

Image Credit: Diann Turner



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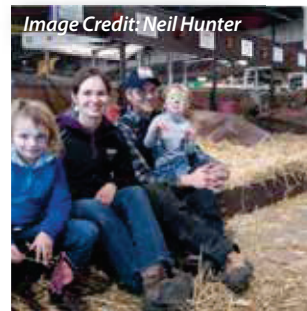


Image Credit: Neil Hunter

Left: Ross Turner Splits Firewood

Above: The Hunter Family

Left: Sunset on the Hunter Farm

FARMERS

Altruistic in the Face of Adversity

By Diann Turner

This is the story of three Front of Yonge farms: Junedale Farm, Hometown Jerseys and Leann Holsteins.

I often wonder what sort of thoughts go through people's minds while driving through bucolic Ontario farming communities. No doubt the rustic, rolling, agricultural land, with its picturesque idyllic outdoor scenes, like the dust rolling behind a tractor and disk in springtime, might suggest prosperous, unhurried life-styles. Murray McLauchlan wrote "Farmer's Song" in 1972 and its lyrics – "Straw hats and old dirty hankies, moppin' a face like a shoe," invoked images of blood, sweat, tears and poverty. In chatting with people, I find that a true understanding of farming today is so rare, people's perceptions become rumped in my mind. Over the decades, the media has created mental depictions of everything from farmers in threadbare clothing, tumbledown farm houses, and sagging verandahs to debonair gents in denim, sporting brand new pickup trucks or \$300,000.00 combines.

It was my privilege to interview Three very successful Front of Yonge Township farmers. As a farm wife of 38 years, I'm pleased to report that farming is smarter than ever, and increasingly much more complex. Ross Turner, 67, of Junedale Farm in Mallorytown, said the Turner farm was purchased by his Grandad in 1913 and has been a working farm ever since. Neil Hunter, 43, and his

wife Melanie, 39, purchased the old Arden Warren farm on Junetown Road in 2016. Neil and Melanie Hunter grew up on farms and discovered an interest in cattle early through 4-H. Melanie's father had a hobby farm but worked full time off the farm. Neil's Dad had beef cattle, but his mechanic's job made the money. Their paths crossed through 4-H and the Jersey Youth Seminar. Melanie earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Queen's and an Honours Degree in Ag/Science from Guelph. Neil earned an Ag/Business Degree from Guelph. They married in 2005 and set up a new farm; the bank manager told them to get a house and job in town. They started out in Napanee with an older herd of cows, added technology, and grew. In 2003, Mad Cow Disease led to setbacks, but by 2016 they had maxed out their facility in Napanee and sought to purchase a suitable farm with an adequate quota. In June 2016, they began operations in Junetown, where they own 430 acres of land, and milk 140 Jersey/Holstein cows. Hometown Jerseys also sells semen and trades/buys/sells cows. Melanie does the milking in the main barn, and Serena (a hired hand) takes care of the second barn. Melanie intimated that she enjoys most days; likes the independence of self-employment, appreciates her two children don't have to go to day care, and loves animal husbandry.

John Asbreuk bought his farm in the mid-1950's and together with his sons, built it into an impressive dairy. Casey Roth, 48, on Cronkwoods Road, together with

his brothers, Leonard and Billy, operate a thriving dairy farm Leann Holsteins that their Dad purchased in the 1950's and developed as a dairy in the 1960's. At that time in Ontario, every country road was dotted with small dairy farms, where families eked out a living milking a few cows and scratching the dirt. As Casey said: "Our tummies were full, we had clean clothes, and Dad quit his Dupont job to farm full time." There were 21 dairy farms along, or near, the river at that time in Front of Yonge.

All Three operators admitted that finding dependable people to work on the farm is by far the biggest challenge. "Where on earth can you find people, who want to work?" Other adversities include break downs with equipment, veterinarian costs, weather and the need to stay motivated, and driven. All these farmers are healthy and in excellent physical condition.

The average age of Canadian farmers is 55 and there are more farmers over 70, than under 35.

Statistics Canada also found that 92% of farms have no written plan for who will take over when the operator retires. The last Statistics Canada Census on farming took place in 2011 and operations are in decline since. The government dissuades small farms.

Ross farms 600 acres he partially inherited from his Uncle in 1970. He rents 150 acres of additional tillable land and plants a total of

300 acres in hay, corn, barley and soya beans. He operated as a small dairy farm until 1990, then sold his cattle and quota for two reasons: Government assistance dwindled, and help was scarce. Ross has no succession plan. He sells firewood, maple syrup, owns a sawmill and cuts logs and lumber for people, and custom combines. His only hired help occurs during spring planting. "I farm because I love it" says Ross. "I love the outdoors."

All three farms are discouraged by commodity prices and the lack of government support. Melanie stated that even Canada's Food Guide (revised in 2018) focuses on plant-based diets. Casey stated, "I could make a lot more money working out, but I do this because I love it."

The economics of farming and the lack of lucrative incentives are enough to deter any young Canadian from choosing to farm. Low interest rates have helped; if that changes, disaster looms. Farmers are granted a few tax breaks, HST is returned to them and they claim expenses other folks can't, but farm assistance programs (NISA, CAIS, MRI) mean tedious applications. Picture no extended health coverage, mortgages and loans for continuous debt load, and obsolete subsidies. Costs have accelerated with inflation. Ross purchased a new Ford tractor with a cab in 1975 for \$12,000; today, equivalent cost is \$75,000. The price of seed, fertilizer and fuel costs have risen exponentially; in the 1970's a bag of seed corn was \$18.00, today it's \$250; the technology costs \$50. To stay afloat, farmers must get bigger, plant more acres, borrow more money, work harder, and press on despite the odds. Risk factors increase as more is invested and borrowed to net proportionate income. Ross says he got the same price per ton for corn in 1980, as he does now, with gigantic increased input.

So why do they keep going? "Because it is a calling," says Ross. Farmers are an example of the indomitable resilient human spirit, more than any other cultural career. Melanie says, "you get up in the morning, decide you're going to do it, and then do it!"

The next time you slurp down ice cream on a sultry day, or scarf down that juicy burger, remember farmers and the effort they expend so that you and I can continue to eat the way we do. Seven percent of the world eats this way. For farmers, life often grinds forward on its winding track through seasons of mundane labors and around corners of forgotten obscurity. Altruistically, they work so that we can eat; we eat to sustain life. What could be more incredibly important? **LH**



Image Credit: Neil Hunter

The Hunter Family



Image Credit: Diann Turner

Leeann Farm, Cronkwoods Road



Image Credit: Frank Robinson

Purebred Jersey Cow