

# Not with a bang but with a wimper.

(in a motion *sans* emotion, BCFA is dissolved...)

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As I pulled my car off the highway and threaded my way down the side-streets, I glanced at my watch. Two minutes to ten. The sky was overcast and just a little chilly for June — perfect weather for a wake. The sprinkling of pick-ups parked in the lot ahead told me this wasn't exactly going to be a standing-room-only affair. Sad...

For two reasons, I knew I wasn't there as a journalist. The first was the grumbling of my Editor in response to my call saying I'd be attending; he'd been unable to secure a media invite for Country Life despite repeated requests. The second became quickly evident: "This seemed like such an historic occasion, I couldn't stay away" I explained to staff at the door in my best CBC grammar. "OK, so long as you're not here as press" was the clipped reply.

And, of course, I wasn't. I was there out of respect. Not for what the deceased had finally, in the end, become. But for what it once was in its youth — a strong, independent and proactive voice for British Columbia's farmers.

When it first opened its doors some 60 years ago, the B.C. Federation of Agriculture was the farmer's friend. Important farm issues and perspectives that had to be explained to the politicians? No problem, ask the Federation to handle it. Not enough cooperation forthcoming from Ottawa? Hey, B.C.F.A. will explain the problem to their national counterpart (Canadian Federation of Agriculture) and see whether something can be done. Need one strong voice to speak for producers? Can't get much stronger than the Fed.

What happened? Well, one could go on for a quite a while on that one. In the end, it simply lost the will to live. At exactly 11:40 a.m. on a Tuesday morning the 17th of June, nineteen hundred and ninety seven, in the small, half-conference room of an Abbotsford hotel surrounded by 20 or so of its members and perhaps again as many friends, the B.C. Federation of Agriculture, duly and by motion of its members, quietly ceased to exist. No fanfare. No public eulogy. Not with a bang but with a whimper. In lieu of flowers, member organizations are requested instead to send checks to the new central farm organization.

End of story. Or is it?

It's all very well and good to contemplate a new farm organization once again representing all of B.C. agriculture. But many farmers I have spoken with wonder if "the same old same old" still isn't running the show. Unless we have farm leaders who can coalesce the sentiments of the various commodity groups and draw commonalty where there once was division; unless we have farm leaders who can direct politicians in the sustainable interest of farming; unless we have farm leaders who can explain clearly and effectively to the public the importance of a healthy agriculture sector to sustainable communities and do it in such a way that the media sits up and pays attention; unless we have respected and articulate farm leaders to chivvy us forward into the next century, we simply cannot get there from here.

In his 1976 National Film Board video POTATOES, Producer Robert Land documents the rapid expansion by McCain's and others into large-scale contract potato production in the Maritimes. He closes with the following admonition:

*If farm families continue to be neglected by governments and city people, the price will be paid not only by the farmer but by all of society. The future is being decided now by choices being made in the cities and changes taking place in the countryside...:*

That was pretty straight-talking stuff back then. So too is the editorial "Corporate farms take over U.S." appearing in the June 5, 1997 issue of Western Producer by a North Dakota farmer:

*"In the March 6 issue... U.S. agriculture Secretary Glickman is quoted as saying the outlook for American agriculture is very bullish and he sees a rosy future for it. Here in America, we farmers have heard that song before. Don't you believe it. Don't you believe even one word of it. ...academic, political and economic powers in America keep farm prices just low enough to force thousands of independent farmers off their farms each year. Their misguided conception is that large corporate farms are in the best interest of America and independent family farmers must go. ...American independent farmers live a life of quiet, helpless resignation economically, watching their neighbours go one by one, and waiting for their turn to come. Too many American citizens have no idea of what is involved in the production of their food... Their attitude seems to be 'Who needs farmers anyway, I'll just buy my food from the local food chain store.'"*

Is the problem that we don't believe in straight talk anymore or simply that we don't feel it does any good? Something so Canadian about a whimper being more seemly than a bang? Where oh where is the dynamite when you need it?