



The Land Between

Cottage Country's Conservation Organization

www.thelandbetween.ca

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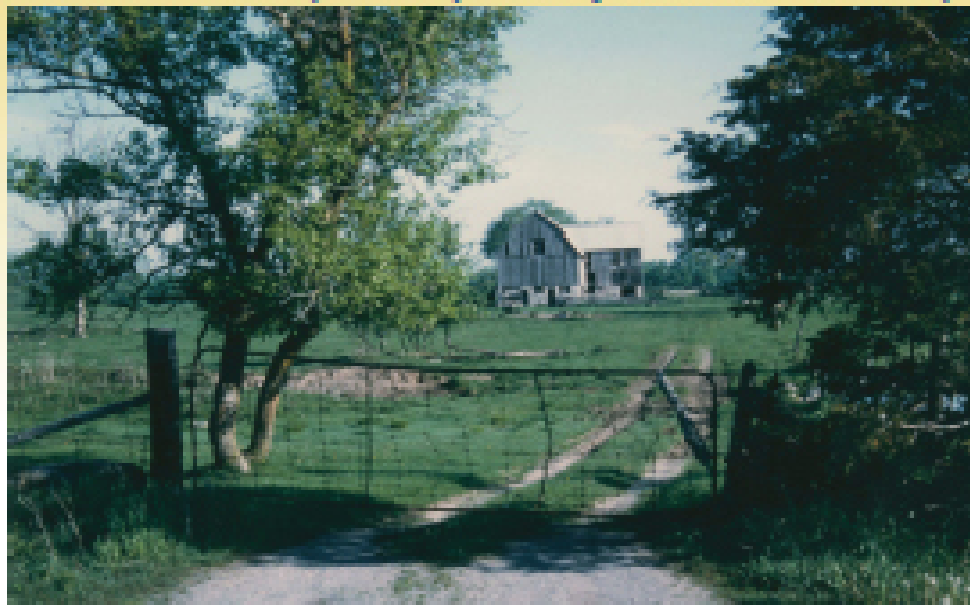


FARMSTEAD

SUBSISTENCE FARMING - A HERITAGE OF THE LAND BETWEEN



PHOTO: RON REID, ELM



Column By: Tom McIlwraith, Department of Geography, University of Toronto

What might first be construed as abandonment is more properly to be viewed simply as changing land use. Land and facilities rise and fall in the degree of intensity of use. Here in Seymour is a scene of under-utilization -- or perhaps of the consequences of over-expectation.

The roadway with the closed, slightly battered, gate, receives occasional use, but could probably grow back green again without further attention. It is of the era before truck-loads of gravel, or tar, or asphalt, those substances that biodegrade only slowly, marking their place long after active roles have ceased. This right-of-way is of the age of horses, wagons and sleighs, when one simply drove through and made ruts and left a green strip down the middle. In pre-automobile days farm lanes and country roads blended together visibly as one, without precedence. The hierarchy of main roads and secondary roads spread from the bigger centres into the extremities of the countryside, petering out altogether in places like this.

As our roadway dropped out of regular, or even infrequent, use it blended back into the terrain. In this case, that point is reached less than half way to the barn. At one time it continued on back to a small house, the site apparently marked by a thin line of stones directly in front of the gambrel end of the barn. Or that is where a house should be, when one looks at a hundred farmsteads around the province and acknowledges standard patterns that get freely and unconsciously repeated. Between that place and the barn stands the yard, upon which faced the 'back' door of the house. Any door on the side facing the road -- what most people would call the front -- would be principally for ceremony, or perhaps just mere decoration. Watch for them covered with plastic sheeting for insulation in the winter, and the idea of these apparent entrances not being for use will strike home.

The board siding missing from the barn gives it that unused

look too, and is a focus for the palpable dereliction of this place. The battered gate -- a 1940s artifact -- and the eroded patch of gravel reinforce the image. The entire site has changed from a hive of rural enterprise and become a pasture, uniformly bland and green where once a variety of domestic and farming functions would have given many hues and textures. Note how short and tidy the grass is; be patient for a few hours and the Holsteins will amble through.

This farmstead is a farm field in an enterprise now centred elsewhere. The family that once lived here has become redundant and moved away to join the world of cities beyond, while those members too old to adapt have lingered, probably in a near-by village, and then died off. The exposure of gravel shows how very thin the soil is in Seymour, just where the good farmland of southern Ontario runs out into the limestone plain and the Precambrian shield beyond. After an effort at being a fine mixed agricultural enterprise, culminating in the raised gambrel-roofed barn of the first decade of the twentieth century, this site has settled back to what it truly is: scrub land. The barn once served as a shelter and storage building, and perhaps still does, but only in a half-hearted sort of way. It is fully amortized (should anyone care to think in those terms) yet, with a sound foundation and a typically well-crafted framework, may stand up indefinitely, even as the boards flap and then blow away. They're just details.

As for the house, its parts -- windows, doors, possibly even a brick veneer once laid up over board siding -- long have had a market among builders engaged in restoration or reproduction architecture. Brick chimney stacks were coveted by scavengers who cared not that water would get in and rot would inevitably follow. People buy up former farmhouses for animal shelters, or dismantle them and recycle the huge squared logs. Whatever its fate, the house we feel certain once stood here in Seymour has vanished, leaving barely a trace for the consideration of roadside philosophers.