

Farm stories: birthday suits, tipped outhouses

What was once was a revered family farm is no more. In the name of progress, our property, on the Ninth Line of Markham just north of Markham/Stouffville Hospital, has been transformed from foodland to wasteland, from preservation to ruination; from conservation to devastation.

It's a war zone, with rural forces fast losing ground to urban dominance. As this metamorphosis continues, all that remains are the memories, recollections to last as long as life itself. Come, take a trip down memory lane and consider these gems from a distant past.

My father was an excellent farmer. Whatever he did, he did right — no half-measures. However, when it came to building loads of corn, he always stocked the sheaves far beyond the edge of the wagon rack. On one occasion, while filling a silo at a neighbour's place, he completed a load that was exceptionally wide. As he turned the horse team toward the barn, several cornstalk ends struck the family outhouse, turning it upside down. That was bad enough. Much worse was the fact the neighbour's wife was trapped inside. She was released, without injury, but her pride was badly hurt. As for the silo-filler, echoes of laughter can doubtless still be heard.

On our farm, it was common practice to barn thresh in late fall or early winter. On one occasion, an urban dweller was coerced into stacking the straw, an obnoxious job at best. While forking sheaves into the thresher, we uncovered a nest of rotten hens eggs. Instead of tossing them aside, we forked them into the machine with repugnant results. The stacker bolted from the barn and hasn't been seen or heard from since.



Roaming Around

with Jim Thomas

Back in the 1930s and 1940s, neighbourhood telephone party lines were forms of communication in more ways than one. In the rural area where I grew up, often a dozen families shared the same service. Long and short rings differentiated the homes. On our line, there was an elderly gentleman who listened in on almost every call. And everyone knew it. It was his way of keeping abreast of local news. My grandfather, then in his 80s, disliked this practice. One day, he answered a call, only to hear heavy breathing at the other end. "Get off the line," my grandfather shouted. "I know you're listening."

"I am not," the eavesdropper replied.

GOOD, BAD HABITS

My grandfather had two habits, one bad and one good. The bad was he always smoked a pipe. He would purchase burly leaf tobacco through the mail and cut it into tiny chunks. It was potent stuff. It smelled to high heaven.

His good habit was, he seldom missed church on a Sunday morning. Regardless of weather and road conditions, Pop could be found in his regular seat. This particular Sabbath, it was my duty to drive gramps the three miles in a single-horse cutter. As was his practice, he pulled out his pipe and lit it up. The red-hot ashes set the buffalo robe ablaze. I stopped the horse, doused Pop and the robe with snow, then continued on our way like nothing had ever happened. Despite the delay, we arrived at church on time and Pop settled into his familiar pew.

My younger brother and I attended a one-room school, two miles up the road from our farm. Here, the most exciting event to occur was the annual Christmas concert. Everyone came, even adults with no children. While the program was amateur in content, we felt like pros, doing our songs, drills and skits with great gusto.

At one, the teacher discovered, to her horror, that the pedal strap on the old organ had suddenly snapped, creating an emergency of indescribable intensity. What was she to do? Her solution — recruit one of her students, my brother, to pump the strapless pedal by hand through to the concert's conclusion. It worked! No one in the crowded classroom knew the difference. But my brother did.

Every Saturday, it was common practice for young people to wash off the weekday dirt at the old swimmin' hole. The girls would go in the afternoon and the boys at night. This one day, my brother and I purposely attended early and set ourselves up at a convenient vantage point behind nearby bushes. The young ladies arrived, changed, had their swim and left. We saw them. We didn't think they saw us. That evening, the guys arrived but so again did the girls. In the stillness of the evening, they crept up to the site, snatched our clothes and ran. Since most of the males were skinny-dipping, we formed a strange-looking group slinking home, clad only in our birthday suits.

Jim Thomas is a Stouffville resident who has written for area newspapers for more than 50 years.

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