

## Two large family farms in Manitoba

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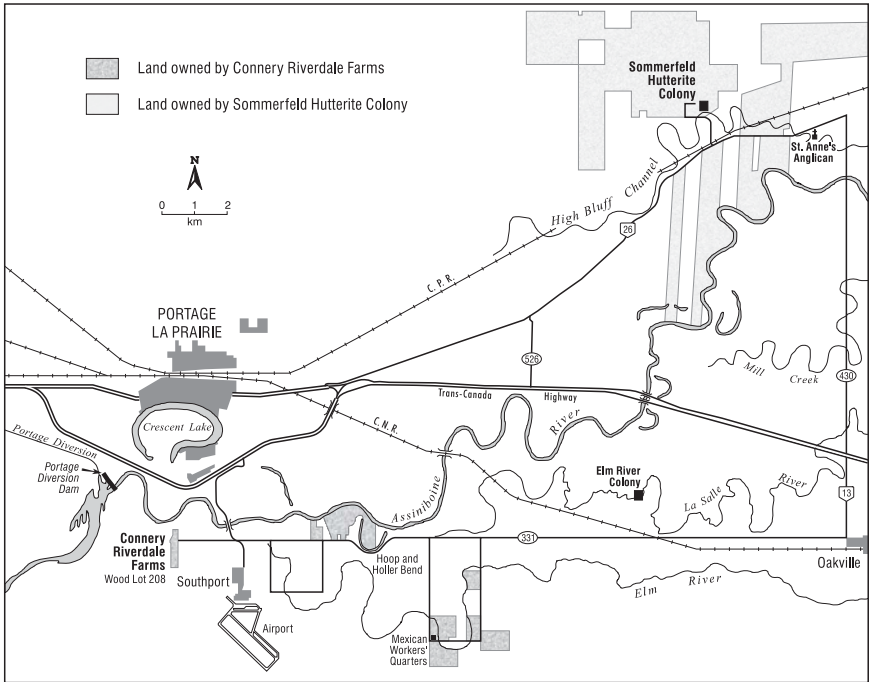
### Introduction

The family farm is alive and well in Manitoba although this is not readily apparent from the census of agriculture (Carlyle 1983). For example, about 2,000 of the 24,000 census farms in the province are classified as corporate farms. Some people have become alarmed by this statistic, fearing that large corporations have been squeezing out family farms. Yet, closer inspection of the census reveals that the overwhelming majority of corporate farms in Manitoba are, in fact, incorporated family farms. Connery's Riverdale Farms Ltd., a vegetable and fruit farm located near Portage la Prairie, is one such family corporate farm (Figure 1).

Statistics Canada (1997) classifies Hutterite colonies under the heading of "institutional, community pasture and other" farms. Hutterite colonies are, however, nothing if not a type of family farm, and they have been aptly classified as being large multi-family farmsteads by geographer Hans Schlichtmann, (1977). Thus, the second type of family farm considered in this paper is Sommerfeld Hutterite colony which is located about 20 km east of Portage la Prairie (Figure 1).

### Connery's Riverdale Farms Ltd.

The Connery farm is an incorporated family farm owned and managed by Ed Connery and his two sons, Doug and Jeff, and their families. It is one of the largest of the twelve major commercial vegetable farms in Manitoba, four of which are located in the Portage district (Manitoba Agriculture 1997).



**Figure 1:** Location of Connery's Riverdale Farms Ltd. and the Sommerfeld Hutterite Colony.

Several conditions favour commercial vegetable production in the area. The frost-free and growing seasons are longer than in most parts of Manitoba (Dunlop and Shaykewich 1982), and the soils are loamy alluvial ones varying in texture from silty clay to fine sandy loam (Ehrlich, Poyser, and Pratt 1957), a type ideal for vegetables in general and root crops in particular. Irrigation water is readily available from the Assiniboine River and several other rivers in the district, most of which flow in former channels (paleochannels) of the Assiniboine River, such as the Elm and La Salle (Figure 1) (Rannie 1990; Rannie, Thorleifson, and Teller 1989). In addition, the district is close to Winnipeg, the main market.

The Connery family formerly operated a market garden and nursery in the St. Vital area of Winnipeg, but moved to the Portage la Prairie district in 1960, lured by the favourable physical

conditions discussed above and by the encroachment of urban land uses as Winnipeg expanded.

The present-day farm comprises some 352 ha (870 acres), of which about two-thirds is owned by the Connerys, and it consists of several parcels (Figure 1). The northernmost group of parcels is located along the south bank of the Assiniboine River, which provides irrigation water for this group. The other main group of parcels is along, and irrigated by, the Elm River (Figure 1). The offices and cleaning/warehousing sheds are located on Wood Lot 208, which is part of the riverlot survey of the Red River Settlement that preceded the Dominion Lands Survey of townships and ranges (Figure 1). Water for washing the vegetables and transporting them through flumes is obtained by pipeline from wells on a neighbour's property near the Assiniboine River

Although the farm's area is not large in Manitoba terms, vegetable farming is intensive, so that the gross farm income is sizeable – more than \$3 million annually.

Ranked by area devoted to each, the crops grown by the Connerys are carrots, broccoli, asparagus, cooking onions, and green onions. In addition to vegetables, the Connerys sow some land to wheat and alfalfa, which are grown in rotation mainly to interrupt pest and disease cycles, and they have a field of strawberries.

Provincial regulations require that only carrots among the crops produced by the Connerys be marketed through Peak Vegetable Sales (formerly Manitoba Vegetable Producers Marketing Board) under the name of Peak of the Market. The Connerys, however, choose to market all their vegetables through Peak.

The Connerys are the main producers in Manitoba of broccoli, green onions, and asparagus, and they are probably second ranked in carrots (Connery family 1997 and Manitoba Agriculture 1998).

There is one spring sowing of carrots, and they are harvested from late July or early August onwards into the autumn. Some of the carrots are shipped directly to market. The remainder are stored in enormous Fil-A-Cel sheds at Wood Lot 208 for shipping out from October to March. These carrots must be stored at 0°C (32°F), requiring that they be refrigerated even during the winter because of the heat they generate in storage.

Broccoli is planted weekly from May to July, and hand cut beginning in July. The heads are sized, sorted, and boxed in the field using a broccoli trailer, then packed in slush ice produced by a slush ice maker at the warehouse.

Asparagus is a perennial crop which can produce for decades without replanting. It occupies a large portion of the 40 ha (100 acre) “island,” which is nestled in a former meander bend of the Assiniboine River, amusingly named Hoop and Holler Bend (Figure 1). This and several other meander bends in the district have been artificially cut off from the Assiniboine River in an attempt to reduce flooding in the Portage area by hastening the flow of the river (Figure 1). The asparagus is cut by hand from three-person buggies during May and June.

Cooking onions are planted during one spring sowing, harvested in September, and packed out until April. They are mechanically harvested, then cured in a heated Fil-A-Cel shed. Green onions are planted weekly from spring to July, hand pulled, and packed in ice for shipment. Harvest begins in early July. Strawberry plants produce for two years and then are replaced. Picking – u-pick or pre-pick – begins in early July.

Vegetable farming is very labour intensive despite the increasing mechanization of some operations, and about half of the Connerys’ annual expenses of \$2.8 million is for hiring farm labourers. They employ 40 to 50 people during the winter and, at the peak of the harvest, this figure rises to 130 to 140. Hired labourers come from Winnipeg, the Sandy Bay Indian Reserve on the west shore of Lake Manitoba, the Portage district, and from Mexico. The Mexicans are brought to Manitoba under a federal program for migrant workers, and they are used for “stoop” labour. They are provided with living quarters on the farm (Figure 1).

## **Sommerfeld Hutterite Colony**

Almost all of the 35,000 to 40,000 Hutterites living on colonies in the United States and Canada are descended from the 443 Hutterites on colonies recorded in the United States census of 1880 (Hostetler 1974). This statement excludes several thousand people following many teachings of the Hutterian faith living on colonies



*The church on Sommerfeld Colony (photo by John Lehr).*



*Some of the residences on Sommerfeld Colony (photo by John Lehr).*

(bruderhof) in the northeastern United States which, however, are not considered to be true Hutterites by the Hutterian church (Preston 1992). Being descended from such a small founding group, today's Hutterites have only about fifteen different surnames. Among the Schmeideleut Hutterites, the group or "clan" to which all Manitoba Hutterites belong, studies have shown that the "average" husband and wife are more closely related than second cousins but not as closely related as first cousins once removed (Hostetler 1974).

This extended family nature of the Hutterites is reflected by the fact that the 20 families totalling about 100 people living on Sommerfeld colony have only two surnames, Hofer and Gross.

The colony "Boss," John Hofer, and his wife Susanna, moved to Sommerfeld colony when it was founded in 1977 from Sommerfeld's "mother" colony, Rock Lake. As is Hutterite practice, Susanna moved to Rock Lake colony from Rainbow colony when Susanna and John were married, which was before Sommerfeld colony was founded.

Following traditional practice, most important management positions on the colony are filled by adult men (see below). The key positions are the Colony Boss, the Colony Minister(s), and the Farm Boss. They meet daily to discuss colony operations (Ryan 1977).

Colony Boss – John Hofer

Colony Minister – Michael Hofer (brother of the colony boss)

Second Minister and German teacher – Clarence Gross

Farm Boss (crops) – Levi Hofer (brother of the colony boss)

Pig Boss 1 – David Hofer (brother of the colony boss)

Pig Boss 2 – Arnold Gross

Chicken Broiler Boss – Jonathon Gross

Chicken Layer Boss – Jacob Gross

Blacksmith – Jacob Hofer (brother of the colony boss)

Carpenter – Joseph Hofer (brother of the colony boss)

Electrician – Peter Hofer (brother of the colony boss)

Head Cook – Annie Gross

Sommerfeld Colony comprises some 3000 ha (7400 acres), of which the colony owns about two-thirds and rents the remainder. I don't know how secure the tenure is on land rented by the Colony.

Some of the land is located on land surveyed under the Dominion Lands Survey system and some is located on land surveyed under the earlier riverlot system (Figure 1). Considering that the average Manitoba farm family of four or five people farms about 320 ha (790 acres), Sommerfeld colony, and indeed most Hutterite colonies in Manitoba, has to make intensive use of its resources.

The economic mainstay of Sommerfeld colony is hogs. There are two separate operations, each with its own boss (see above). A total of about 1,000 sows is kept (soon to be 1,400) each of which produces some 24 hogs a year, for a total annual output of 24,000 hogs. Two holding tanks, one of 5.5 million litres (1.2 million gallons) capacity and the other of 13.6 million litres (3 million gallons) capacity, are used to store waste from the hog barns and to produce manure fertilizer for the crops.

The colony also relies heavily on poultry. It has 7,500 laying hens which produce about 6,000 eggs per day or 2.2 million eggs a year. The chicken broiler operation yields 1,500 broilers every 6 to 7 weeks.

The hogs, laying hens, and broilers are all raised under factory-farming conditions in barns and sheds where there is close monitoring and control of temperature and moisture conditions, types and amounts of feed, and exposure to diseases.

Four dairy cows are kept for colony use, and a vegetable garden and orchard of about 2 ha (5 acres) yields vegetables and fruit for colony consumption.

Canola, wheat, and barley are the main crops grown, with most of the barley being fed to the pigs and chickens on the colony.

With such a large human and livestock population on the colony, obtaining sufficient supplies of water is a high priority. When the colony was being founded, drilling for water at the colony site was unsuccessful despite the fact that some drill holes penetrated 120 m (400 feet) below the surface. Ample quantities of water were, however, eventually found in 9 m (30 feet) of sand along an Assiniboine River paleochannel (High Bluff channel, Figure 1) about 0.8 kms (0.5 miles) away, from whence it is pumped to the colony.

Hutterite life is firmly grounded in their faith, the essence of which is a belief in oneness in Christ, which manifests itself in



communal living on colonies. To maintain this faith, services are held frequently at the church on the colony.

Education is also a concern of the Hutterites. On Sommerfeld, and generally among Manitoba Hutterites, formal schooling is limited to grades 1 to 8 at a public school on the colony. Some children on Sommerfeld do take grades 9 and 10, but they do so on the colony through teleconferencing with schools in Portage la Prairie.

The operation of a Hutterite colony is a complex one, involving skills ranging from metal working and electrical wiring to using computer software. Knowledge of this type is gained from manuals and books, and extension courses offered by colleges and universities. Once gained it is passed down from one generation of Hutterites to another.

## Conclusion

The two farms examined in this paper are unusual in that they are minority types in Manitoba. The Connery farm is one of only twelve commercial vegetable farms, excluding potato farms, in Manitoba and Sommerfeld is one of about ninety Hutterite colonies in the province. They do, however, represent part of the vast spectrum of family farms in Manitoba, no two of which are exactly alike.

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