

## THERE WAS AN ERA WHEN WHEAT WAS KING

*Excerpted from Nicola Ross' book, "Caledon", 1999*

Subsistence agriculture predominated until the 1850s. At this juncture, several events pushed Caledon's farmers toward commercial farming. First, the prices of agricultural commodities, especially wheat, were jacked up by the California gold rush (1849). Furthermore, crops failed in Europe at the same time as the Crimean War (1854-56) cut off the supply of Russian Wheat. In 1855, wheat from Ontario was selling for \$2.40 per bushel. This compared with a low of about 32 cents per bushel in 1832. Many of Caledon's fine farmhouses and barns were built on the proceeds from wheat during these prosperous years.

About this time, farmers also learned how to harness animal power to speed up harvesting. This meant farmers' productivity was no longer dependent upon the number of farm hands available. Finally, improved farm practices promoted by provincial agricultural associations began having a positive effect on productivity.

A reciprocity treaty signed with the United States came into effect in 1854 and lasted until 1865. It encouraged Ontario farmers to diversify. Barley was in high demand by American breweries and mixed farming appeared. The quality of local cattle began improving with the arrival of the first purebreds. By the time the treaty was removed, local cattle breeders had made dramatic improvements to their stock. By the 1870s there was a healthy demand for local cattle outside North America. Dairy farming also picked up in the 1850s, as did hog production.

During this period one of Caledon's leading farmers was J.C. Snell. At one time he was growing over 200 hectares of wheat on his farm near the corner of Highway 10 and Mayfield Road. It was all cut by hand. He began breeding Shorthorns in 1855 and also purchased a Cotswold ram and ewe. He added Berkshire swine and later imported Galloway cattle, Yorkshire and Suffolk swine and Southdown sheep. Snell's sons kept up their father's tradition of excellence after his death. Between 1878 and 1884 they won more prizes at the Chicago Fat Stock Show than any other Canadian exhibitor.

Consequently, it's not surprising that when their local village, Edmonton, was asked by post office to change its name, it became known as Snelgrove.

While the 1880s were a time of frenzied quarrying in some parts of Caledon, it was agriculture that ruled Peel County as a whole. By then a larger percentage of land had been cleared in Peel than in any other county in Ontario. By 1900 more than ninety percent of Peel's tree cover had been removed and almost sixty percent of the wetlands had been drained, mostly so the land could be used for farming. But just as a rich agriculture future seemed sure, events – natural and human – came along to challenge agriculture's dominance. Commodity prices fell as the West opened up to farming and Ontario slid into the "Sixty-Year Doldrums," a recession that spanned the years 1890 to 1950. Furthermore, overproduction of wheat and the loss of tree cover meant that the soil wasn't just exhausted – it began to blow away. Much of Caledon's soil, especially in Albion Township, was very fine. Without trees, the wind played havoc with farmers' newly cultivated fields. Huge dunes formed, and parts of Airport Road had to be ploughed to keep them clear of sand. In an effort to stem this sandy tide, the provincial

government initiated tree-planting programs, but parts of Caledon would never live up to the farming potential some had dreamed of.

The number of farms in Peel County decreased during the early part of the twentieth century. The lure of the West stole many young men and women away, and the First World War (1914-18) meant that farm labour was in short supply. This manpower shortage spurred on the trend towards mechanization. The Ontario government introduced tractors during the war, and electricity arrived, much to the delight of the farm women. Farm organizations such as the Ontario Department of Agriculture's Extension Service, 4H and Women's Institutes improved agricultural practices and contributed to the social fabric of rural areas such as Caledon. Nonetheless, between 1901 and 1961, the number of farms in Peel County decreased from 13,867 to 6,600. The downward trend continues today. In 1981 there were 626 farms in the Town of Caledon. Fifteen years later, in 1996, there were only 490.

But despite the loss of farms, 1963 was a banner year for local agriculture. In October of that year, Caledon hosted the agricultural world at the World Ploughing Match. The Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson, prime minister of Canada, opened the event, held on the farm of Connie Smythe near Caledon Village. Some eighteen countries entered, including Central America, Denmark, Finland, France, New Zealand and United States. Attendance topped all previous World Ploughing Matches and it was deemed a great success by all who partook. Today, a Cairn of Peace commemorates the 1963 World Ploughing Match. Located in front of Caledon Village Place, it is one of a number similar cairns around the world that "promote peace and unity".

It was fitting that Caledon hosted this prestigious event since it has some of Ontario's finest agricultural land. The vast flatland known as the Peel Plain, especially on the east side of Highway 10, south of Olde Base Line, is dotted with well-maintained barns and silos. Lush cornfields straddle country roads and the quality of more-than-century-old brick and stone farmhouses, many adorned with architectural details that only the wealthy could afford, attest to the region's rich agricultural heritage. Surprisingly, a second pocket of premier farmland sits to the northeast of Caledon Village, perched on the Niagara Escarpment.