

Bill Rea ? Good time at the Royal

?Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.?

William Jennings Bryan

I have never been a farmer, and at this stage of my life, I am not anxious for a career change, if for no other reason than I'm having lots of fun doing what I'm doing.

There is a bit of agriculture in my family tree. I have relatives in Ireland (actually, Caledon in Northern Ireland) who are dairy farmers. And the only picture I have ever seen of one of my great-grandfathers (my paternal grandmother's father) was of him posed with a Holstein. So I do understand the importance of farming. Since I practise my craft in an agricultural community, I had better grasp it.

As a kid, I read a lot about the life of farmers. But having been raised in the big city of Toronto, it was always something of an abstract to me.

And then I fell in love with a farm girl and married into a farm family. And that was the start of my real education into the agricultural way of life.

Incidentally, I am fully aware that I still have a lot to learn on that score. I consider it a work in progress.

That's why I appreciate days like the Saturday we all just got finished with.

It saw my annual trek south for the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto. Beth went with me.

True, the trip was work related, and inspired by my job (and I have the picture I took to prove it). And it presented its fair share of complications. Beth was very quick to admonish me to remove my shoes the instant we got home (no prizes for guessing why).

Good thing my father wasn't around ? the message would have been the same, but the language would have been a lot stronger.

It is a fact that people raised in urban areas might have a bit of trouble understanding what goes in to producing the food they eat.

True, some of the details are taught in schools (at least they were in the Toronto system in the days when the local professional hockey team were in contention for the championship), but kids don't always remember what they hear in the classroom. Those of you who question that conclusion will kindly relate the implications of the Pythagorean theorem (you all should have learned it before you had advanced very far in high school).

I like to think I'm an imaginative man, meaning I've always been able to grasp where my food comes from. I have been on farms, I have been in food-processing facilities. I even once had a tour of an abattoir (interesting, but not a lot of fun).

The point being, I get it, even if a lot of other people don't. And I got it a long time before I made any firm decisions about my partner in life.

While I had spent a number of years going with this farm lass named Beth, it took a while before I actually popped the question (you know what I mean). During that time, it was her brother Paul who was running the what at that time was a dairy operation (Beth's father died a couple of years before we became an item ? I never met the man ? she never met my dad either), yet wedding vows had to be exchanged before I was invited into the barn.

A couple of months after we were married, Beth asked me if I could spare a couple of hours the upcoming Saturday to help Paul vaccinate his dairy herd against Bovine Viral Diarrhea. I was happy to oblige, if only to get more of a feel for farm life, and a chance to get a glimpse of the inside of the operation.

Was I, as a city boy, unique? Certainly not.

The day after Beth made her approach for my time the coming Saturday, I had occasion to talk to my brother Michael on the phone, and casually mentioned the service I had been pressed into (lovingly, to be sure) for the following Saturday. Big brother was (and still is) a city boy like me, and was intrigued enough to get on the blower to my brother-in-law and shamelessly wangle an invite. And since Paul is not a stupid man, he was not about to turn down the unsolicited offer of free labour. Thus started an annual tradition that went for several years, proving that two lads born and bred in urbia (I just made that one up) could step in manure with the best of them.

And I got to learn a few of the basic realities of farm life, such as how hard a Holstein can kick (very hard).

And although it was never written in any marriage contract, there was a general understanding when Beth and I were married that part of my initiation to the family included milking a cow. I eventually did that. It took about seven years, and it was all done mechanically (Paul had to give me a minor bawling out for attaching the mechanism to the udder backwards, but we're all entitled to a mistake in life), but the mission was accomplished.

We hear a lot of talk these days that farmers are not appreciated for the role they play in society. It is a fact that at least one farmer

(probably several) contributed to the last meal you consumed. Yet I do have the idea that people are getting the message.

I base that statement on what I saw Saturday at the Royal. The place was packed. The only thing that was not in abundance was elbow room. And one of my cousins-in-law was chaperoning the local 4-H contingent. Saturday's crowds didn't faze him much. It was the anticipation of Monday's mobs that worried him. School kids take field trips to the Royal.

Like I stated above, annual trips to the Royal have been a tradition for Beth and I for years, as are the apple dumplings we avail ourselves of every time. But my exposure to the event goes back long before I had even heard of Beth (it even goes back to the days before Beth heard of me).

My first experience with the Fair came when I was a very little boy (four or five ? I don't remember). My mother dragged Michael and I to the Fair. There were vague references to butter sculptures, and we sat for a time in the Coliseum, watching people walking cows around the ring. My mother explained the judges were going to give prizes to the nicest cows. I thought they were all pretty nice, but what did I know?

But I really got exposed to the Fair as a school kid through the aforementioned field trips. They were taking Toronto kids down there 50 years ago too. I was still trying to figure out why one cow was nicer than the others (fact is, I'm still trying to figure that out).

Another fact is the Royal is a fun place to spend a day, and Beth and I had the very sore (and dirty) feet to prove it.

So check it out if you get the chance. It runs until Sunday.

Just make sure to wipe your feet when you get home

