

**The ghost of farming future**

Wendy Holm is an award-winning Agrolgist, economist and journalist from British Columbia. She can be reached at holm@farmertofarmer.ca, www.theholmteam.ca



After the apparitions appeared before him — the past, the present, the future — Ebenezer Scrooge was a changed man. Why? Because he could no longer deny what his life had become, and how it would all play out. With this new insight, he changed from a curmudgeonly skinflint with no need or respect for community to a loving and jovial man who counted his blessings and shared them generously with others.

To bad it's not that easy. If it were, farmers could dispatch Apparitions-R-Us to Ottawa for appearances before every single Member of Parliament to show them that, like Scrooge, the future of farmers in Canada is beyond grim unless dramatic changes occur.

If the apparitions could be summoned, what might they show us?

**The Ghost of Farming Past**

Farming got its start in Ontario in the late 1700s, when the Yanks declared independence from mother England and Britain lost its principal agricultural base in British North America. In response, Britain channeled settlers into the lower Great Lakes Region to defend the Canadian border and grow hemp for British manufacturing.

As settlements grew, wheat became the principal crop until the late 1850s, when depressed wheat prices, the wheat midge and favourable trading conditions spurred diversification into livestock, wool, butter and coarse grains.

Cheese factories sprung up, and by 1900 Canadian cheddar cheese had 60 per cent of the English market. The invention of the cream separator in 1900 promoted butter production,

and refrigeration boosted Ontario's beef and pork industry.

Market gardens grew up around the cities, and fruit, tobacco, dairy and crop farms established themselves in the rural countryside. A flourishing feed and fodder sector supplied livestock farmers struggling to keep up with domestic demand.

Farmers Institutes and Women's Institutes abounded, as did associations of stockbreeders, dairy producers, grain farmers, market gardeners and fruit growers.

In 1919, the United Farmers of Ontario formed the Provincial Government and Simcoe County's Ernest Charles Drury became the province's eighth premier. Dubbed the Farmer Premier, Drury was an agrarian idealist who began his career in the farm movement as leader of the Dominion Grange and Farmers' Alliance. He went on to act as the driving force behind the Canadian Council of Agriculture, and co-founded the UFO in 1913.

But optimism didn't protect farmers from the Great Depression, and in 1931 farm receipts had dropped by 50 per cent from 1926 levels. Government came to the rescue with regulations, marketing boards and financial support. Thanks to good policy, Ontario agriculture was diversified and vibrant by the start of WWII.

During the '50s, '60s and '70s, Canadian farmers remained respected members of Canadian society, and family farms were recognized as strong economic contributors to rural communities. That translated into respect from politicians, which in turn led to policy respect for the farm sector.

Domestic farm policies were crafted to meet the needs of Canada's farmers and rural communities without trade interference. Solid safety nets existed to protect farmers from income losses due to pests, disease, weather and markets. Agricultural marketing boards and farmer-owned co-operatives played important roles.

**Ghost of Farming Present**

Beginning in the mid-1980s,

Canadian policy sovereignty started to unravel. Trade Agreements and threats of harassment from trading partners trumped farm policy. With the scrapping of Canada's Foreign Investment Review Agency and the pulling of teeth from Canada's Competition Act, concentrated agribusiness interests began making their moves on farm profits, lubricated by the NAFTA.

Today, two multinational firms control Canada's dairy processing sector and the story is the same in our meatpacking and hog sector. In the prairies, farmer-controlled wheat pools have disappeared and the Canadian Wheat Board is under attack by the federal government.

Farm profits are at record lows and farm losses are at record highs, yet since the 1990s, Canada has cut its support to agriculture faster and harder than any other OECD nation in the world with the exception of — for some indicators — Australia and New Zealand.

Farm numbers, which began a long slow decline post-WWII in response to rising productivity and urban migration, began to tumble sharply downward in 1999. In the three-year period 1998 to 2001, full time farm employment dropped by a whopping 26 per cent — the largest decline in 35 years. By 2006, this figure contracted by a further seven per cent.

From 2003 until very recently, Canada's ranchers have suffered devastating trade harassment by the Americans over BSE, yet their NAFTA rights to an open border were never defended by Ottawa.

Prices for farmland near urban centers has skyrocketed. The rural-urban interface is expanding, and houses are considered the last crop for many farmers. New regulations to meet the demands of neighbours who like greenspace but not greensmells make farm costs mount. Pockets of non-farm use spring up and begin to spread like moth holes in a sweater. Infrastructure leaves. Sons and daughters who should be taking over the family farm are making different choices, encouraged

by parents who see the writing on the wall.

**Ghost of Farming Future**

Without dramatic changes, the future is grim. As Canada's farmers grow older and fewer in number and Canada's once strong farm organizations disappear (the victim of bickering, commodity politics and declining support), the price of imported food shoots through the roof. Government's Agricultural Transition Framework Strategy to retrain surplus bureaucrats as farmers ends in dismal failure. The goal of food sovereignty and sustainability is accepted as beyond the reach of most communities.

**Wake up Canada**

Absent apparitions, changing this grim future it will be up to farmers themselves. Think of this column as a present — one you don't even have to shop for — that you can send to your favourite politician at the federal, provincial or local level. Heck, splurge, make a few copies, and include them ALL on your gift list! Food for thought from the farmers of Canada.0

