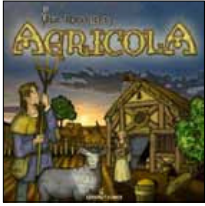


News

Against the cultural grain?

Two family farm profiles



A new German-based board game called *Agricola* has the following tagline: “The 17th century: not an easy period for a farmer!” Despite

that disclaimer, strategy fans have jumped at the chance to imitate antiquated agricultural: develop a well-balanced farm and you’ll win the complex game. Successful or not, of course, players can pack away all the pieces representing sheep, wild boar, and grain once the final round is done.

For Canadian farmers in the 21st century, however, the game goes on. Would today’s farmers agree that it’s “not an easy period for a farmer,” or have things gotten better? Is the farm still a great part of God’s green earth to raise kids or is that an old-fashioned idea? *CC* interviewed families on two contemporary farms to find out what it’s like today, and where Canadian farmers might be going from here. —*Angela Reitsma Bick*



Jack and Paula with sons Steve, Dave and Robert in front of a logging truck.

I: The Dielemans

Curt Gesch

The idea of a family farm, complete with stay-at-home-mom; children mucking about with chickens, calves, ducks; a rope-swing over the old pond; and a busy dad finding time to instruct the respectful children at evening devotional time . . . Well, except in a few rare cases, that picture does not match reality.

In central British Columbia, there are very few family farms that don’t rely on off-farm income. Dairy and poultry farmers pay astronomical quota fees and in return get a fair return, but for most of the rest of us, it’s “get a job to subsidize the farm.” As Jack Dieleman says, “The farm is a great place to raise the kids, but we paid more for fuel in the past year than we’ve get income from the farm.”

The Dielemans of Round Lake, B.C., are perhaps typical of a new type of family farm. Jack is the truck driver, Paula is the farmer. Jack does the

field work in the summer. Paula does the farming the rest of the year. They have six children, all boys.

Paula’s main crops are simple: hay, silage, cows. They have scaled down on beef – from 60 to 30 cattle – but also raise hogs, chickens and turkeys, mostly for their own use. They also own two to five horses in any given year. Mechanically, they own a herd of snowmobiles, quads, and motorbikes, besides tractors, rakes, swathers and balers.

Raising future leaders

Jack and Paula built a shop first and lived in it for three years. The two youngest children were born while they lived in the shop. This presented quite a challenge, according to Paula. “The shop only had a parts room upstairs that all the boys used as their bedroom and there was an office and a bathroom; the rest of the building was all open. It was a little difficult when Jack worked nights and he had to sleep when all the kids were awake, but we lived through it all. Once we moved into our house it was like having the best hotel in the country.”

Jack, who is also an accomplished carpenter, finished a home for the family that serves the whole flock quite well.

Three sons – Robert, David, and Steve – still live at home. Jonathan, the oldest, still helps out by feeding every Saturday. He owns a small 40-acre farm that he is developing. Michael is at the University of Ottawa studying law, preparing to become Prime Minister. Chris is cowboying on a feedlot in

southern Alberta.

The Dieleman family is active in supporting a local community, Round Lake, where Jack helped superintend the reconstruction of the community hall. Paula is an active supporter of the local school and 4-H club. The Dieleman boys have all been effective public speakers, readers, and leaders in 4-H competitions, their local church, and schools. Jack and Paula have both served as deacons at Telkwa Christian Reformed Church.



Paula, Jack and a steer named Elmo.

Community pillars

Small family farms remind me of some recent research about rural or small-town congregations. They may not increase dramatically in growth, may not measure up to *mega-* status, but frequently they are a strong witness to the continued existence of universally-sought values, and a supply of future leaders, shakers, and neighbours if they leave the field and move on to concrete pastures. Although the family beef farm may be struggling when it comes to income, the example of the Dieleman family demonstrates that a rural family is still, in many ways, the backbone of a local community.



Carla, Peter and Ruth VanderZaag

II: The VanderZaags

Angela Reitsma Bick

“We thought about finding the best place to raise our children,” Peter VanderZaag says. “University setting, staying overseas, or coming back to try our hand at farming.” After living abroad for twenty years, Peter and his wife Carla returned to Canada in 1991. They settled in Alliston, Ontario where Peter grew up working on the family farm alongside his father, Anne, and Uncle Harry. And where did the farm’s name come from?

“We had worked in China where the rising sun is a sign of hope, so we named our farm SunRISE to avoid confusion with the existing VanderZaag farms and to create an acronym as a reminder of our hope in farming – Sustainable Research Involving Systems Education.”

Today Peter and Carla own and operate a large-scale farm that grows, stores in state-of-the-art facilities, and markets over 400 hectares of potatoes annually. Many of the potatoes are sold for chips, and organic potatoes and Yukon Gold can be purchased fresh at the door. The VanderZaags are also involved in research to improve potato production and have developed three new varieties.

Rich and varied harvest

The VanderZaags have six children “and each learned so much working here,” Peter says. “The skills and work ethic learned on the farm has been a valuable background for the diverse areas of study and work each has followed, from environmental science to politics, a vet clinic or peace and conflict studies.” Their daughter, Ruth, has chosen farming as her career after being actively involved nearly her whole life.

Carla remembers grown men watching

in admiration as “this cute young girl operated some piece of equipment with ease.” Once, Peter recalls, a neighbouring farmer saw her driving a large tractor with a disk.

“How old is your daughter – 17 or 18?” he asked.

“Nope,” Peter replied. “She’s 13.”

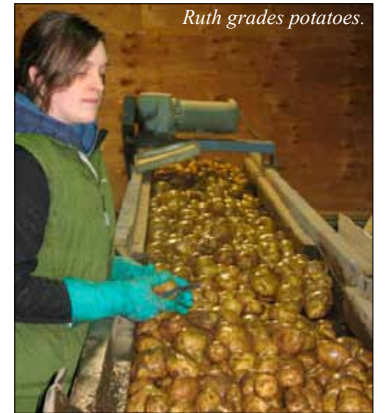
Ruth is now living her life-long dream of being a farmer. She recently purchased land and has contracted to grow her own potatoes.

According to the VanderZaags, nothing equals the “fulfillment of working with the land, growing crops, and seeing the whole process through.” Peter believes that as the world’s population increases and resources dwindle, farmers will play an increasingly vital role.

He is encouraged by the witness that an organization such as the Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario has provided. And he’s tried to encourage interest from the next generation in farming by sharing his equipment, vision and land.

“It’s a tough business, but it’s like any business,” Peter concludes. “You have to work hard and be innovative.” And, if the success of Sunrise Potato is any indication, his advice is worth noting. With a sharp business plan and a willingness to adapt, the VanderZaag family has thrived in Alliston.

Raising a family on a farm in Canada doesn’t go against the cultural grain; instead, farm kids learn values that make them integral to the culture they grow into. And that’s something that hasn’t changed. ➤



Ruth grades potatoes.

Tips we’ve learned along the way...

- There are normal stages of growth and development in the business life cycle (*Managing the Multi-generational Family Farm*, see www.farmcentre.com).
- Input and support from outside experts is important for making wise decisions.
- A professional mediator enables each family member to express their opinion during difficult discussions.
- Listen. Listen. Listen.
- Be gentle with one another.

The VanderZaags