Swing Beam: My Father’s Story of Life on the Farm and the Barns

He Loved And Lost—

An Arts-Informed, Life History Perspective

Laura Lush

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

© Laura Lush 2013
Abstract

Through narrative, poetic, and visual inquiry, this arts-informed thesis reclaims the silenced voices and life histories of both our elderly farmers and of our elderly architecture—the barn. Using the life history model of research (Knowles & Cole, 2001), I engage in informal “chats” (Archibald, 2008, p. 377) with my elderly father to seek out the meaning and significance of his life spent on a farm—and his emotional response to the taking down of his two bank barns after the sale of his farm. What results is a “responsive” (Knowles & Cole, 2001, p. 10) representation of data, an alternative type of meaning and knowledge that is known as arts-informed qualitative representation.
Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Gary Knowles and Dr. Guy Allen for their passionate visions and respective expertise in arts-informed research and expressive writing. I am grateful for their guidance and direction in helping me complete this thesis. I would also like to thank my father, Barry Lush, who was willing enough, brave enough, and vulnerable enough to share his life story with me. To all three, I am grateful.
Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... ii
Acknowledgments ......................................................................................................... iii
List of Illustrations ....................................................................................................... vii
Preface ........................................................................................................................... ix
Foreward: The Death of Old MacDonald ................................................................ xiii

Section I

How to Find Me ........................................................................................................... 2
I Remember ................................................................................................................... 6
Morning .......................................................................................................................... 8
Toward the Barn He Walks Every Morning ................................................................. 8
How They Built Them ................................................................................................ 9
Beginning: Barn Talk ................................................................................................. 10
The Barn Speaks: I ....................................................................................................... 16
The Barn: Etymology ................................................................................................. 17
Early Barn .................................................................................................................... 18
How to Build a Barn ................................................................................................. 19
Build ............................................................................................................................. 20
Framework .................................................................................................................. 21
Swing Beam ................................................................................................................ 22
Threshing Floor ......................................................................................................... 24
Memory at 17 ............................................................................................................. 24
Tell Me All You Know About Barns ....................................................................... 26
The Barn Speaks: Old English ............................................................................... 29
From the Roof of the Barn ....................................................................................... 30
Walkers Line, Burlington, Ontario ......................................................................... 31
St. George, Ontario ................................................................................................. 33
St. George Barns ................................................................. 39
The Pig In the Shoe Store ......................................................... 41
Running and Farming ............................................................. 46
Running and Farming: Pan American Games .................................. 49
Marion .................................................................................... 54
My Wife ............................................................................... 55
When Things Burn ................................................................ 58
Owen Sound: 1976 ................................................................. 63
The Last Farm ....................................................................... 65
Piggery ................................................................................... 67
The Goose Man ..................................................................... 68
Christmas Delivery ................................................................ 72
Geese .................................................................................... 73
Eggs ....................................................................................... 75
Cleaning ............................................................................... 78
Looking Back ........................................................................ 80
Owen Sound II ..................................................................... 82
Drunk Piggery .......................................................... 83
Fence ..................................................................................... 86
Barn ....................................................................................... 88
The House ............................................................................. 88
Return to the Garden ............................................................ 89
Planting: May Long Weekend, 2012 ......................................... 90
Truck ...................................................................................... 92
Haying ................................................................................... 93
Section II

Changes ........................................................................................................ 95
The Last Barns ................................................................. 97
Keys ................................................................................. 98
Trees ........................................................................... 99
Selling the Farm ............................................................... 100
Song ................................................................................ 104
Reflection ...................................................................... 105
The Razing ....................................................................... 107
Taking the Barns Down ..................................................... 108
The Barn, Broken ......................................................... 111
The Newels, Lopped ...................................................... 113
Aftermath ...................................................................... 115
A Man and A Dog ........................................................... 117
How It Carriages ................................................................ 123
The Barn Speaks: II ....................................................... 125
Last Words ................................................................... 127

Reflection: Arts-Informed Inquiry ............................................... 128

Epilogue ........................................................................ 129

References ....................................................................... 133
List of Illustrations

Figure 1: The laneway to the farm, circa 1976 before trees were planted .............. 4
Figure 2: Peering inside my father’s barn ............................................................ 5
Figure 3: My father carrying his pails of water to feed the pigs ......................... 7
Figure 4: Close-up of a beam inside my father’s barn ....................................... 9
Figure 5: Another glimpse of beams in the barn ............................................. 14
Figure 6: The frame of the barn ........................................................................... 15
Figure 7: My father dwarfed by the huge cavern of the barn .............................. 15
Figure 8: The inside of the barn roof: 1 .............................................................. 23
Figure 9: The inside of the barn roof: 2 ............................................................... 25
Figure 10: An aerial view of my father, his geese, and Robbie McGlashan, one of his many dogs ................................................................. 30
Figure 11: My father running in a marathon race ............................................. 45
Figure 12: Letter my father sent to his parents from the 1954 British Empire Games in Vancouver ............................................................. 47
Figure 13: Postcard my father sent to his parents as his plane to Mexico was arcing over St. George ................................................................. 49
Figure 14: Marion, one year married .................................................................. 53
Figure 15: Feature article in *The Hamilton Spectator*, December 19, 1963 ..... 57
Figure 16: My father and his friend sitting on the front porch steps ................. 62
Figure 17: Flossie with her piglets ................................................................. 64
Figure 18: Sows .................................................................................................... 67
Figure 19: Geese photographed from the barn roof ......................................... 69
Figure 20: Gosling and geese ............................................................................... 70
Figure 21: Feature article in *The Sun Times*, December 17, 1983 .................... 71
Figure 22: Two of the last three geese bathing in the pig trough .................... 74
Figure 23: Dad captures the last goose to go to the Bumstead Homestead...... 74
Figure 24: Farm fresh eggs lined up on top of the dryer................................. 75
Figure 25: One of the chickens peeking out of the chicken pen door.............. 76
Figure 26: Wheeling a load of manure out of the pig barn............................. 77
Figure 27: *The Farmer’s Advocate and Home Magazine*, January 15, 1983 ... 79
Figure 28: My son, Jack, feeding the grey mare ........................................... 85
Figure 29: My father fixing the roof of the barn............................................. 87
Figure 30: Jessie and Jodi in the truck .......................................................... 91
Figure 31: The hay mow .............................................................................. 93
Figure 32: My father’s sailboat in the bottom of one of the barns ................. 97
Figure 33: My father walking into the empty barn, except for two TVs .......... 101
Figure 34: My father gazing at his old treasures taken from the barn .......... 102
Figure 35: The pile of scrap wood taken from inside of the barn................. 102
Figure 36: Inside of the barn, empty ............................................................... 103
Figure 37: Fallen debris, including a Lush for sale sign ................................. 103
Figure 38: Workers starting to dismantle the barn ........................................ 106
Figure 39: My father walks past the barn as it is dismantled ....................... 109
Figure 40: The demolished barn, photographed from the concession line .... 110
Figure 41: Victorian concrete ornaments that topped the gate posts ........... 112
Figure 42: The house and the fallen barns .................................................... 114
Figure 43: Dad as a toddler .......................................................................... 116
Figure 44: Dad as a teen with one of his first dogs, Bud .............................. 121
Figure 45: The barn, stripped of its boards, still standing erect ................. 122
Figure 46: The silo flush to the side of the barn .......................................... 124
Figure 47: Cat in the empty barn ................................................................. 126
Preface

Synchronicity and serendipity were powerful agents of change that directed me to write this thesis. I began my journey as an MEd student at OISE in 2008 in CTL, not quite knowing what I wanted. I knew I wanted to go back to school, to be a student again, to learn. So I chose Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning.

I was comfortable with both the concepts of teaching and learning. After all, I was/am a teacher. Curriculum was the word about which I wasn’t so clear. I wrestled with this every time I taught a new course. Curriculum was an enigma. What is it? Where is it? And how do I get it? Ironically, the search for “curriculum” became my own journeying, a puzzling wandering that included lots of theory, lots of ideas, lots of possibilities, but to my mind, no clear answers.

It wasn’t until my sixth course that I finally realized what my journey was all about. It did involve those two much-used words: serendipity and synchronicity. That was when I enrolled in Dr. Gary Knowles’ class, Introduction to Qualitative Research in May of 2011 (G. Knowles, personal communication, May 5, 2011).

Finally, I had arrived. I was home. I was where I should be.

And that was in arts-informed research. Gary affirmed that there are alternative ways to see and understand knowledge and phenomena—through the lens of a painter, a poet, a sculptor, an actor. In short, arts-informed inquiry necessitates that you see your research subject through the medium and eyes of art and an artist. This was both validating and path-changing. I decided to change my scholarly journey from an MEd to an MA.
The second moment of serendipity and synchronicity happened when I enrolled in my eighth and final course with Dr. Guy Allen. It was aptly called “Expressive Writing.” From the first class, I was hooked. Verbs—and not just any old verb—loud Saxonite ones that thumped and clacked—and nouns that particularize down to the type of twill on a textile weave. And rhythmic and playful Dr. Seuss patterns—Chomskian word play. Word patterning. Syntactical harmonies. Music. I also learned why we are compelled—why we must write our stories. We write to speak, to share our voices. We write so that we can listen to each other’s stories of how and what we experience in the world. We write so that we can share the power of our experiences in the hopes that these experiences will resonate with those around us. If we learn to craft our experiences in such a way that the reader enters what Guy calls the “psychic space”—and does not leave that space until the piece is over—then we have done what we need to do as writers (G. Allen, personal communication, February 13, 2012). We have told a story.

The act of telling our stories is not self-indulgent solipsism. On the contrary, telling our stories is a way out of the self—a way to connect with others and the world around us, both epistemologically and ontologically. Knowles and Cole (2001, p. 11) write that life history inquiry is “about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to understand the experience of other humans.” By telling our life stories, we shine light on our selves, our past, and on a broader scope, our “social and societal conditions” (Knowles & Cole, 2001, p.12). Our narratives, our life histories, our life stories—however you want to call them—instruct and reveal, reveal and instruct. They are the ultimate curricula that are both personal and universal, intimate yet accessible. In
arts-informed research, the researcher and the participant forge what Knowles and Coles call a “partnership research” that encompasses “purpose, process, and result” (as cited in Coles & Knowles 1993, p. 28). They forego their vulnerabilities as they engage in a mutually beneficial sharing, listening, and interpreting in which attentiveness and reflection manifest into a passionate and rich vernacular.

Architecture, I also argue, has a voice. In particular, the barn with its long history is an “elder architectural structure.” It is also a type of “vernacular architecture” (Arthur & Witney, 1972) that speaks of crops and animals, the birth (and passing) of family members, the rotation of crops, the cycle of animal husbandry, and the daily routine of farm chores.

For a good part of the 20th century, the vast majority of Canadians lived and worked on farms. Cultural knowledge was largely derived from the very lands that these farmers worked and other farm labour that exemplified a simple and earth-connected way of life. The farm—and the barn by extension—was the nexus of rural culture and family life. To labour on the earth meant to live fully and to till, seed, plant. But as we move further into the 21st century, we move further away from our connection to the earth as the Canadian farm as a lifestyle continues to vanish. Witness the increasing “domicide”\(^1\) (as cited in Porteous & Smith, 2001, p. 11) that is taking place in our geographical landscape; the destruction of our barns—fixtures of our rural landscape since the late 1890s. With every dismantling of a barn, a kind of cultural and historical domicide also

\(^{1}\) Domicide is a term first coined in a series of articles by Douglas Porteous to refer to the deliberate destruction of home. In this thesis, I suggest that a similar domicide is taking place with the small Canadian farmer’s “psychological home” of the barn.
takes place, a domicide which slowly erodes our connection to a shared rural past.

Further, as we destroy our old barns, we destroy a key embodied space that holds the emotional and psychological pasts of the elderly Canadian farmer. And this domicide, in turn, kills their stories. It kills our stories.
Foreward: The Death of Old Macdonald

Old MacDonald woke to the sound of his rooster crowing. He stretched, reached for his coveralls, and slipped on his gum boots. Downstairs, his wife stirred the morning oatmeal. Ah, Mother, he said to himself.

“Old MacDonald!” she yelled. “Time to rise! The porridge, the milk—”

He buttoned his shirt. “I’m coming, Mother. I’m coming,” he said. “The cows can wait!” He stumbled toward the window and pulled back the curtains.

The sun’s yellow tipped the fields.

Then he gasped, stumbled back, and fell onto the bed. “Mother!” he yelled.

“Lord-all-mighty—Mother!”

“What is it now, Old MacDonald?”

“The barns?” he yelled. “Where’re the barns?”

He charged down the stairs and into the kitchen. Old MacDonald’s wife turned and waved her spoon.

“Oh, Old MacDonald,” she chuckled. “Where’ve yeh been? What barns? They took’em down ages ago.”

“But the pigs—the horses—the cows—?”

Old MacDonald’s wife shook her head. Then she started to sing:

Old MacDonald had a farm.

E-i-E-i—No, he didn’t.

* * *

We tell stories, the stories tell us.

xiii
SECTION I
How to Find Me

When you drive south on 21,
look for the barns. The barns,
they aren’t shy. Big and grey, rising
out of the landscape like a hillock of timber,
like a clutch of trees.
(You don’t have to justify a tree.)
(You don’t have to justify a barn.)
There are cattle in those barns.
Pigs, rats, mice, cats. Even a couple of boats
I keep in the lower part of one barn.
A tomb of sorts. Treasures, memories, and
oh stories—I could go on.

Slow down as soon as you pass Concessions 10 and 11.
Don Scott’s house is on the left banking the corner field.
Don and Gwen, they have been our neighbours
through good and bad, through summers
and winters, through all the losses.
We were there when Don lost Gwen;
Don was there when we lost our son.
You’ll see Don on his rider lawnmower—brown Tilley hat,
glasses—turning out of his lane, then down the side of the road
to mow our grass that fringes the long driveway.
That’s the kind of guy Don is.
That’s the kind of neighbour he is.
Across the road—the Walker farm. They keep trotters
and the Jack Russells that tore through
my turkeys one spring. I said if it happens again, I shoot.
Then I got my own dogs—Jessie and Jodi—they make sure
the Jack Russells don’t tear through my turkeys anymore,
make sure I don’t have to shoot.

Put on your left indicator, ready yourself for the long
drive up the lane. Keep driving past the house—wave
to Marion leaning over the kitchen sink or reaching
for a cup—keep driving past the chicken pen,
past the purple phlox, the Hawthorne bush. Crack your window
if you want—the whiff of growing things.
Don’t mind the dogs. They just like to tell you
they are there. Get out and open the gate to the barn yard.
Step carefully. The geese—their tongues will fly
at you like Dragon Tongues. Park in front of the first barn—
up the rock hill, beside the hay wagon.

Stop there and get out of your car.
Lift the door hasp—with one hand—it will
slide easy enough. Walk in. Your first deep breath
of barn. Walk into the wild pigeon flap.
I’ll be there, grain bag slung over my shoulder or
pitching hay through the chute.
Take your time.
I’ll be there 365 days a year
for the next 35 years.
And then one day,
I won’t.
Figure 1: The laneway to the farm, circa 1976 before trees were planted.
Figure 2: Peering inside my father's barn.
I Remember

I remember what I need to remember:
One wife, three children—some things
staying too long, others leaving too soon.
I remember too many dogs to name:
*Bud, Chubby, Duke and Charlie, Lindy.*
*Lady, Robbie McGlashan, Rhondo—*
my last dogs—*Jessie and Jodi.*
Mostly, I remember the land.
The land frozen, the land green,
the land too rocky, too wet, too dry.
Always working it—tilling it—discing it.
I remember trying to start tractors, chain saws,
water pumps. I remember trying too many times
to do too many things. I remember pulling combines
behind me, my neck crooked to the right, then to the left.
I remember driving those tractors back into the barns, how
quiet and dark in there. I remember climbing ladders to fix
the barns after storms, hail, tornadoes plundering.
I remember every morning, every afternoon, every evening.
I remember feeding chickens, turkeys, cows, pigs. Sometimes
shooting groundhogs, coons and foxes. Almost a neighbour’s dog.
I remember going to my barns just to fix things—look up.
I remember I have never been a religious man—
*yet somehow in those barns*—a pulling up into vaulted
beams. I remember almost believing in something
I still don’t know how to say.
Figure 3: My father carrying his pails of water to feed the pigs.
**Morning**

Wake up, slip on my coveralls,
my barn boots—a hat, a pair of gloves.
Then walk out to those barns.
Hundred-old-boards sawing in sleep.
   Barn anchored to earth,
   the earth anchored to barn.
I can’t tell you how they do it—
shuck winter, bust winds—ping hail.
   Tighten their beams,
Tell me what has more stories
   than these barns living?

**Toward the Barn He Walks Every Morning**

Two white buckets, one in each hand.
Water-slosh, boot-squeak.
The geese roiling. Jessie and Jodi, noses to the ground.
Because life once in those barns.
Cows lowing. Shimmer of calf.

He holds his hands to his eyes—sees 20 years ahead—
barn boards tossed. Men hard with hammers.
A game of pick-up sticks.
   Yet still walks *toward*
   not away
   from those barns.
How They Built Them

We all know the story—
mallets and levers, mallets and pike-poles.
Men working, men working together.
The women feeding the men working together
and the children watching the women feeding
the men working together, and the whole damned
village pulled/keeled/fixed to one purpose. Getting
the barn up. The barn raised tall and timber-high.
Giant pined construct, th ewly beauty of beveled
mitres fit together so the hay, the straw,
the sheaves—so the cats, the cows, the
horses all inside, all thrusted warm and tight
inside.
Spend time on the land, spend time with the living, spend time with the living, not the dying.

The floor of this new rec room is original slate taken from the Wiarton escarpment. A fossilized skeleton of an animal’s back curves out of the slate in a “J” pattern. Around us, unopened boxes of LPs and books sit, a maze of paraphernalia. Behind him, his running trophies line five rows of shelving, the gold bodies of men with their hands thrust up in the air, faces pained. Trophies missing hands or feet, or both—torsos of chipped bronze and silver lying on their sides. An old wood stove rescued from his recently-sold farm is mounted into the west wall of the rec room.

An usually warm day, but my father wants the wood stove on.

He balls up some old newspapers and reaches for a couple of logs, leans forward in his black La-Z-boy chair. Then he scrapes a match along the box and lights the fire.

He lights the fire because today he is about to tell me a story.

The first barn I remember is a very small one. It was the back of a cottage on the Beach Strip in Burlington, and it was a combination of a garage, woodshed and barn. It originally used to have a couple of horse stalls. There were horses, wood for the winter, and if we were lucky enough—a car. Pop’s car was kept there. An old Packard. The interior floor had all rusted out, and Mom wouldn’t let us put our feet down. She was afraid we were going to fall through the holes in the floor. I remember looking down and
watching the road zip by, my feet curled up on the seat. That’s the first barn I remember seeing. I was four years’ old. I had some baby ducks—Pop gave them to me—and I had some dogs. Two. The next barn I remember was on Guelph Line; Pop rented this farm. It was three-and-a-half acres and it had a really nice barn. You drove in and it had a garage on the first floor, chicken pens upstairs, and on one side—Pop raised chickens for a living—a mow to put your straw in, and it was all wood. It looked quite sharp. It had been well-looked after. Probably built in the ‘20s or ‘30s. The next barn I remember is on Torrence Street. I was nine or 10 years old. Just prior to the war. There were two big buildings. One big long shed they kept their baskets in—cause it was a market garden—and a big barn. A bank barn. This particular barn was in terrible shape. Wasn’t worth fixing. It had been let go too long, so Pop tore it down.

The next barn, 1940. Pop had bought this brick home on Brant Street next to the public school and it had been a farm originally, as almost all houses on North Brant Street were. Apple farms, vegetable farms. And this was a really nice barn. It had a cement foundation. The first floor was all stone and there was a big hay mow above. It had a steel roof—a tin roof—and one section had been set up as a garage and you kept your car in there. There was also a spot where they had kept their horse and buggy. I kept chickens in the barn, and some ducks, some pheasants, and up to five dogs at a time. There was a rule in our house that I could have as many dogs as I wanted—as long as I looked after them. The day I didn’t look after them—they were gone. And I knew a dog catcher named Clanky, and he would always call me, and he would say, “Have I got a dog for you!” And I would go down and I couldn’t resist. So to pay for the dog food, I
pedaled eggs all over Burlington in two six-quart baskets, and I’d sell them so much a dozen, and people liked them ’cause they were all fresh. A few days old.

The next barn—I’d be a teenager then. I finished high school and we bought a 60-acre farm on Walker’s Line and it had a massive house, a stone home. It was the original house on Walker’s Line and it had a massive bank barn, which was in bad shape, and I reroofed it, patched it up. One wall at the far side had caved in so I took out the loose stones and we cemented them up and filled them up again. And it had four horse stalls, a couple of big pens for pigs, and a small area for cattle. That was a typical bank barn. Built after 1880. Bank barns were built so you could just pull up your wagon and drive in. You just drove up into it. And to get to the stairs, you didn’t climb a ladder, you went around the side and walked up a ramp—a bank ramp—a lot of these barns were built into a hill. If not, they brought earth and built it up on one side. So you’d take your hay wagon with a team of horses and pull right in.

After that farm, we had the farm in St. George. It was a mixed farm. A family farm. I had a little bit of everything.

Then the farm in Owen Sound. My last farm. I was there for 35 years straight. There were two barns. One strictly built for horses. It had a high ceiling. The first barn. The best barn. And the next barn was for cattle. And hogs. I wanted to go into the sheep business, as well. Here’s a picture of the second floor of the barn. It’s got beams. Beach logs cut from the bush with a saw. You’d take an axe and square it off. It wasn’t just boards, you understand. It was a piece of a tree brought in by a horse. One piece of tree at a time. And you’d cut it up to size and fit it onto the cement wall that was built to the
stone wall that covered the first floor. And you’d fit in the notches, and then you’d put
the rest of the beams up. And there was almost no nails used. No nails. They all fitted
into notches. And there would be one coming up this way—and one coming that way.
There would be a notch, and you’d cut it into here and there. And they would fit in
exactly.

This is where you come in with your machinery and the hay mow is up above.
Bank barns were built for a style of farming that was done at that time, and it covered a
long space. It covered from 1860s right up until twenty, thirty years ago. They didn’t
build barns like this after this. The only ones who do are the Mennonites because they’re
still labour intensive. They don’t have tractors. They have horses. They plow with horses.
They bring in their hay loose. They farm like it was in the turn of the century. And they
have big families. They help each other. They’re in communities. When George is haying
that day, they all help and bring it in in one day. And the next day, George helps the other
neighbours. They build barns exactly that way. They do their crops that way. But we
never did. Protestant people. The settlers did long ago. But we got more independent.
And we built barns—sure there would be two or three neighbours that came along, but
you didn’t necessarily go next door and help your neighbour bring the harvest in. But the
Mennonites do that. You have to do that when you have no machinery. Machinery short-
circuited the farming operation by allowing one man to do a tremendous amount of work
if he had a good tractor and good equipment. People don’t want that physical work they
had before. That’s hard work.
Figure 5: Another glimpse of beams in the barn.
Figure 6: The frame of the barn.

Figure 7: My father dwarfed by the huge cavern of the barn.
The Barn Speaks: I

Tenoned and pegged,
Morticed and boxed.
    I rust no nails.
    I am let into each post.
Driven hard.
Driven hard so wind can’t break me.
Driven hard so nobody can
    take me down.
The Barn: Etymology

The ere.
The bere.
The byre.
The bryne.
The barn.
**Early Barn**

Wattle—a criss-cross of twigs.
Daub—the thickly mud and straw plastering the wattle down.
A roof, thatched straw. No wolf dare blow down. A narrow hole at the top so smoke could escape.
(They lived in their barns.)
On those walls, a few hooks to hang their things—rough coats, hats, mitts.
A wooden table, a couple of chairs.
The stench! A bed of straw. And more straw—ricks for hay and straw—the sheen!
Cattle stowed below the parapet.
Lowing them to sleep each night in these U-shaped crucks.
How to Build a Barn

You take two trees. Trim their branches, roughly.

Bent together, they will fall like men falling head to head, exhausted from fight.

And they will form a beginning—an alpha, an A, a frame, a cruck. And another pair of trees again.

The same. Braced by a single pole.

Ah, men,

drop your axes. This is all you’ll ever need.
Build

Build with your hands.
Build nail-free.
Build with what’s around you.
These twigs, these roots, these branches.
Build with beach and maple and oak.
Build until these trees are rooted again,
homed in this basilica.
Let the trees swing their beams
through the great wide space.
  Collar beam.
  Tie beam.
And just let it all alone.
**Framework**

These spaces between the beams
and posts. The hay, the straw—
breathes. And the barn’s lungs open.
Swing Beam

Heavy-timbered,
35-foot beach swing beam
spanning the barn’s interior.
No center post on the barn's threshing floor.
Tether ox to a pivot. That ox will circle,
thresh grain. At the centre, the bay.
And during the winter, the weight of the winter
will crush down on that swing beam.
Bearing, singular. A sturdy truss
that supports the loft and
holding that hay-girth in.
Figure 8: The inside of the barn roof: 1.
Threshing Floor

Honey coloured.
The wagon is full.
Into the barn, take wheat.
Flail it hard. Until the wheat softens,
until the floor shines.

Memory at 17

We would walk up that hill,
the barn door padlocked. Just dark,
behind those doors?
Slide the lock, pigeons’ coo.
The all-at-once caught
of something in the throat—and
then the immensity,
the hand-rough of those beams,
hay tilting, leaning, the barn laughing
out its sides.
Figure 9: The inside of the barn roof: 2.
Tell Me All You Know About Barns

A thatched barn. Not to unlike what you would see in England, and it was used out west. That’s because they didn’t have all the wood that we have here. It was a mudbarn as well, because they filled in the cracks with mud and it baked. I’ve never seen one alive today. Never saw one as a kid either because it was out west. Then you had barns with a truss roof. This means that you have posts up there and strips across here and there is a peak roof, and what it does it gives you the space to put your hay in and build right up to the top. You’d fill the barn right up to the roof. You’d put the hay right from the floor. You’d drive the wagon in, and you’d fill it right to the top. And you’d fill the other side to the top. That’s how I did my barns. I love the shafts of light the most. You could see the sky through those boards. Barns were made with wood locally and it hadn’t dried out completely, so they’d nail it on at that time—the boards are really tight together, but they’d dry out and after a while, you’d have half an inch and between the boards going up. Now, the typical Ontario barn. The bank barn. It’s built into a hill so that your wagon can get up to the main floor, which is upstairs very easily. You drive your team of horses in with your wagon and a fork would come down and lift your hay up. Or when I was doing it, I did that the first couple of years at St. George, but after that, I got a bailer. You’d just unload the bails and put them on a bale elevator ladder. It was like a machine with a chain that had hooks every six inches and powered by an electric motor. I would lay the bale on the elevator, and it would go up to the ceiling. You had to have a place to put your horse harnesses, and each horse had its separate own harness, and if I was hooking up Charlie or Vicky, then this would be Charlie’s harness, and this
would be Vicky’s harness, and you’d keep all the bridles together. You never want your barn to burn. You never want anything to burn. I had a burning barn at St. George. It was more of a drive shed—but it functioned like a barn—and I had turkey pullets under a heat lamp—an oil heater—and it caught fire and I lost them all.

The Dutch Barns. I know these well. Wagon doors are placed at either side. But my barns were bank barns. They only had an entrance at one spot. They don’t use nails, the wood is cut into a notch. Wood pegs that shove into each other to hold it tight. They used the wood of the area: maple and beach. A ramp goes up to the top of the barn. And there’s usually an undershed where the horses could go when it rained. You could put your tractor in there. That’s where we put Trigger, the pony that died later—went to the barn later to die.

Stone barns are unusual. They’re a bit cold. A lot harder to build. I prefer a log barn—you can see the axe marks. They lay the logs on the ground and used an axe. That’s how the beams in my barn were. Cleaned up by an axe. Beautiful. The carpenter, well he leaves his signature—his particular mark—right in the wood. They would cut these logs out on the ground on the land, and they’d mark them. They’d say to themselves—this one is going to go here, and this one is going to go there, and this one is going to go across.

A typical Ontario barn. You can see all the beams. The hay on top. The mow separates the bay from the aisle. The mow is where they stack the bails. My barn had all these—the hooks and the hinges. Big long hinges for support. They were all iron. From
the turn of the century up to the 1920s and the 1930s. Threshing and mowing. I never went to a barn raising, but I heard enough stories about them.

The roof was a standard V-shaped roof with a thirty degree angle to give extra width. It was just straight up and down. We had a cement silo. They started out with stone silos, where they built a stone wall, a circular stone wall. They were very labour-intensive; they weren’t normally very high because you had to put scaffolding up. They went from there to poured concrete where you’d bring in the forms and just pour the cement in, and it was easy, they ran up a ladder along the side of it, and they poured the cement in, and they’d keep packing it in. The cement had to harden. My silo was a poured concrete silo. The smell of corn ensilage—you could get dead drunk in there. In the barn, the rafters all hook in and strengthen each other. The cross pieces would hold the roof up, yet they would tie into the crossbeam, and again, no nails used. They were notched in, and they drilled a hole and they put a peg in, and all my barns were that way. The one at Walkers Line was like that, the one at St. George was like that. Ontario barns were built in the 1900s. My barns at St. George were built at the turn of the century, and they burned down in 1935, so they rebuilt them. What most people did was take the wood right out of the bush and they’d get a portable saw mill to come in on a wagon and they’d cut in the beams to the measurement that they needed for the barns, and the wood would sit for a while because the wood was green. And then they would dry out. It would save them from cracking and twisting when they put the barn up.
The Barn Speaks: Old English

Barne. A knafe barne.
That knafe barne had bene
Til knaf barne madyn.
Barne foure score,
Then teran down.
From the Roof of the Barn

From the roof of the barn
you could see everything—

   The baby turkeys, bald and thin,

the gate I was trying to fix.

   A log waiting to be split.

Robbie leading the geese out or away from the barnyard.

   He could lead, that dog.

Once my son got right up there

   Just to take a picture of how I looked

lugging a pail of feed to the barn,

   geese plumply scattered.

And, Robbie, black and matted

   squatting the grass down.

Figure 10: An aerial view of my father, his geese, and Robbie McGlashan, one of his many dogs.
You start with something, then it grows.

Walkers Line, Burlington, Ontario

I started farming on Walkers Line. I had a market garden, 60 acres, no tractor at that time, so I went out to buy a team of horses and I always knew this chap who would ride up and down Guelph Line with his team and he sold me the one horse but he wouldn’t sell me the other one because it was too nasty. If that was nasty, then God help us, because the one I bought would kick the hell out of you if it had the chance. His name was Tony. So I had a feed man who made rounds every week from Toronto and he dropped off feed—and in those days—the easiest way to do that. He said he knew of a horse who was really quiet, worked hard. I can’t remember his name now, but he was a work horse. He really worked. Tony would back off in the harness. Tony was quite a character.

The first year we moved to Walkers Line from the high school, Len Wilkensen was a neighbour who lived next door from us and he was always growing this and growing that and breeding this and breeding that and he talked me into breeding these mice. I was 20. He had these pens, but he decided not to do it himself. He had stacks of tiny little cages. This was not too long after the war, and there was a lot of research going on and these were special clinic mice, so this guy came in with a truck and dropped them off. It was a government-run operation and it was located in Buffalo, so anyway I took these 60 mice, and I bred them, and it only takes three or four weeks for mice to be born, once you bred them, and I had mice coming out of my ears. And this truck drives in, an insulated truck from the States, and they picked up my mice and I got a nice check. I
thought this was just great. I was through the next crop, because I bred them all at once, that way the truck wasn’t coming in every week. I got a registered letter saying that the government had withdrawn all finances for this research, so they won’t be needing any more mice. So what was I going to do with all these friggin’ mice, so I took them to the market and sold them to some people who wanted white mice as pets. What else could I do? Drown ‘em? I was getting a buck a piece for these mice because they were a special breed of mice where the blood type was all the same, and they needed them for research, they needed the same bloodline. I tried to sell them anywhere at all where people wanted pets, but I ended up dropping most of them in the water pail.
St. George, Ontario

Pop, Mom, and I moved to St. George—a village of 800 people six miles south of Galt on highway 24 in 1952—and I bought the team of horses that were there: Charlie and Vicky. Charlie was maybe 2,000 pounds, real big. Dappled gray. Beautiful horse. And they could work. They worked good and steady. And Pete, my brother, would start out with the tractor and he’d plough and I’d come along with the harrow and cultivate it with the seed drill. A harrow had grate and teeth and you’d drag it along the field and break up all the lumps and make it nice and smooth and bring up all the stones to the surface, so Peter would start out and Charlie would follow him. It worked really well. We did a lot in those days. The barn we had in St. George was a nice barn, a bank barn. And I painted it red by brush. I had to keep moving the ladder every five minutes. I kept at it. And when you’re young, you can do things like that. I did it whenever I wasn’t busy with something else. So my barn for half a year was half-painted and finally I got it finished. I made it look really nice. But I decided I needed an income, so I went into the pig business. I was in my mid-twenties—twenty-five. I bought 25 sows. That seemed like a lot at the time; when I came up to Owen Sound, I had 50 sows. In those days, 25 sows were a lot of work too. I fed stock in the morning, fed the pigs and cattle, the chickens. I got up at six. I raised the pigs for market. I had a Danish barn. I fed them all in a trough with water. The old fashioned Danish way, and I’d get good grades on the pigs. I was also working in the fields, as well. Full-time farming. I had a team of horses and we’d seed everything down. I’d bring in the hay. Load it on the back of the wagon. I’d have to be on top of the wagon with a team of horses. I’d keep moving around and around until I
got the load real high. I’d take it back to the barn, drive up the ramp, go into the barn. A big fork would come down and I’d stick it into the hay— it would lift the hay right up to the top. In the fall, I was harvesting. Combining. We used to bag all our grain. We’d drop it down through the hole in the barn floor and grind it up to a mash. You had the spring when you plowed, disced, and seeded. You had the summer when you brought in all your hay. You had to fill the barn right up to the top. Late summer and fall, you harvested.

Come winter, that’s when you’d really work ‘cause you were cleaning manure. You never ran out of work. You worked seven days a week. It was a stock farm, livestock. And if you didn’t stay on top.

I ran cattle every year as well. I’d sell the calves off and then a cow acted up—aborted or I couldn’t afford to keep it any longer and I sold a lot of wood, cut timber in the bush. And that was my income. I could throw out the manure on the raised area.

Cows are pretty smart. I would let them out in the morning and they’d head back along to the pasture field. I would drive the cattle out to the back and I’d leave them for the day and I’d go back and get them in the evening.

The cows would recognize me. As soon as they saw me, they’d start coming back in. They knew they were going to get their grain. I had a cow called Sue. You could ride her back. I’d just climb on her back and she’d walk in—very slow, very easy—and they’d all trail in, single file. Some of the cattle were still coming out of the bush when I’d herd the first bunch into the pen and feed them grain, a little bit of hay, a little bit of whatever you had. Sue was so easygoing. But she rolled on a calf one day, just a couple of days old, maybe it was her fourth calf, and I got mad, and I shipped her out.
And I was sorry I did that. You know how you feel bad about doing things. I felt bad. I
could’ve waited another nine months and she’d have another calf. But anyway, that’s the
way it goes. It’s a four-season job. Spring seeding, summer, hay, fall, harvesting, and the
winter cleaning. I was very careful and I would always treat my cattle so they didn’t get
panicky. In the summertime, you had to watch out for pinkeye. It was a type of bug that
would infect their eye and they’d go blind. You had to put ointment on their eye. Try
putting ointment on a cow’s blind eye. They knew there was someone there, but they’d
panic, and run into a tree. I’d have to go out and try to lasso them, put this paste on my
finger, and you could cure it, but if you didn’t, you’d lose the cow. It was viral. It was
terrible. And if one cow got infected in the herd, all the cows got infected. The flies
brought it to the herd. Some years, they got infected—other years, they didn’t. I was
trying to treat this cow, and it stepped on me, and then it crashed into a tree. I got up, and
I had broken my ribs.

I had some great animals. I loved my animals. I had three or four good horses.
Big draft horses. A ton a piece. They were big and they could pull that seed drill or
cultivator all day. I used the tractor for jobs the horses couldn’t do. The tractor sometimes
got stuck in the fields, so I used the horses. I could walk a team of horses through wet
spots, and they dried it up in no time.

I never had a job I liked better.

* * *

We had some great parties in St. George, both winter and summer. The kids were
my age—20, 25— they were all city kids from Toronto, Hamilton, and Burlington, and
they’d all come up. In the summer time, we’d have a wiener or corn roast back at the lake—an 18 acre lake—and I’d hook the team up, and we’d put a lot of hay on the wagon, bales of hay, they could sit on. They’d load up until we had a wagonful of kids, and then we’d head back. I had two big Persian horses chomping at the bit wanting to go, and we’d walk nice and sedately until we hit the bush road, and then it would go down a slope, and I would let the horses start to jog. The horses would start to get away, and the girls would be screaming their heads off, and the hay bales would be falling off, and we’d be getting close to the lake, and there was a road in the lake—you couldn’t see it—you’d have to take your tractor to get to the other side of the pond. And then I’d get to the top of the hill and I’d let go of the reins and the horses would take off, and everyone was screaming and yelling, yelling and screaming, and I turned around and I lost all my passengers—because they thought they were going to get dumped in the lake—and I’d be laughing my head off, the girls were all covered in mud and wet, so everyone went for a swim that night. In the winter time, I had a lot of parties. We really partied it up as young people do. I had the place for it, a big place. Mom and Pop didn’t mind. But I asked a bunch of friends from Toronto to come out to the sugar bush. I was out making maple syrup in the bush. I had a great big steel pot, a big cast iron pot, and I had all the wood stacked up and the cans were hanging up along the trees, and I’d empty the pails and put them in a pot. I had it really going that day, I was out all day. And they came out, and I brought them out on the wagon and we shovelled and trampled down the snow and what we did was we’d dip in with a cup and drop it in the snow and it would freeze and it would be sugar maple, like toffee, they thought it was great. That farm is still there. I
know where it is. I’d like to stop by and walk back. We left on good terms. The same people are there. The wife died, but it’s now a boy scout camp. He was a contractor and he tied in with a guy in Toronto who had a contract with the first subway in Toronto. And darned if the old guy didn’t die. And so he inherited this great big company. He went to the Olympics a couple of time, trapshooting. But when he bought the farm, he didn’t want to shoot anymore. He just wanted to raise birds. He didn’t hunt. He had a bunch of birds, pheasants, just like me. He was a nice enough guy. I didn’t get a long with her too well. I moved Pop and Mother. I had a tonne truck, and I moved them and our stuff to the farm in Carlisle; it was a lot of work. And I didn’t have all the stuff off the veranda, and she said this all has to go by 4:00 p.m., so I went over to the McComb’s and said I need some help. I had the house pretty clear, but I still had a lot of stuff on the verandah—beds, couches.

When we moved up there, I had a two tonne truck to haul the tomatoes. I grew four acres the first time, and we had a blight the first time in 25 years and most of the tomatoes were ruined, so the second year, I grew six acres, and I know Mr. Funston came around to see me and said, “Are you gonna stay with it Barry?” and I said, “Yeah,” and he marked me down for four acres, and I said, “No I want six acres,” and he said, “Sure,’ and it was the driest goddamn summer and I barely made my expenses. Didn’t make a profit. So the next year, he came around, and he said, “What are you gonna do, Barry? And I said, “I’m gonna grow eight acres.” And he said, “That’s a lot Barry.” But I had to catch up. Mom helped me a lot, I disced it up nice and smooth and I had a two by six and I put pegs in it, three pegs, three feet apart, and I dragged down one end of the field and
back and then I went the other way, it was like a checker-board and you planted the
tomatoes where the lines crossed. I had the earth worked up really good. I’d take a spade
and work it into the ground. You put your foot on one side and pack it down. I had a crop
of a lifetime. Was it ever good. All my friends from Hamilton came out and helped. All
the guys who worked with me at the Brant Inn—Sandy, Doug, and Don—and we kept
up with it. Anyway, the three places I farmed was Walkers Line, and St. George, and
Owen Sound. So I had three farms over the period of, well let’s see…1950 until 2011. I
was off the farm for ten years. We moved to Burlington in 1966. I was three years at
Walkers Line, I was 10 years at St. George, and 35 years here. But looking back over my
life, I’m glad I did it. It wasn’t the place where I made a hell of a lot of money, but I had
a living.

---

2The Brant Inn, located on the Lakeshore in Burlington, Ontario, was one of the leading live music venues
in the 1940s, hosting such greats as Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Horne, and Vic Damone.
St. George Barns

At St. George, we had 238 acres, a lake and a farm, an ideal stock farm. The thing I remember most about this farm was the Danish style hog barn. It was a style of barn where you had big cement troughs and you mixed the mash with water the night before and you fed them the mash. The pens were set up so that you isolate the pigs while you could clean the pens by throwing the manure into the barnyard. Each pen carried 20 pigs. This style made it very easy to clean a pen out because you didn’t have to move the pigs out of the pen you just shut the door and shoved everything down to one end, put the bedding down, and shoved the manure into the exit door. It was a really slick way of doing things. I had a lot of people who had never seen a Danish style of barn before and they were really impressed. I was working in the fields as well, full-time farming, a team of horses, just a great pair—Charlie and Vickie—and we’d seed everything down with grain and hay. I’d bring in the hay, load it on the back of the wagon loose. I didn’t have a bailer in those days—just a hay loader—and you just drove over the cut hay and lifted it up and forked it around. When you got the load high enough, you’d go back to the barn, take it up the ramp to the top of the barn and a big fork would come down from the top of the barn and then you’d shove it right into the hay. A big steel fork with two pins and you’d shove it right down until you couldn’t get it any further, and then you’d pull the latch which sent out teeth and then you’d lift it up. It came with the barn. You’d lift the hay right up to the top and then you’d drop it. Haying was the biggest part of my job. Seeding went pretty quick. You ploughed the field, you disced it, you harrowed it, and you smoothed it off. A harrow looks like a big gate lying on its side with pins on its side
and you pull it and it breaks and smooths out the lumps of earth and it will also lift the stones up so you can clear the stones up before you seed.

In the spring when you plowed, disced and seeded, then in the summer you’d bring in all your hay. You had to fill all the barn right up to the top. Late summer and fall, you harvested the grain. Come winter, that’s when you really worked ‘cause you cleaned the pens and fed the livestock, and it was a job that took you pretty much all day. You never ran out of work. You worked seven days a week, you had to feed. Seven days a week.

In St. George, I had a big stable for cattle, cow stalls, where you tied them up. And I took them out and made one great big pen because I wasn’t going to have any milk cows. I had beef cattle, so you could clean out the stalls very easily (if you had one big pen) with a front end loader. I brought in fresh straw to keep it nice and clean. If you had stalls themselves, you had to shovel it out with a fork. So anyway, I decided to change the horse stalls around and there were five stalls and I had room to hang a harness up, and one pen. And I changed it into four horse stalls and two big loafing pens where you could put a mare or a colt. And Frank Loan—my brother’s father-in-law—disagreed with how to keep the horses. Frank insisted on having box stalls where the horses ran loose. But I wanted to keep them in stalls because they are so much easier to clean up. I’d just wheel in with a wheelbarrow in the morning and clean up all the manure, which was at one end of the stall, instead of having it all over the place. It made it easier for me. With work horses, it made a lot easier to keep them nice and clean. So anyway, we got into a bit of an argument. I tore down what he had built and put it back the way I wanted it. I said,
Frank this is still my farm; I appreciate all the help, and I look after your horses. So I think it’s a reasonable tradeoff. Don’t jump to conclusions and say you want it your way because I pay the taxes. So, we got that solved.

**The Pig in the Shoe Store**

I had some really nice sows, and I kept them longer than anyone else. I ran them out in pasture, so I would get eight or nine litters out of them, instead of just four. And some of them got pretty big—about four hundred pounds. I had big sows. They were quiet sows because I treated them right. I didn’t kick them around or hit them, but this one sow went crazy in the heat when she farrowed. She smashed the door down in the barn, marched down to the pond, and had all her pigs there. When I heard the squealing, I went down there, all the little pigs were lying belly up in the pond. I was just furious. That’s a big loss for me. I feed the sow all this time—four months, and turn out and she had 11 pigs and they drowned. She didn’t know any better; she was lying in the mud. That would be on a Tuesday. So I put the hose on her the next day, and cleaned her up. I said, I’m taking you to Kitchener, the stockyards; I’m not taking any more of this. So we loaded her up, in an old beat up pickup truck we had, and took her to Kitchener. I had to go through Preston; the sow didn’t like being in the back of the truck. It was a Chev pickup truck with wooden racks. All of a sudden I heard this crash and I stopped at a stoplight in Preston, looked, and said, “Holy Christ.” The sow had lifted up the back of the wooden frame that held her down, and lifted it off. And she’s running down the main street of Preston. She was really running, too. She was panicking. And I stopped the
truck, and I ran after her, and she dodged between two parked cars and up onto the sidewalk and people were running to get out of the way. The more people yelled, the more frantic she got. So she ran into a shoe store. It was the summer time and the shoe store was really busy. And she ran in there and there was a whole pile of women in there—at least eight or nine—and two clerks, who were also women, and this great big thing like a goddamn elephant came tearing in and squealing. Well, the women were screaming and running out of the store in their stocking feet and the sow ran into the back of the room. And if you’re ever in a shoe store, they have these racks where all the shoes were all stored; but the racks are very flimsy. She crashed into one and took all the boards down, pushed everything down, boxes flying everywhere, shoes pouring out. I was standing there with my mouth open. I was in a panic. Just then, the sow decides she had enough of this shoe store, and she ran back out to the street, made a right hand turn and turned down this alley and it was the only alleyway in Preston that was a dead-end alleyway, so it had her boxed in. Two cops arrived right away. One cop reached for his gun, and I said, “What are you gonna do? Shoot it? You can’t do that.” He looked as nervous as hell. He didn’t want to have anything to do with this goddamn sow. And I said, “Just stand there and wave your hands. When she starts coming toward you, I’ll get my truck and back up in to the alleyway.” And one cop said, “I’m not standing here. I’ll help you with the truck or direct traffic.” And the other cop had to stand there and wave his hands. But the sow was so scared that she stayed in the back of the alleyway. So I backed the truck up the best I could. By now we had a big crowd watching. I backed it up and the sow took one look at that truck and I dropped the tailgate down—it was terribly
high off the ground—she ran to the truck, panic-stricken—it was the only thing she recognized. She jumped up with her front feet and couldn’t get her back feet up. And there’s two cops and myself with her back feet trying to lift this four-hundred-pound sow into the truck. Got her in. I latched the gate down and tied some wire on it. I had a little bit of wire in the front of the truck in case she tried to lift it again and the one cop said, “Where are you taking her?” And I said, “To the stockyards.” Then the other cop said, “Well, we want her out of town. You’ll have to come back after because you’ll have to answer for this. So I said, “I will. I promise.” They took my drivers license, number and everything—my address, and my name, and I took off and when I pulled off, there was a whole pile of people standing around the shoe store looking at all the carnage, and so the sow never gave me another problem. We drove to the stockyards in Kitchener to the loading ramp, she climbed off, and I signed for her, gave my name and address, so they could send me the cheque. I didn’t hang around. I’m in a real mess. And I drove back to Preston, and I went to the police station, and they said,” Well you’re going to have to see the owner; he’s in Toronto, but he’s coming back. So he’ll charge you.” So I went in and he wasn’t there. I talked to the woman behind the counter and she was laughing. “I have worked in the shoe business for 30 years and I have never had anything like this happen before. I thought the damned sow was going to run between my legs. So I jumped up on the stool.” And I said, “Well, tell the owner I’m so sorry and I’ll come in in the morning and sit down and figure out what the damages are. Well the Kitchener Waterloo paper and the TV station came out and took pictures of it. And I was just relieved that I wasn’t here, thank God. So I showed up the next morning,
walked in the store, and the owner came in to clean up and sort out all the shoes—’cause they were out of their boxes. He looked at me and said, “So you’re the guy who wrecked my place.” I felt terrible. “I’m so sorry. It was one of those things that happened.” And he started laughing. “It’s okay for you to laugh,” I told him, “but I’m the one who’s got to pay for it.”

“I tell you what,” he said. “I told the head office.”

“Now I’m in trouble. Savage Shoes?”

“They got so much damned publicity that we’ll just forget about it.”
Figure 11: My father running in a marathon race.
Running and Farming

I looked after the animals; ran my sows outside in the grass at St. George and I had a sow ready to farrow when I left for the games. And I said, “Peter, keep an eye on her. I don’t want her farrowing on the grass.” So Peter put her in the pen and she had eight or nine pigs.

I was at the games for three weeks; it was difficult to leave the farm for that great of time. It was July, before the grain harvest. I remember writing to him:

“Dear Pete, by the time you get this letter, you will be well into the combining. Hope that everything is going all right and that you are not finding it too difficult to handle."

Mostly, I was taking care of the farm at that time. When I was away, I worried about the farm—my family—and I thought serious about going to the games. Could I do it? Could I manage? Could they—Mom, Pop, and Pete—manage? Our whole life was wrapped up in that farm, and it just happened that I was going to the games in July before the heavy combining. Wheat. We had more barley and oats than wheat, but by the time I got back, the combining was done. It was 1954. I worked there til ’62. I quit running in ’58. I was married by then—1957—and that wasn’t really fair to Marion. I’m gone half the night running down to Brantford and back. So, it was just a little too much. I was still running well and winning races, but I thought I’d better stop at the top. Farming and running complimented each other. It allowed me to call my own shots as to when I’d train. I was up early in the morning with the livestock and run in the night. I ran with army boots in the winter time to strengthen my legs. I’d run from St. George to
Brantford. Managing chores and running. I trained three nights a week. I ran Highway 24. People knew me. They’d wave at me. I was young. I could take on a lot. Farming is a hell of a good profession if you’re healthy.

Figure 12: Letter my father sent to his parents from the 1954 British Empire Games in Vancouver.
During the British Empire Games, I met a girl out there who worked in an office—real friendly type—so I took her out a few times, but she was going on holidays, and she didn’t stick around for the games, for the race. But when the Games were over, she wrote back and forth, and finally said, “I’m coming east for a holiday, and I’d like to see you,” and I said, “Okay.” I wasn’t interested in anything serious—a romance—we were just having fun. So she came, and while I was there, the rodeo was on in Preston—a rodeo, now that was a big deal. And the rodeo organizers came out because they wanted to borrow my horses—two great grey Belgian horses, Vicki and Charlie. So, I said Okay. Why don’t you come out and see the buck ride. You ride. I don’t think so. And so, Eleanor arrived, and she brought a girlfriend she knew out west. The girlfriend was going with Al Utter—that’s how I met this girl, and so we drove out to the show and I was anxious to meet her in case my horses acted up. Anyway I got talked into riding the bucking broncos, so Al said “No friggin’ way I’m getting on one of those horses.” But I’d been living with horses for quite a while, so I wasn’t too worried. So it came my turn, and I was wearing a cowboy shirt and the whole thing. I was full of bullshit, I think. So anyway I thought I was going to do okay, and I got on the chute. You stand on the rails and drop on the seat. Of course, the horse doesn’t really do anything until you open the gate and he comes out and he starts. Well, he threw me out of the stall. I went ass over tea kettle over the gate and landed in the rodeo yard. They sure laughed like hell out of that. I was stunned. The horse didn’t even make it out. I just settled in the saddle and I was looking down to put my feet in the stirrups and all of a sudden, it just lifted its rump and I went flying. Oh it hurt. I hit my knee on the gate, rolled over on my side, and I
rolled real quick because I thought that horse is going to come back and trample me, but it didn’t. But the crowd busted themselves laughing.

Running and Farming: Pan American Games

Then a year later, I ended up going to Mexico for the Pan American Games. I still had a lot of responsibility on the farm, so it was tough to leave Mom and Pop. I had to run, I had to work some nights at the steel mill in Hamilton, and I had to farm. The farm came first to me. Then the running, then the job at Stelco. But sometimes the running came first, especially for the big competitions. But I never stopped worrying about the farm.

![Postcard](image)

Figure 13: Postcard my father sent to his parents as his plane to Mexico was arcing over St. George.

Anyway, I was flying to Mexico, and it was around six thirty in the morning. The flight left from Toronto, stopped in Chicago, then finally to Mexico. The plane takes a
little time to get up to altitude. Three thousand feet, four thousand feet—you can feel the plane lifting. Then it past over St. George—I’d say at four thousand feet—and I was looking out the window, and I recognized number 5 highway. Then I could see the village of St. George, and we crossed just a little left of the farm. This is the route you’d have to take to Chicago. The tractor was in the barn yard, but none of the animals were out, and I was always worried about the farm when I left. Pete, my brother, helped with the chores when I went to the British Empire Games the year before, but he wasn’t available now. He was starting up his business. So Pop and I took over, but Pop didn’t have to do any seeding or cultivating. He just had to make sure the hay was down from the mow for the cattle, and feed the pigs—it worked out well that way. But there he was walking out to the barn. I could make out this figure from the plane window. I knew it was Pop. There he was walking to the barn. I know I said in the card that I didn’t see him, but I did. I was joking with him. It would’ve been 7:00 o’clock by the time we passed over St. George. That’s the time Pop would be walking out to the barn to make sure the cattle had hay.

I didn’t take a permanent job till ’56. I didn’t think my running days were over but they were. I found that working all day and running half the night—sometimes 10, 12, 15 miles after supper—was a tough one to hang into, but I enjoyed both the work and the running. I’d run from St. George to Brantford, about 19 miles return and I tried to do that three times a week, and I’d race on Saturday. The running was my entertainment. I didn’t mind working and I didn’t mind training. If you really wanted to win a race, you
had to train, so that’s what I did. I had just ordinary women’s light running shoes and the shoes they have today are fabulous—but in those days, they didn’t have them. People knew me all the way up and down the 24 highway and I’d wave to them and they’d blow their horns and wave back. My mother was a little uptight all over this because she thought I was working too hard and running too hard.

Pete left in ’54, when I got back from the games. He’d had enough. We started in ’52. He said it was too much work for what you got out of it. You had to really like it. I liked everything about it: I liked growing things, raising livestock; I liked the independence of it. I didn’t need a car, I drove an old pickup truck. And if the girl I dated didn’t like the pickup truck, tough luck. But he left in ’54. I hung in until I ran in the British Empire Games. And Pete went to work for my cousin’s husband, Bill Hitchcock. Got his real estate licence and he never looked back after that. But I found that working as hard as I did still wasn’t enough to pay the bills. So I took a job with Swifts selling feed to feed mills because I knew the livestock business. So I got a job there because I had been in the British Empire Games. I sent in my application and listed that I did a lot of running for my hobbies, that I was in the British Empire Games, that I finished fourth, and that guy interviewed me in Toronto for Swifts—a meat packing house based in Toronto—he was a sports person himself. He played basketball on a couple of teams, and he said, “I’m gonna have this guy.” The discipline that sports gave me trained me for a lot of things in life. So I got a job there and it worked out well. My boss was Art McFarlane; he hired me for the meat division, but I wanted to get into the feed division. So when I heard there was an opening, I went down to Wyoming and got hired. Course
Art wasn’t very happy, but I said, “Art, you know damned well on my application I said I
was a farmer, had a farming background and I wanted to get into the feed business. So
anyway, I was sent to Coburg to work all week long. And that was no fun. Dad had to
cover things, hire somebody. Then an opening came up in the Niagara peninsula and that
worked out great because I could live at home, work the farm and sell feed, too. So that
worked out very well. I worked a couple of years for Swifts.
Figure 14: Marion, one year married.
Marion

Born in New Liskeard,
dughter to Margery May
born on an Ojibwa reserve—
her mother dying in birth.
(Daughter to Duke, Welsh miner
plundering the underground. Dead at
36, car smashed on a black-night road.)
Moved down to Hamilton at four,
words sharpened on Barton Street.
Schooled at Delta, hired by Bell, wore swish
New York clothes—listened to opera.
Met me—runner-farmer at 26. A fast courtship—
six months, two rides on the Flyer at the Ex
sealed the deal. Married. Had our first son.
Then a girl. Then another girl. Years, nothing
but pabulum and diapers and bits of sleep,
some laughter. Tears. Lots of tears. Moved her
to the quiet of the farm. Not even a car horn.
Some say she gained when I moved her there—
trading in bridge for canning, shopping for hulling
tomatoes. Others say she lost. Hard to say.
This kind of life. That kind of life.
All I know is that she made it all the way to the end.
And I am thankful for that.
My Wife

Marion came from the city, didn’t know anything about a farm, and it was quite a shock for her to realize how much work was involved and how late you’d work, how early you’d start—you’d work until dark, sometimes 10 or 12 hours a day. Then Marion was pregnant. I was out combining and Marion was walking all morning and afternoon, and my Mom kept on telling Marion that she needed to go to the hospital. And Marion was stubborn, said she wasn’t ready yet. I was on the combine, combining the wheat. I thought I saw something out of the corner of my eye. My Mom started waving a tea-cloth, and I knew I was in trouble. I took off. I got her to the hospital. A cop chased me all the way. Twenty miles to Brantford. I was speeding. When I pulled up to the hospital, he took one look at Marion, and said, “Good luck” and took off. He didn’t want anything to do with it.

So we lived on the farm in St. George, in a little pink war time house that was towed in on a flat bed. Mom and Pop stayed in the house. Marion seemed to like living on the farm, except now she had kids and she was worried about the pond. I kept ducks, geese, pheasants, and then I built a dry-shed. She was worried that one of them was going to fall in the pond and drown, but they knew enough to stay away from the pond.

St. George was a great place. There were other ways I made money. One winter, Ontario Hydro were running a tower line, a steel tower line across the back part of our farm, and you couldn’t stop them, but they would pay you something for the tower they put in, and they would also pay you for the trees you’d cut down—where the lines went through—so I took the job on. I worked most of the winter. This was all ice there. It was
a swamp there. So I cut all the wood down, burnt the brush and come spring, the trucks roll in with the equipment and a big tractor trailer. And we had a massive front lawn—probably an acre and a half of grass—that was just the way the house was set up, and I went out and had a nice chat with the foreman, and I said,” I haven’t been paid yet,” and he said, “Don’t worry son, you’ll be paid,” and I said, “Let me tell you this much. I worked my ass off all winter cutting this wood and I was to be paid months ago, and I haven’t been paid yet, so you don’t put up the steel line on my farm until you pay me. He looked at me and he said, “You’re kidding,” and I said, “Nope.” He goes and gets into his cab and he phoned down to Toronto and told his boss what the problem was and the boss down there said, “Tell the kid not to worry about it—I’ll have his check up to him the next day, and so he came back and said, “It’s all settled. I’ll have the check up to you the next day,” and I said, “Okay, tomorrow you start work. But until I have my check in my hand, nobody drives into my yard.”

And I got my money. A guy came out in a Cadillac with a black Hombre hat—a big shot lawyer. “You’re not exactly reasonable, Sir,” and I said, “Oh, I tell you what, if I don’t pay my hydro, you cut me off. Y’know—I make an income from that wood.”
Figure 15: Feature article in *The Hamilton Spectator*, December 19, 1963.
When Things Burn

I was always afraid there was going to be a fire. I had already burned one barn down once. I was raising turkeys and I was working for Swifts at the time and the turkeys were only two or three days old. One of the heaters backfired and it burned the barn down. I'm down in Beamsville and Marion called and the neighbour was there and he said your wife’s really upset and he said the barn is burning, and I said which barn, and he said the one the baby turkeys are in, and Will McCombe’s up on the roof of the other barn stomping out the sparks and I could’ve lost both barns. I lost the turkeys, though. I had a mess. I had to clean up the timbers and piles of rock.

As I was working for Swifts, Pfizer came along; it was just starting up a special Ag division. So Pfizer called me and I went down to talk to them. I didn’t negotiate that well. I didn’t get a big pay like I should have. Knowing what I know now, but I started to work. Things were working good, and I really enjoyed the work. It gave me the independence. I was just selling the St. George farm at the time, and we moved to Carlisle. The kids were really small: one, two, and three years old. That house burnt down, which was a trauma on Marion. She had a hard time getting over that. So did Curt. He was old enough to realize. The night of the fire—it was close to Christmas, a week before Christmas—I didn’t like being on the road because clients wanted to party and drink and if you said, “No, pass,” they sometimes took it as a bit of an insult, so I decided the week before Christmas I would head down to Peterborough early and start with the Quaker Oat Company Monday morning. This was Sunday. I started to go and Joe Wheatley drove in. I had hired him for Pfizer. He drove in with his wife and his kids and
they stayed for supper. There was no sense of me driving down in the dark, all the way there, so I said I’d get up early in the morning and head down. That was the night the fire started.

Caused by a badly installed fireplace. Built by a guy who knew how to build them, but he didn’t put any flue in and there was no insulation between the pipe going up and the brick and it overheated that night. We were very lucky to get out. Very lucky. I look back at it now, and think, My God, I owe my life to those two dogs I had, Duke and Charlie. They woke me up. I couldn’t smell any smoke. I came downstairs because I could hear the dogs barking, and the kitchen was ablaze. So I rushed up and said, “Marion, the house is on fire. Let’s get out of here.”

“What? What? What?” She ran to the hall window and opened it up. She wanted to throw the kids all out. I said, “What are you doing there? That’s the roof that is burning.”

So the stairs went straight out to the front door, and we never used the front door—we used the side porch door—and there was snow piled up. I ran up and I picked up our two-year-old, Barbara—she had a little nightie on—and I ran down the stairs and I couldn’t get the door open. I really had to slam it hard. And I got it open and I pitched her out in the snow, and I rushed upstairs and got Laura, and I always remember Barbara standing there—one foot hauled up around her waist, screaming her head off, fists clenched in the air. She was freezing to death. I threw Laura out and ran back up the stairs to get Curt. I couldn’t find him. He was hiding under the bed—panicking. So I reached under and grabbed him by the feet and scraped his back on the metal springs.
And I couldn’t get Trevor, Marion’s brother up. He was dopey as anything. I got him out. Then Marion and I hopped in a car. I had the car, the keys in it and everything in it, the luggage because I was going to take off in the morning. So I drove over to our neighbour, pounded on the door, and I left the kids. I went back, and by now the house was just an inferno. A couple of firemen there saying, “I think there’s kids in there; we gotta go in.” They were putting gas masks on. I said, “No, I got everyone out. All three kids and the wife.”

And they looked really happy, because they weren’t interested in going in that house.
We got burned out at Carlisle, then we moved to Kilbride, and we moved from Kilbride to Plains Road in Burlington; that’s when we got rid of the horses. Then I sold Lucky and I ended up selling Black Jack that summer. Kids in the neighbourhood sure liked him. I took Charlie, the big lab, there. But we left the horses in the barn for two months, and I’d drive up every morning and feed the horses, because I had Frank Loan’s horse and the colt, and I had Lucky Strike. And I left Duke, the other lab, there to stay with the horses. He liked the horses. And I went up there one morning and opened the door and the dog was gone. I never found him. I put an ad in the paper, talked to all the neighbours. I guess he went to the house, couldn’t find me, started tracking and left. I always hoped he didn’t get killed. I hoped he had gotten picked up by another family. Then Charlie got killed on Plains Road. I kept him chained up, but the neighbourhood kids came to play with him. He was big and gentle, but he loved to swim, and you couldn’t keep him out of the water. He just loved water. He got away from the chain, and he chased a rabbit across the 403 and got hit by a car. I’d had him for about three years. Beautiful purebred.

The house on Plains Road was a beautiful home—it really was. It had a tennis court, a garage, a carport. Mom really liked it. Right after that, I got a promotion to sales manager for Pfizer, regional manager of Ontario, which increased my money. And I was lucky—two of the three years, I had the top sales force. Really nice guys. And I fired the guys that weren’t working out. They said, “Why are you the boss? You don’t have a college education.” They were the poorest salesmen, and they felt that the company owed them a living. Entitled. So I got rid of most of them and I hired my own guys, and they
were great. They were all different. Joe was a hardworking guy, an Englishman. He knew farming pretty well because he had farmed in England. Joe Wheatley. And I hired Johnny Thompson, because I had worked with John at Swifts. Then I quit Pfizer because I was going to have to move to Montreal. So I quit and worked for my brother. My boss was thunderstruck. To get anywhere with Pfizer, you had to move to Montreal, and I didn’t want to move to Montreal.

Figure 16: My father and his friend sitting on the front porch steps.
Owen Sound: 1976

I went back to farming because
I couldn’t stand wearing a suit and tie anymore.
I couldn’t stand the cars and the sidewalks, cold.
I couldn’t stand the always shine of my black leather
shoes, the weight of my duffel bag,
the endless shuffle of paper, the in
and out box, the telephone calls.
That was no way to live.

I went back to farming because
I had to. I had to get back to the-land.
The sun. The earth. The barns.
I had to get back to something before all this.

Are you crazy, everyone said?
Oil prices and inflation skyrocketing.
Worst possible time to buy.
Worst possible time to buy a farm.
The Banks. 
*Sonsabitches.*
Before interest rates rose, they said borrow money.
After interest rates rose, they said borrow more money.
Many fine men hung from barn rafters
because of what those banks said.
Many fine men drank themselves into the ground
because of what those banks did.

So, I looked everywhere. All around southern Ontario—
*Belle ville, Or illia, Peterborough*—until I found that 148-
acreage just west of Owen Sound.
Until I found those two barns, empty and waiting.
And I filled them.

![Figure 17: Flossie with her piglets.](image)
The Last Farm

When I came up to Owen Sound, we came at one of the worst times in farming in 30 years, when taxes were up, when interest rates were up. You had to borrow money to farm—18 and 20 percent. Couldn’t believe it. Farms were being foreclosed. Banks were notorious for that. And you had to borrow. You couldn’t buy cattle for cash. You were trying to build up your equity.

The kids would get up and help feed the pigs in the summer. Mash was barley. Concentrated soybeans. Mixed it with water. All three kids would feed them, mostly on the weekends. They couldn’t go into a pig-barn and go to school. And I had these two special pigs. Skippy and Art. They had a weakness. Skippy got rolled on when she was a baby, so her back legs were paralyzed. So I took her out of the pen and made her a harness. Secured it with a rope that I fastened to a pulley so she could move around freely in the pen. She loved it. You could go right up to her and scratch her under the chin. She was that friendly. And Art—he got attacked by the other pigs. Really carved him up. Pigs can get pretty nasty with each other. So I took Art out of the pen and let him roam freely with Skippy. He never left her side. They were quite a pair, and when Skippy eventually died, Art sunk into a real depression. You could tell he was affected. He wouldn’t eat. Just stood there. So I put Art back in with the other pigs, but they started attacking him again, so I had no choice but to let him just roam by himself outside the pens.

He was like a dog that pig.

Summertime I’d let my sows go out into the field, two or three at a time. Once they get used to each other, there’d be no more fighting. I had a cow break her leg. She
was running and she tripped into a groundhog hole. I had to shoot her. But you treat your animals gently, you treat them well. I lost my temper a couple of times. One sow jumped out of the hog barn and she went into the pond and had the babies in the pond and they all drowned. That’s a loss. You have to feed them. I was averaging about 20 pigs, 20 wieners per sow. That’s high. But I really looked after them. I’d stay up at night, even in the cold winter, when they were farrowing. And every once in a while, they’d panic, and they’d step on them. And they’d step on another one. They weren’t doing it on purpose. I loved animals so much that I’d get a great kick out of it. Best job I ever had.

I had a lot of good pigs, but I never had a pig as good as Flossie. When I started my son, Curt, had to go out looking for her. I came home Wednesday night and she still wasn’t back, so I went out in the field and she was out along the fence line. She found a bale of straw and tore it all apart and had her pigs out there. Nine babies. She wanted privacy. She did that twice. Next time, she went out to the bush. She dug a big hole beside this maple log on the ground, and we looked and looked and looked, we went out to the bush, and didn’t find her. And Marion saw her ears poking out from behind the log, so we left her out there for three days. We could see her coming across the field with nine little wieners.
Piggery

I have a picture of three pigs. They were just out in the barn yard and I pastured all of them out in the fields in the summertime rather than in enclosed pens, which made them a lot healthier because they liked rooting around. These are two sows here, and that’s a boar. A young boar. I’d mix up some chop and some concentrate and some water and mix it into a porridge and pour it into a trough and they ended up loving it. They cleaned it up, they really cleaned it up. They know when feeding time was because they’d start to grunt.

Figure 18: Sows.
The Goose Man

One year we kept 1,300 geese, day-old goslings right through to market for Swifts, and out of the bunch, I kept maybe a dozen. They hatched every year, and we had geese for years to come. I also kept a lot of turkeys, and we’d butcher them every fall and sell them off at Christmas time. Sometimes, I’d climb up on the barn roof. It was easier to take a picture of the birds from up high.

Thirteen hundred goslings. The biggest problem was foxes and coons cause you couldn’t keep them in the chicken pen for too long and they had to get out and graze. And of course two-thirds was grass and one-third grain, and they’d be out in the field and coons would come by and grab them at night. So I had a station wagon at that time, and I put a mattress in the back and I slept out in the station wagon with the back pointed toward the field with my gun. And I shot a couple of coons and one fox. It seemed to stop them. Geese are an intelligent bird in some ways and stupid in another. I lost about eight geese that fell in a hole and they just piled on top of each other, so I had to go around and make sure all the groundhog holes were filled. In a farm where you’re bringing in hay, you have a lot of groundhog holes. It was just a waste of birds ‘cause they were a fair size when they’d fall in the hole and sit on top of each other and squash themselves. Probably 1,150 went to Swifts. I lost about 150 altogether. Swifts sent great big trucks out with cages and five men and they gathered the geese up. I know my youngest daughter, Barbara, was really mad because she thought they treated them really rough. But it was their job to deliver them and take them away. My job was to look after them. For that I got paid a certain amount of money. We put them in feedbags so they couldn’t break their
wings because they’d be flapping away. That was when we were taking them to the processing plant in Durham. There was a good profit in geese. When I sold the farm, I still had three geese left. Pets. They were probably 12 years old. They were watch dogs. They kept all the garter snakes away from the house. They loved snakes. One would grab one end, and another would grab the other end and they’d run around the house chasing each other with these garter snakes and Mom didn’t like these snakes, so we hung onto them for that reason. They’re good clean pets. The last three years, I never even put them away in the winter time. They were quite capable of sitting in a snowdrift as long as they got grain.
Figure 20: Gosling and geese.
Figure 21: Feature article in *The Sun Times*, December 17, 1983.
Christmas Delivery

The storms were really bad at that time—the late 70s. Sometimes you couldn’t get down the lane, so I drove my car down to the edge of the laneway, lug these geese down in bags because they’d already been processed and people would come and get them.

And I’d have the name of whoever would buy them—Mrs. Walker, Mrs. Cross, etcetera. When I sold the farm in 2010, I gave away the last three geese I had to a farm on the way to Wiarton. I couldn’t put them down. There’s no guarantees what will happen to them. I had five geese for a long time and a couple died of old age. They still tried to hatch eggs. Time and time again. But as the geese got older, their eggs became infertile, but they’d sit on twelve eggs and sit on them and sit on them until the eggs would blow up. They were rotten. Full of gas. Then they’d hang their head and trot off, and I’d have to take a pitchfork and clean their nests. They make their own nests along the fence line or somewhere safe and hidden. They were great birds to look after. They knew me. I know when I had the 1,300, they had the run of the whole farm and they’d go back to the bush and eat there. I climbed up on the barn roof one day and took a picture of them. I could see their trail going right back to the bush, and a guy from the local paper came out and took some pictures and he was astounded.

The last five geese all ran to the barn one night. They were hiding in the barn from predators. Two of them got it though. Foxes. Red foxes. I also had some trouble with neighbours’ dogs.
Geese

Those geese flapped, broke wings,
fought, snapped snakes, hatched goslings—sat
on eggs until they exploded.

Sat quiet and white
on snowbanks—fell to coons, fox, neighbours’ dogs.
Sold for Christmas geese—now that was me thinking
what can I do now for a few bucks?

Followed the trail of seed in the barnyard—
pecked at our scraps, bathed in pig troughs,
fled to the barn for safety—later two
carcasses, dead.

Two out of five, now three. Oldest
geese in Grey County. Twelve maybe fifteen years old.
I took those last three on that last day, rustled them
into a feed sack, feathers scattering, helluva noise
and drove them that last time on that last day
to the Bumstead’s on the county line,
where—hard to say—dunno—
what they’re doing now.
Figure 22: Two of the last three geese bathing in the pig trough.

Figure 23: Dad captures the last goose to go to the Bumstead Homestead.
Eggs

I head to the chicken pen first thing in the morning.
There will be squawking, a commotion
of feathers. Smell! Pinch your nostrils tight.

But once they know it’s me—they’ll settle down. Flap just a bit.
Then I go over to each laying box, see what they’ve left me.
One, two, maybe three eggs. They are beautiful
and brown-oval. I say to myself, My God, they’re perfect. Then I put them in my wire basket,
a couple of dozen at a time
and bring them into the summer kitchen.

I bring in the smell of chicken and straw and manure, as well.
(Marion keeps me out of her kitchen.
The summer kitchen is for me and my washing and cleaning.)
Then I run them under the tap, one at a time,
turn them like you’d turn a wrapped present.

Then I line them up on the dryer
and just look a while.

Figure 24: Farm fresh eggs lined up on top of the dryer.
Figure 25: One of the chickens peeking out of the chicken pen door.
Figure 26: Wheeling a load of manure out of the pig barn.
Cleaning

Every day, I’d clean the stalls. You couldn’t leave the manure pile up. I’d use the manure on the land. I really liked a clean barn, and I’d put shavings down. They absorbed well, and I’d put straw on top of it, and it would work very well. The Owen Sound barn was a cattle barn, but I turned it into a pig barn by taking out the stalls and putting in separate pens and the sows could have their litter in that pen all by themselves. But it was a labour-intensive deal, and I had to really go through the barn each day with a wheelbarrow and gather up everything. I’d work on two or three pens a day, so over the week, all the pens got cleaned up. I had a chap from down near Listowel come up every year, and he’d whitewash the whole interior of the barn, as well as the outside on the stonework. And it really just freshened everything up; it killed the flies and the smell. He’d spray in the barn with the sprayer. He’d spray with lime, and we’d put an insecticide in it as well. And it worked really well. It made it smell clean when you walked in—and it was bright, and well you could take city people in there. You take pride in your barn. I had two good barns. I played music in the barn. Always had music so the pigs wouldn’t get startled by a bad noise. The music seemed to quiet them down. It was a constant thing. Like white noise.
Figure 27: The Farmer's Advocate and Home Magazine. January 15, 1893.
Looking Back

You think the problems you have today are new problems, but they aren’t. Not at all. I bought a bunch of Farmer’s Advocate newspapers once—five of them in fact at a farm auction down near Chatham, and it was interesting because you read the problems they were having back in those days and this was really before the motorized vehicles came into play. So there was a lot on horses and special cows, and I’d always want to see what animals were selling for in those days compared to the 1970s. There was real estate in there—one of the finest farms in Manitoba, and it was going for $20 per acre. So it showed how values had changed so much from my time, and I liked reading the advertising in terms of what people were putting in the ads to sell—lambs—what they were asking for, and this was the forerunner of the big agricultural magazine, and it had all the information that a farmer would need—how to overcome weeds, how to overcome the present agricultural depression. It’s a history book to me; it showed how it was many many years before.

They had a whole veterinary section. Catarrh and sheep. You had to be a veterinarian.

Here’s a section here: “Why the Boys and Girls leave the farm.” That still happens. The problems two hundred years ago are the same as today. Listen to this:

How should we keep them [boys and girls] at home? In my mind, the solution is easy. Give them in as great a measure as possible, the coveted pleasures that lure them to town. What are they? Wealth is not one. … Let
the boys have some stock….it will yield them something better than
money. A harvest of knowledge. (Carson, 1893, pp. 35)

A lot of the problems that were shown up there still exist today. They existed in
the 50s. Young people were trying to leave the farm. They didn’t see the value in it until
they were older. There were a lot of jobs that weren’t hard work—they could get a job in
the store. They could see the bright lights of the big city. They could make a lot more
money driving taxi. You had to like farming, you had to like growing things, raising
things. And you had to like the family you were working with—your own family. There
was quite a lot of spite at time between brothers, somebody was getting more favours. It
was a bit difficult. Usually the oldest son got the farm, and the other sons went off to the
city. Pop did a little bit of farming toward the end. He didn’t grow things; he took care of
things when they were ready to come down. He liked driving the tractors. But he was
scared of the tractors at the start. You’re talking about a man who never drove a car until
he was in his 40s. He had to learn. But he liked being on the tractor, eventually. He got a
big kick out of it. I have memories of him on the tractor at dusk, with a cigarette—a
Peter Jackson—in his mouth, and he would be wearing a checkered flannel long-sleeved
shirt.
Owen Sound II

When I came to Owen Sound, I was in good shape, physically. I was looking forward to getting back to farming after being away for 12 years. But we came back to farming at the worst time in 30 years, interest on the money was so high, but you had to borrow money to farm—18 to 20 percent. I couldn’t believe it. Farms were being foreclosed left right and centre. Banks were notorious for that. But you had to borrow cash to farm. You were trying to build up your equity. Everyone in the family pitched in, especially those first couple of summers. Both Laura and Barb would help feed in the summer. Mash was barley and oats chopped up and mixed with soybean meal, and then it was mixed with water to make a slop. We feed them in troughs and by farm the most economical way to raise pigs to 210 pounds.
Drunk Piggery

I had some very nice sows and they were all coming in at various times so I didn’t have all the pigs at once. I liked to have at least one sow a week that was farrowing. To do that, you had to have your own boar. So I bought this boar down country and named him Joey. He sure grew fast. He knew what he was there for, and he was in such good shape that all the neighbours wanted him, so I’d trot him down the road with a stick and he’d just march along. Marion thought he was vulgar—I don’t know what she thought—how these pigs were going to be born. The sows were a good business. They provided money coming in each month year round. When I left it for 12 years and came back, well the hog business took a dive and it was down for five or six years. I worked my butt off and lost money on each sow.

I had another sow—one of the biggest ones I had, probably five years old. She walked down in between the cattle stalls and got her head into the ensilage in the silo. The ensilage was just put in, so the moisture was leaking through the bottom, and it was alcohol, and she got drunk. She drank and drank and drank, and she got so drunk she couldn’t move. There was just a narrow walkway that you could push a wheelbarrow through to get the ensilage out of the tower silo. So I had to leave her there, and she stayed drunk for a week until the ensilage stopped weeping. And once it dried up, she sobered up finally. She staggered backwards—you’d never have lifted her up as she was close to 450 pounds. I thought I was going to have to put her down, and she was determined to drink that stuff—she loved it. I remember going in every morning to see if she had sobered up—the ensilage was corn liquor, whiskey. The ensilage was in the silo.
You put it in green and quite wet and it would dry out in the silo and the moisture would drop down and come out the bottom, and the sows were set up so the water would drop out and run into the laneway. Except this damned sow got out of her pen, and she smelled it and went up and you couldn’t turn her around, so she kept drinking and got drunk and stayed drunk for a week.
Figure 28: My son, Jack, feeding the grey mare.
Fence

He’d get up on that cedar fence,
the one I built when I first got here
and just look. His eyes fixed on the
grey mare I had in the barnyard. And
he would wait—sugar cube in hand—
until the mare would amble over.
Nostrils flaring, tail swatting flies.
That was all he needed—
a horse, a horse licking a cube,
small and sugary, off his small hand.
Figure 29: My father fixing the roof of the barn.
Barn

She hated it when I spent any money on it.
When I fixed the roof. Christ was she mad then.
Tied a rope around my waist and got up there anyway.
I nailed all those sheets of metal. I wasn’t afraid of falling.
It looked different up high.
I could see the turkeys—the reds of their necks.
The pheasants pecking the ground.
She always made him stand at the bottom by the truck,
though—where I had tied the rope. She made him watch for me.
Made him look up. I didn’t ask my son to climb up on that roof.
That was my job.

The House

He never fixed the broken doors. There were no locks
the 35 years he lived there. Windows icecicled in the cold.
Floors creaked.
The fridge bumped Freon at night.

But the barn. He’d throw a thick rope around
his waist—tie one end to his pick-up truck, and climb
that gilded ladder—climb that beanstalk to the top.
No giant waiting. Just shingles, old and foddent,
Ready to be ripped. They fell like flotsam to the ground,
Scattering the geese and turkeys. Then he shined up the roof
with new tin sheets. God, you shoulda seen it then.
You could’ve skated on that roof.
He watered flowers, he watered all living things.

Return to the Garden

I’ve been planting a garden since I was six years ago. Pop wasn’t around most of the time; he was in the hospital. Gas attacks in the First World War. And he’d be out in the summer, but he couldn’t dig the garden very well. The first garden was on Guelph Line in Burlington. Pop had a little chicken farm there. He rented the place, and we had a garden there. And I’d plant all the greens—carrots, potatoes. My mother helped me. She was a really good gardener. The last year we were at Guelph Line, Pop bought a scuffler. It was a machine that went down between the rows and took the weeds out. But he couldn’t push it himself. So he tied a rope around me and tied it around the scuffler, and I’d walk ahead and pull it.

But growing things was something I learned early in life. Torrence Street in Burlington is where I really took off with gardening. I grew blueberries, strawberries—I grew enough so I could ship them off to Toronto. I had a big garden on Brant Street in Burlington, as well, and a whopping garden—six acres of tomatoes, one acre of strawberries—on Walkers Line. It took a lot of work, but it was a great sense of accomplishment. When I moved to St. George, I was so busy with the cattle, that my Mother did most of the garden. I’d plow it, and she’d take the scuffler. When we moved to Owen Sound, then I had a really big garden—raspberries, strawberries, potatoes, tomatoes, beets, carrots—the whole gamut. I never had a disaster with any of the gardens. They all grew, some more than others. There was no such thing as a drought.
Planting: May Long Weekend, 2012

I’m going to get a rope. You follow me. We’re going to put in tomatoes, lettuce, peas, beans, radishes, all the regular stuff. The only thing I don’t have is lettuce. I should’ve picked it up. I didn’t have a chance to do a garden last year. I was feeling too tough. The garden is going to make me feel terrific. Animals and gardens are different all together. Animals need attention every day; a garden doesn’t.

We’ll make rows now. We’ll stick in a broken stick and tie a piece of string. We’ll start with a few seeds in each hole. We’re going to make up lines here. Mom used to help me plant the six acres. I’d get it nice and cultivated. We’d walk with boards on our feet and nails and mark the garden like a checkerboard. We’d walk and mark it.

We’ll put the cages around the tomatoes when they get bigger. I’m worried about coons and rabbits getting at the tomatoes. We need two feet between the tomatoes—you got to remember that they like to spread out.

Tomatoes.
Figure 30: Jessie and Jodi in the truck.
Truck
All I had to say was “truck,” and they’d come running. Those two cross-hounds I bought as a pair, couldn’t/wouldn’t separate. Marion took one look at the sister, and she said, “We’ll take her, too.” So we did. Jessie and Jodi, Curt named them—one more Shepherd, one more hound. Jessie, the Shepherd didn’t like rain or storms, would crawl belly-to-the-floor into the safety of the bathroom. Jodi would whimper and lie close to my feet.

But the look on their faces when they knew they’d be going for a ride in the ‘78 pickup. Around the barnyard to unload feed, or to pick up wood. It didn’t matter. I’d open the door and they’d just jump in, Jodi on one side, and Jessie on the other. Tongues long and sloppy.
The day I drove into town to pick up feed, my right arm suddenly stopped. The dogs were in the truck. I couldn’t just go to the hospital. I had my dogs. So I asked the guy to reach for the keys in my pocket, and I drove home, my left hand on the wheel—Jessie and Jodi licking at my limp-stroke-frozen arm.
Haying

When you go inside, there are all sorts of things. Old grain, horse dander.
The hay mow leans a bit.
‘Member when you kids lifted the bales off the bailer, screamed when you saw a snake. disappeared between the haystacks, your arms saving you at the last minute?
They were times all right. We were all together. That’s what I remember the most.

Figure 31: The hay mow.
SECTION II
Changes

They don’t bring in loose hay anymore. They don’t bring in small bales anymore. They have big round bales, and they leave them out under plastic. They don’t keep their cattle in a barn anymore. They keep them in sheds. Farmers used to have a lot of kids or they could hire help for labour and board for a couple of bucks a week. But you can’t do that anymore. Farmers got into bigger farms. They bought bigger equipment and bigger tractors. They couldn’t drive these tractors into a bank barn. They’d fall right through the floor. Some of these tractors are worth $150,000 CAD. So they went into these big round bales and they’d stack them outside and put tarp over them. All of a sudden, barns became specialized. In my day—the barn in St. George is a perfect example—there was a cattle section, a pig section, a chicken section. In those days, the farmer was a family-operated farm and you didn’t specialize in one thing. Every farm had pigs. Every farm had chickens. Every farm had some cattle. Every farm had a market garden. They don’t do that anymore. The barn is part of the farm, so they’re not going to tear it down if they’ve kept it up. Even if they don’t have livestock, they need to put their equipment in there. They can store their small equipment in there, boats—any number of things.

It’s when they let their barns go. It’s when they let their barns go, they tear them down. Other times, they don’t have any use for barns. They don’t want to pay for the upkeep, because any building requires upkeep. You gotta paint them. You gotta fix windows, doors, or they fall apart. You drive by some farms where they’ve never used the barn in years, and it’s almost ready to collapse. There were three of them along 26 highway to Collingwood, and each year, I’d drive by, and they’d be in worse shape, and
one day, the wind just blew them down. It used its time. It’s just a pile of wood. So people come around and cut it up for firewood. Farming has changed. People aren’t building big barns anymore. They’re building sheds! They crumble onto the floor of the wood stove in a heap of grey-white ash. They’re building sheds because the haying has changed. You don’t bring in loose lay. And you don’t bring in small bails anymore. Me. I’d go up to that top of that barn. I’d climb that wooden ladder. Get up there, throw down six bales, and they’d come crashing down onto the floor, and I’d come down and break them loose with a pitchfork. It was hard work, but it was satisfying work.
The Last Barns

1976 to 2011.

That’s the longest time.
The longest stretch. No one was going
to make me sell my farm until I was ready.
I still wasn’t ready when it came to the time.

*The one barn was good.*

*The other one not so good.*

The doors didn’t slide so well. The geese would go in there
and hide from the coons. I lost three of my geese
that summer to the coons. The other three hid
in that barn. A couple fell through the floor
and landed in the bottom where I kept my boats.

Safe down there.

Figure 32: My father’s sailboat in the bottom of one of the barns.
Keys

In 35 years, we never had any locks on the doors. *Hell, didn’t have to.*

I had my neighbours.

I had my geese.

I had my two dogs.

But then, I had to sell the farm.

Had to have a locksmith come.

in a big black truck. The words *Lock Ready.*

He fitted each door. The front, the side, the back with a lock,

The way you’d fit a prisoner with an ankle bracelet.

And then he shut those doors.

And nobody ever came through those doors again without knocking first.
Trees

When we first moved up there,
I lined the driveway with hockey sticks,
Black tape still clunged around the handle.
Then I planted trees—12 feet apart, 24
on each side. They grew each year
with the hay, with the kids, with the highs
and falls of the weather.

They grew until
there was a small forest straight
as an arrow to the blue rectory church door
of the farm house.

When we left, they cut down each
tree. I could hear each tree-body fall.
It was a hard and cold falling. The measure
of our 35 years there. They wanted the space
and wind instead.
Selling the Farm

I didn’t want to sell the farm.
I could’ve stayed there.
I could’ve stayed there until the end.
But my grandson wasn’t going to grow up on this farm.
My son was no longer with us—no—*he was a great boy.*
My two daughters. Well, they do what they do.
   So I sold the farm. It was that easy.
It was that hard. And I watched my kids
haul everything out of those barns—my feedbags,
harnesses, ten-inch nails, old windows, ropes,
electrical supplies, skeets.
   I watched them put everything
in a pile, then I’d walk around that pile with a stick,
check the pile, poke a bit, put a few things
here and there.
   Mostly back in the barn where
they belonged. That would get them upset.
They’d haul it out again in the dark and I’d check
the pile in the morning, and put it aside.
Eventually, they won.
   See, we both won.
I brought my pile to the new house, and they cleaned
the barn. Cleaned it good like you do before you’re ready
for something. Wash up good. Christ—
   you could have eaten off those floors.
And I walked around in that hollow shell—*hallow*—
   Looked up at the rafters—those hay/straw-barren rafters—
   and just looked.
I couldn’t believe it. The *emptiness.* And I thought,
There’s no way in hell hay will ever fill these barns
again. And I was right. They took the barns
down right after that. Right to the bare foundation.
And I will never go back.
—Hallow—
—Hallow be *thy name*—

Figure 33: My father walking into the empty barn, except for two TVs.
Figure 34: My father gazing at his old treasures taken out of the barn.

Figure 35: The pile of scrap wood taken from inside of the barn.
Figure 36: Inside of the barn, empty.

Figure 37: Fallen debris, including a Lush For Sale sign. Lush Realty is owned by my uncle, Peter.
Song

My pitchfork is raised.
I fall onto the prongs of those soil cutters. No one looks.
Reflection

In the morning, I looked out at the fields.  
In the evening, the fields looked out at me.  
Mornings always made room for another morning.
   When I farmed, I lived, when I farmed, I felt,  
and when the farm left me, I didn’t leave the farm.  
   I still farmed in my mind.
Figure 38: Workers starting to dismantle the barn.
The Razing

When we got there, they had already started.
I could hear the sound of barn boards torn
from their hewed sockets. I could hear the yellow
voices of old straw. My daughter went first. She led
me through the long tired grass of the barnyard.
I could hear the sledgehammers. The joy
of their pounding. Taking away, breaking down. They.
It wasn’t their barn. They weren’t a part of it.
They had no feel for the farrowing. No memory of hay.
They had their shirts off. Like this was some sport.
My daughter kept looking up at them—searching.
They shouted to each other above the hammering. A cigarette fell.
And then my barn just receded into the earth, until the bareness
of its foundation—its hulking fossil of white limestone—
grounded and rubble.
Taking the Barns Down

You know how much the new owners got from those guys who tore down those barns? Two thousand dollars. Two thousand dollars for two massive 3,600 square-foot bank barns with hand-cut wood from the bush. Those beams ripped out of my barns—they’re going into furniture, they’re going into slabs for a wall in a rec room, they’re going into somebody’s new home in the city. They’re not in a barn any longer. They’re somewhere else. They’re somewhere else now. So when they took down my barns, I couldn’t believe it. They were beautiful barns. My cattle lived there—50 head. My sows—Flossie, Miss Pickie, Joey the Boar. Marion—she even loved those sows. She would go out into the field looking for Flossie. She always had her piglets in the field. She was different. A bit of a loner. Then she would go back and look for her, see her pink ears sticking through the long grasses, and she’d yell, ‘Barry, here she is, I’ve found her,’ and she’d be so damned relieved, worrying that those babies—Flossie’s babies were going to die, and I’d just laugh, and say, ‘Flossie’s not going to starve her babies, Marion.’ No animal—no pig, no mother is going to purposely starve their babies.

That was a hard day. Seeing the barns taken down. I couldn’t wait to get out of there. I had to go. My boats were in there. My motor boat. The one I sunk off the Muskoka docks. Remember? And my sail boat. I built that boat myself when I was 16. Sailed Vic Damone around in that boat in the Burlington Bay when I worked at the Brant Inn. I had to get my boats out of the barn. Those guys didn’t care about my boats. They just wanted the barns down. I could hear the hammering, the beams crashing.
The barn cats. What was going to happen to them? I had made a deal with the new owner. She was supposed to look after the barn cats. I told her she’d need a few cats in there. Every barn has cats. She promised me she’d feed them. I’d go out there every morning and leave food and milk. Now what was going to happen to those cats? Those guys with their shirts off, tearing my barn apart, they don’t care about my cats. They just want the barn down.

Figure 39: My father walks past the barn as it is dismantled.
Figure 40: The demolished barn, photographed from the concession line.
The Barn, Broken

The beams.
The posts.
The lofts.
The columns.
The bays that separated the columns.
The rafters.
The purlins supporting the rafters.
This is the barn they tore down.
Figure 41: Victorian concrete ornaments that topped the gate posts at laneway entrance.
The Newels, Lopped

They were just lying there in the grass—cold, weighted.
And I thought to myself—

My God, they really did it. They took the barns down. They took the farm apart. They took the balls right off the farm.
Figure 42: The house and the fallen barns.
Aftermath

They yanked and they pulled,
they cut and they sawed,
you threw and you heaved until every piece,
every beam, every barn board, every sound and every colour
of those two barns lay heaped in a mess of bruised wood.
Then they put down their hammers and pickaxes,
you put away your saws and your wire clippers,
got into their big fendered trucks and drove off—
these eight bare-breasted men—had taken down my barns,
my bit of history, had scraped a bit of the landscape away.
I began to feel cold, I couldn’t breathe.

I sank into that grass, my body flattened down, too.

My heart.
And I thought, what am I to do now?
Where am I to go? And I didn’t know the answer.
So I got up and just kept walking.
Figure 43: Dad as a toddler.
A Man and A Dog

He weighs 5.6 pounds, tiny hands and feet, a mouth that can’t latch onto his mother’s breasts. She feeds him formula and special vitamins from a dropper, grows him to five-foot-six. He wants to play football, but he’s too small, wants to become a fighter pilot, but he’s too young. He runs instead. He runs every day in army boots, a white peaked cap, red shorts and a maple leaf tank top. He runs from St. George to Brantford, from Hamilton to Toronto. He runs around the Bay in Burlington, the hills of Boston and New York, he runs the heat of Mexico City, the rain and fog of Vancouver. He collects trophies and ribbons, lunches with the Duke of Edinburgh. He dates girls taller than him, richer than him. He courts well. Always opens the door, pays for dinners, brings flowers, spends all his food vouchers on a Danish girl he meets on the train to the British Empire Games in Vancouver.

He talks about the first time he met his wife, how he took her on the roller coaster at the exhibition—not once but twice—how she threw up in his white-peaked cap, how she knocked his socks off—her New York clothes—how lucky he was, this farm boy from St. George. He says, Well, I’ll be, son-of-a-gun, plays the ukulele, the gut bucket, sings the first eight bars of Tommy Dorsey’s I Can’t Get Started every Valentine’s Day. He names his children with care—Barbara after his sister, Laura after the song, Curt, after a southern boy from South Carolina who gave him his dog tags so he could feel for himself the weight of the Second World War around his neck.
He can parse plants, differentiate a good bale of hay from a bad one, oats from wheat. He loves spring and summer, winter and fall. He packs up his kids and wife every year and takes them to campsites in northern Ontario. He shows them how to bait a hook, cast a line, make the lure dance under water—when to throw back a fish. He takes them to P.E.I., Expo—finds a tent blowing down a street in Lethbridge. He sinks his boat off a Muskoka dock, waterskis into an island, lands on a cow when skydiving.

He spends hours in his barns, intoxicated by the sweet-thick aroma of silage, runs his hands up and down the roughened hand-hewn beams, shoots rats buried in feedbags, watches his cows huddled in the lower barn, the whip and run of his horses across the field, walks the concession fields, pauses so he can watch the graceful line of his barns rising out of the landscape. He raises birds—turkeys, pheasants, geese that run toward the sound of his boots in the barnyard. He guards their eggs hidden in the long grasses, sleeps outside at night with a gun tucked under his arm, shoots at anything that moves.

He watches sports every night in a black Lazy Boy, fully reclined. He sits with the remote in his hand and switches back and forth between hockey and boxing, football and baseball. He pulls his Lazy Boy close up to the TV, presses his ear against the screen so he can hear the sound of a hockey puck zinging across the ice, jumps off his chair when a football cleaves into the hands of a running back, shouts, Touchdown!
He keeps his pockets full. Lifesavers, sticks of gum, broken toothpicks, a set of nail clippers, old lotto 6-49 ticket with the numbers circled in pen, loose chain, balled up gum wrappers. He can never find his glasses, his wallet, his car keys. He drives off with piles of laundry on the hood of his car, forgets his 7-year-old son in a gas-station washroom, drives back half an hour later to find him balled up and crying on the bathroom floor. He always remembers birthdays and anniversaries, the exact time when the tufted heads of his kids crested his wife’s birth canal. He can tell you when an egg will hatch, when a sow is sickly, when it’s time to walk away from a crop of tomatoes.

He knows how to build a fence-line, clean a gun, remove porcupine needles from the snout of a dog. He sits you down on Remembrance Day, tells you about Gallipoli, Dieppe, how his own father—a bullet in his chest—ripped off his gas mask, sucked in the mustard gas, those burned lung-shreds. He can sail a 60-foot boat into the Caribbean Sea, tie a tourniquet, break up a field with a discer. He is agnostic, anti-Church, sings the last three lines of “The Seafarer”—Amen, Amen, Amen.

He loves the open. An open window, an open field, the open arms of his children, the openness of Canada. He believes in freedom, democracy, capital punishment. He watches actions, Westerns—anything with Clint Eastwood and Charles Bronson. He intervenes in fights, gets black eyes, broken ribs. He likes money, but not saving it—prefers the pull of a slot machine, the slap of cards in a blackjack game.
He buys three of everything: three weed wackers, three hammers, three lawn mowers. He buys cars, forgets to change the oil, waits till the last minute to signal left, stops to pick up hitchhikers. He talks to anybody, doesn’t drink, smoke. He goes to the grocery store, comes home with sticky buns and butter tarts, *three of everything*. He names his farm animals, splints their broken legs, constructs elaborate hoists and zip lines for pigs crushed and hobbled. He spends hours rubbing their bellies and ears, mutters *goddamned-son-of-a-bitch pigs* when he takes them to the abattoir.

He always owns a dog. Dogs follow him everywhere—behind his tractor, into the barn, grocery stores, belly-crawling up the aisles.

He flies the Union Jack on July 1st, votes conservative, extols the dangers of communism when his son writes to Russian pen pals. He argues with him about everything, food, music—the way the world carves itself up. His son orates human rights, the hypocrisy of American policy, corporate greed. He says, *Hey son, wanna play catch? Shoot a puck? Not today, Dad*, his son says.

He packs away the hockey sticks, baseball gloves, studies his son instead. Learns about his world, the *other world*, sends his spare change to Nicaragua, spends whole summers with his son jumping the waves of Sauble Beach, watching the same movies, talking about history—long past arguing—his world just a little more open. But slams shut when he learns that cold October morning that his son, his oldest child, Curt, named after Curt Ayers, that southern boy from South Carolina, is now gone.
He gets old, gets sick, his heart falters. He talks to his dead son about what’s wrong with American policy, burns the Union Jack, votes NDP, and when his dog can no longer eat, he lays his 81-year-old body down on the cold basement floor beside his dog, says, *You can’t go, too. Not you, too.* He rubs his dog’s ears. *There there boy* when the dog has a seizure, *Easy boy,* as he walks him around and around the yard until even he—this five-pound-six-ounce baby now grown into an old man, this runner, this farmer, this fighter, this father who lost his son, his oldest child named after that southern boy from South Carolina—cannot save his dog, that dog who followed him behind his tractor, and the dog just drops and stiffens onto the grass, and the man does not move, just sits for a time under the willow tree in the hot August afternoon and thinks about his dog.

Figure 44: Dad as a teen with one of his first dogs, Bud.
Figure 45: The barn, stripped of boards, still standing erect.
How It Carriages

It stands—bare, unadorned, foundation
girthed to the rough stubble of earth.
Like him, every year, it ages. Boards
hooked by wind. Lime walls
crumbled. Like him, it does not complain.
It is filled with what it needs to be with—
sustenance, life. The egregiously rickety
of once-good parts now broken.
Like him, when it’s time—or when it’s not time,
It will be taken
down. And it will fall and the earth will
harden a little.
Figure 46: The silo flush to the side of the barn.
The Barn Speaks: II

I remember hay, straw against my beams.
I remember the chyick of the grain elevator,
the burn of ropes on my beams. No man
hung from my beams. No man died of my wood.
A pony sought me out once. Old and teeth-rot,
it just lay down. His owner, that man, that farmer,
that man who let the hammer-men take me down,
he sat down beside that pony and cried.
Figure 47: Cat in the empty barn.
Last Words

I can’t tell you how I feel about my barn.  
It’s a place I’ve always known.  
Every farmer has a barn.  
*To take it down?*  
*To take it down?*  
That’d be a terrible thing.  
I got cats in those barns. *My hay.*  
35 years I’ve had those barns. Listen a minute. Can you hear the boards?  
Gnawing of oats? The smells?  
Like a tractor just getting going.  
The land turning over.  
The sow farrowing in the sluice.  

I had a pony not too long ago.  
The pony went in there to die.  
How would that pony  
have died if not for this barn?
Reflection: Arts-Informed Inquiry

This arts-informed thesis involved three different inquiries: life history, poetic, and visual inquiry. By incorporating more than one method of arts-informed inquiry, I was able to represent my father’s story in multiple ways. First, life history inquiry allowed me, as researcher, to understand my father’s experience, and by extension to understand the plight of the small Canadian farmer whose farms and barns are slipping away. It also allowed my father to speak his life history using his own words, his own trajectories, and his own particular mannerisms as story teller. In short, life history inquiry allowed me to validate and pay homage to my father’s life story, while at the same time extend his story beyond the personal to the societal. Life history inquiry also enabled me to adapt John Dewey’s idea of a “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 1) that embodies time (the present), place (my father’s small rural farm in Ontario) and sociality (my interaction as researcher with my participant, my father, in a mutually beneficially dyad in which I both listened and attended to his stories. In doing so, I honoured Clandinin and Caine’s (2008) notion of a reflective and reflexive inquiry that constituted a collaborative learning experience between my father and myself, and hopefully between the story and the readers themselves.

As a practicing poet, I have been using poetic inquiry as a means to understand and know the world around me for almost three decades now. My job, as a poet, is to both delve into and explore the human condition, to answer those questions that are hard to answer and articulate: “What does this experience feel like?” and “Why do we feel the
way we do?” In this thesis, poetic inquiry allowed me to interpret and reflect upon my father’s narrative, aiming at both an epistemological and ontological understanding of his life and experiences. Poetry allowed me to reframe my father’s stories in poetic form, further distilling and freezing his life moments, giving way to a deeper frame of experience. The rich Anglo-Saxon word play, as well as the emotive lyricism of poetry create a textual place where both the head and the heart can equally comingle, yielding both a visceral and cerebral reading experience and understanding of “story.” Poetic representation offered an alternative to the often-times inaccessible language of the human heart and a vital space and platform from which I could quietly exam my father’s stories. Moreover, poetry often became a surrogate for the depth of emotions and feelings that my father hinted at but could not articulate during the taped transcripts.

As a way to push my own artistic boundaries, I incorporated a visual approach in the forms of photographs taken over various stages of my father’s life, ending with the final stage of dismantling my father’s two barns. Using various techniques as outlined in The Art of Visual Inquiry (2007), edited by Gary Knowles, Teresa C. Luciani, Ardra L. Cole, and Lorri Neilsen, these photographs spoke when poetry or my father’s narrative was not enough. They also served as oral prompts that triggered my father’s memory of his life spent on the farm. All three methods of inquiry served and reflected back on one another, culminating in a alternative form of representation that, hopefully, speaks to the reader.
Epilogue

As children, my brother, sister, and I would run into our parents’ room every Saturday morning. Mom would already be up, making breakfast, dad would still be lying in bed as expected. Then the ritual began: “Dad,” we’d ask, “Can you tell us a story?” He would think a bit, sit up, and recount tales from his past.

We were mesmerized: stories of near muggings in Chicago, escaping the notorious Inchberry Gang in Dundurn Park; hitchhiking from Burlington to the Palais Royal in Toronto. What we didn’t know at that time was that he was building our family narrative, one that would grow every Saturday morning with a new story. As he told these stories, we began to understand who he was, and by extension, who we were, or the possibilities of who we could be. Curt, the eldest, learned to stick up for the little guy, to shape himself into a compassionate advocate for others; Barb learned to enact out her own stories, creating her own narrative of mischief and mishaps, Huck-Finning her childhood every chance she got. I picked up my own pen and started to write my own stories; some real, others not.

However, some point along the way, the Saturday morning ritual ended and only occasionally we’d share our family narrative—this time around the kitchen table—until, eventually, our storytelling all but came to an end. We were busy, had more important things to do. Then, years later, I got the chance to drive across Canada with my father. During that three-day car ride from Alberta to Toronto, where I was living as an undergraduate student, my dad and I began to share stories again. The idea was to keep each other awake—the guy who wasn’t driving had to tell the other a story, and by the
time we reached the Saskatchewan border, we had run out of stories. So we picked up hitchhikers who willingly filled us with more stories. At the end of that trip, my father and I had released our stories: we felt both invigorated and freed.

How does this all relate to my work as a graduate student in Curriculum, Learning, and Teaching? A lot and not at all. It all depends on how we weave and connect our pasts with our present, interpret our roles as teachers, how we position story—our own stories—as tools of self-analysis, reflection. Stories allow us to reach an understanding that extends into a connection with the human condition itself. Our stories speak to each other in a way that validates, clarifies, and distils human experience. Specifically, the further I entered into my father’s story, the more I began to understand my own role as a daughter in our family narrative, my role as a teacher vis a vis my students, and my greater role as a person in society. I began to understand that the power of story lies in its cathartic release for the story teller and its power to affect or resonate with its listeners. As a teacher, I now understand more than ever the importance of letting my students tell their stories so that they, too, can express, validate, and acknowledge their own personal histories, giving meaning to the act of writing beyond its structural framework.

And what does an architectural structure like the barn have to do with storytelling? I learned that we all have iconic objects that speak of our lives; my father’s iconic objects have always been his barns. They represent a structure whose sheer largesse has the capacity to “house” his complex emotions, his feelings of joy, sadness,
and loss. After the barns were dismantled, I would walk the streets of Owen Sound and
inevitably, one or two people would stop me and say, “You took down the barns.”

I knew what they were thinking, feeling. A violation had happened, a historical
transgression of some sort, a deliberate attack on and carving out of our rural landscape.
Where the barns once stood was emptiness: a glaring and unsettling omission which
could not be replaced. However, I realized that barns were not completely eradicated
after all. Those eight men who took down the barns could not take down the
foundations; they could only plow them over.

That’s the barn’s strength. That’s the story’s strength.

Which brings me back to the power of story and the power of narrative inquiry.
Our “storied lives” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) are the unshakeable foundation in
which our lives our built. We only need, then, the opportunity to tell our stories, we only
need someone to ask that timeless question, “Tell me a story.”
References


