formerly the home of Hagerman farmer Clark Young.

hours a day, putting equipment through more abuse than it would get on any farm.

"They did call it the torture track, and it was a torture to the human body as well," Carmen Cariglia, a Markham man who joined the operation at age 16, remembered.

Fortunately, drivers were changed every hour or so. "It was pretty rough on the body," said Allan.

Every April, the men who drove on the track went south to harvest crops, starting in Texas or California and working their way north. They saved with an M-F machine.

learning it inside out and reporting daily. They would not come home for three months.

Though the summer trek was only five weeks later on, it was still too long for many.

"The man that was settled," Allan recalled, "was not likely an employee that would stay with us."

Cariglia, who got married, did. "My wife had to cope and she coped very well."

After years of these track and field tests, Markham farmers often got a chance to test models themselves. The M-F farm was sold in the '70s, but the test track, surrounded by new homes, continued running until 1985.

One failed experiment put a hovercraft cushion on a rice harvester, but perhaps the idea was ahead of its time, said Cariglia. "We often tried things and then dropped them."

Once, the crew had to anchor a rice harvester in a hole during a bitterly cold winter and run it for months to see how fast the (specially heated) mud would seep into the machinery.

Over three decades, "I'd say they were lucky no one was seriously hurt," Allan said.

~ Mike Adler
Photos courtesy of
Bill Sutherland



An aerial view of the Massey-Ferguson farm showing the test track area.

Acknowledgements

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