

The Fifth Estate The proud history of Country Life in B.C....

December 1997 Column, Country Life in B.C.

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A haze rises from the field. Almost feels more like fall as earth — warmed by sudden mildness — pays back the compliment to the lengthening rays of a 3 o'clock sun. Strips of sky, like long, shiny ribbons, reflect in the water standing in furrows too long removed from the feel of a wheel.

Your fingers flex and relax against the familiar feel of your thermos cup, it's warmth welcome against your skin. Farm looks tidy this time of year. Fall clean-up finally done despite the rain. As long as you don't count that crop left in the field. Or the green manure that won't be there next spring cause you couldn't get in to seed. Soon, a skiff of January snow will cloak the field in white, hiding last year's losses from all but your banker's view. Seems no-one much cares about farming anymore...

You remember back to when you bought the farm from your dad. Third generation farming. Certain you'd make it and eager to try. Change a few things, modernize a bit, maybe put in some new crops. Do it your way. Get 'er done. The steam from your coffee blends against the haze rising from the field as you settle back against the shed — knowing you could still get to a few things in the garage before dinner, knowing you'd rather lie here twenty years younger and with a head still full of dreams.

You close your eyes for just a moment...

You are standing in a street full of mud. Wood frame houses with porches and wide front steps line one side. On the other side, fields. A team of horses approaches, straining against the traces of a crazily-tilting wagon made up of what looks like hundreds upon hundreds of clanking pots and pans.

A woman appears at the door of one of the houses and impatiently summons you in. A short, robust woman, full of fire and intent. "Gonna start a paper for farmers" she shouts, "wanna help?"

The year is 1915. The place is east Vancouver. The woman is Ma Murray. The paper is Country Life. "Come with me," she says, "we haven't got much time."

Do you have a choice? Following her down a centre hallway that leads to a kitchen, you see the rough layout of a tabloid and masses of handwritten articles spread across the table. Stuffing a bundle of the papers in your arms, she grabs some herself and hustles you out the back door and down an alley. Turning a corner, you suddenly find yourself standing in a wooden shed surrounded by clanking presses, the smell of printers ink mingling with the sawdust from the floor. You attend at the birth of Country Life in B.C.

You watch as farmers across the province soon turn to Country Life to provide balanced and informed coverage of farm news. Keep them in touch with their neighbour's concerns. And provide a strong and effective editorial voice for B.C.'s farmers.

The war begins. The First War. Men and women go off to fight and Ma Murray's attention turns to other things. Country Life is sold to the Okanagan fruit growers, who proceed to lay the foundations of a cooperative marketing structure, important aspects of which remain in place to this day.

Like youth that believes itself invincible, the splashy 20's can't begin to anticipate the dirty thirties. Advertisers with pockets — never mind deep ones — disappear. Charlie Hayden

edits the paper for the fruit growers until the money runs out and it's printer, Vernon Press, takes it over in lieu of debts. In the early '50's, Tim Armstrong, former editor of the Summerland Weekly, buys Country Life and runs it until 1976, when its current editor, Malcolm Young takes over the helm. To a man, editors committed to seeing farmers get a better deal.

For much of this time, Country Life is delivered to farm kitchens across the province as part of each farmers' membership in the B.C. Federation of Agriculture.

Then, in the early 1990's — labouring under the mistaken impression that there was money to be made in the publishing business — B.C. Federation of Agriculture goes into direct competition with Country Life. Subscriptions to Country Life are canceled and B.C. Agriculture, a short-lived, glossy magazine, is born.

Despite a precipitous drop in subscription revenues, Country Life soldiers on. When B.C. Agriculture folds in under two years and advertisers no longer have to split their dollar between two papers, things recover somewhat but money remains tight. It becomes, for many of the writers, an affair of the heart.

Country Life from 1915 to 1997. Eighty two years. Five owners. The sturdy little newspaper that B.C.'s farmers have grown to depend on for solid and insightful coverage of every major farm event and news story that's happening. And a few that haven't yet.

Ma Murray's firm hand on your shoulder swings you around. She looks you intently the eye, taking your measure. "Listen to me. British Columbians *want* to help farmers. That's for damn sure! In that poll last Spring, they agreed the best way to keep food affordable was make sure BC has a thriving agriculture industry and never becomes too dependent on other countries for food. They just don't know how to do it. They're city folk. You gotta tell them! Here. Here's the list." With that, she presses a small, folded piece of paper into your hand.

"You know what you have to do?" Ma asks, holding your eyes in hers like a long lost embrace. "Uh, yeah... Yes, ma'am" you hear yourself answer.

"Then get going. We have a farm paper to run here, ya know..." A smile. A quick, firm handshake. And she's gone.

The sound of the neighbour's tractor starting up with a roar awakens you. You stretch and quickly get up. No sense hearing about an afternoon snooze for the next week.

You head off to the garage, reaching in your pocket for the truck keys. You pull out a piece of what looks like butcher's wrap. Unfolding it, you read the words neatly penciled across the top: "GET THE MESSAGE OUT". Underneath are three headings, each with its own list of items:

GET THE MESSAGE OUT

THINGS FOR FARMERS TO DO:

1. Invest in your future. Give a subscription to Country Life in B.C. to your favourite doctor and dentist to put in his/her waiting room. (Tax deductible, and they will be read for years...) Also consider giving a subscription to your local high school.
2. Tell your suppliers that you noticed their ad in Country Life. And that the farm community appreciates their support. If their ad isn't there, ask them why not.
3. Renew your subscription.
4. Ask your neighbour if he/she saw the article on "x", and if not, why not? If they reply they don't subscribe to Country Life, express amazement...

THINGS FOR FARM SUPPLIERS TO DO

1. Support Country Life in B.C. with your advertising.
2. Send a short note to editor Malcolm Young letting him know of issues you feel farmers should know about, think about and/or support.

THINGS FOR CONSUMERS TO DO

1. Buy B.C. It's more than just a slogan.
2. If you want to really feel connected with your food, subscribe to Country Life. For \$24 a year, an amazing bargain. Leave fresh issues on your coffee table when friends come over and express surprise when they say they haven't seen it before.
3. If your coffee table's already overflowing with material you don't really have time to read now, donate a subscription instead to B.C.'s active 4-H Clubs (Country Life will find a deserving kid) so that some young farmer will be better equipped tomorrow to understand and support the diversity and strengths of farming in this province.