

## Where Have the Young Farmers Gone?

by Ralph C. Martin

There have been many corn harvests since I straightened my 19 year old shoulders and told my father “I’m tired of farming and will never shovel piles of brown stuff again.” I set out with my farm boy skill set and imbibed attitude that there must be some way to get each job done. Farm kids have wonderful training for the world beyond the farm gate too. Eventually, my path lead me to a PhD and professorial pronouncements, at which stage my father quietly suggested that I was back to shoveling.

The Statistics Canada 2011 Census of Agriculture shows that farm youth are still leaving their farms. About 20 years ago, almost 20% of farmers were under 35 and by 2006, less than 10% of famers qualified for this distinction. In 2011, only 8.2% of farmers were in this energetic age category of enhanced mental acuity and physical stamina.

Let’s be clear that we’re not only talking about fewer farmers as farms increase in size. The point to emphasize is that as the overall population of farmers declines, young farmers are disappearing even faster.

We know that rural communities are also struggling to attract young doctors and other health professionals. Globally, more people live in cities than in rural areas. Young farmers are part of this trend. Nevertheless, local organizations, such as FarmStart and Everdale, are incubating new farmers.

In 1998, Alex Sim, a respected sociologist and Guelph resident, published his book, *Land and Community, Crisis in Canada's Countryside*. He noted that as farm size increased, fewer people worked on farms, rural churches and villages tended to shrink and the folks left in rural areas felt isolated. The youth who want to farm, may have trouble convincing a partner to join the venture.

A recent BMO survey on the migration of young people from rural to urban areas indicates that 62% of respondents saw "a negative impact on the family farm" as young farm operators leave farms and 61% believe the migration impacts the ability of farmers to transfer knowledge to the next generation.

The gospel according to Martin is to “keep your soil covered.” Researchers in

Maritime Canada found that cover crops and other erosion control practices tended to increase with farmers mostly on the farm and when the farms were organized as family units. It's interesting that soil tends to stay on farms, when farm families stay there too.

Wendall Berry, a well known farmer, academic and poet from Kentucky advises us to increase the ratio of eyes to acres, on our farms. He recognizes the efficiencies of more bushels of grain or litres of milk per hour of labour or per dollar invested. However, he also worries about the lack of attention to gradual shifts toward less soil organic matter, less biodiversity, fewer perennials and decreasing water quality and quantity. His old fashioned argument is that we need enough well trained eyes to keep track of what is happening and to change course as required.

Farmers are under pressure to produce plenty of cheap, convenient food while meeting numerous regulations and facing rising input and land costs. They still need to make a profit to stay in business.

Over the years, students told me their farm parents were telling them to consider other careers and some parents were more blunt by flatly stating, "don't farm." One of the more arresting moments in my career was to hear a young 5<sup>th</sup> generation farmer admit that his grampie (generation 3 on that farm) told him "when I was your age, I was crazy enough to want to farm too, but it's a tough life, so do something else." The tears welling in the young farmer's eyes revealed a glimpse of the back story.

Farming can be rewarding as well as challenging. One old timer told me, "I'm glad so many people want to live in Toronto because then I can live in peace here." In addition to retaining food production capacity, dedicated land stewards often foster rural culture and communities.

So where have the young farmers gone? Thankfully, some are still on farms and a few are farming in and near cities with an ear tuned to their consumers. Others work in businesses related to agriculture. Some have chosen to leave agriculture and use their excellent training to serve society in other jobs and as ambassadors for rural Canada.

Next time you see young farmers, tell them you appreciate their life choice to farm. You might even ask what will help them to continue. It will be worth listening. I challenge you to act on what they suggest.

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