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Farming evolves: Get over it

By WILLIAM THORSELL
Monday, May 20, 2002 – Print Edition, Page A13

We are just back from visiting the cliff dwellings of the Anasazi people at Mesa Verde, Colo., their move to the cliffs an apparent result of dramatic changes in the prospects for farming around 1000 AD. And then another report comes out in Canada about the changing economics of farming here in the 21st century.

My parents grew up in the 1920s and 1930s in New Norway, Alta., a town of about 300 people that serviced the densely populated quarter-section farms in the immediate area. One grandfather owned the hotel, the general store, the creamery and the mortuary. The other ran the lumber mill. Each made his living by selling to farmers, and to other townspeople who sold to farmers. An agricultural service centre, New Norway had a vibrant social and political life centred on the school and church.

Today, New Norway is just a remnant of houses scattered around the emptiness of the former town. A sad thing? To some. A bad thing? No.

The fall of New Norway reflected vast improvements in technology and the quality of life for ordinary people. The first big hit came when they paved the road to Camrose, a much bigger town 20 miles away, where the local farmers soon went to shop for more variety at lower prices. They bought much bigger, more efficient farm equipment that required much bigger acreages to finance. So the quarter-section farms became one-section farms -- eliminating three farm families per square mile. And then one-section farms grew into multisection spreads that supported even more productive machines and technologies.

Cousins who started out feeding the cattle with pitchforks went to agricultural college to learn about the chemistry of fertilizers, the environmental benefits of crop rotation and stubble, tax laws, accounting and computer management of inventories. And New Norway died.

It was accepted by that generation with equanimity. It wasn't just that people's incomes rose, and the real price of farm produce dropped. Most importantly, it allowed the grandchildren of those farmers and small-town suppliers to study history, art, law and economics at universities around the world, and to work in diverse and interesting jobs.

Whose quarter-section grandfather would not be happy that his granddaughter had the option to farm much more land with much more efficiency for much more income -- or be the CEO of a biotech firm? Would that grandfather now rant on about a "lost way of life" and the awful disappearance of New Norway?

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If politics had allowed it then, would that grandfather have fought to retain the quarter-section farm (or fishery) through vast regional development programs, protectionist subsidies and chronic dependence on unemployment insurance programs to keep a parochial and inefficient lifestyle alive -- purportedly in the interest of his children?

The Anasazi people had no choice. They lived as farmers for some 700 years on the high mesa overlooking the desert below, irrigating crops of corn (the most efficient cereal in nature for converting sun and water to food) and creating villages of many rooms centred on communal *kivas* half buried in the ground. And then, apparently, the water ran out.

Suddenly, the Anasazi started building dwellings into the cliffs along the deep canyons that rent their lands -- places requiring enormous effort to construct and inhabit. Most of the dwellings are set in crevices created by water seeping through the sandstone, that water being the apparent rationale for the move and fortress-like construction of the sites.

And then, just 100 years later, the Anasazi abandoned even these last redoubts, and moved away from the mesa itself -- another in history's myriad uprootings, many of which, like forest fires, lead to renewal and improvement.

Agriculture in Canada is a fascinating mixture of continuing technological and economic progress based in the market, stark interventions against market forces through subsidies, quotas and trade barriers ("supply management"), changing environmental conditions and competition for other uses of the land itself.

Some people in Alberta think (illogically) that the public should pay billions of dollars to pump water uphill from northern rivers to the southern Prairies so farmers there can grow crops at a loss in inhospitable nature.

Some people think (too logically, perhaps) that we should abandon our marketing-board system for milk, chickens and other products in exchange for cheaper food, reducing the farming population even more and enervating little towns. And some people think (wisely) that we should discourage the expansion of suburbs on good farmland, because good farmland just isn't made anymore.

It is choice that differentiates us from Mesa Verde and New Norway, and which makes farmers into politicians and politicians into students of cows.

William Thorsell is president and CEO of the Royal Ontario Museum.



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