Anabaptist Agriculture: Understanding the Success of Mennonite Farmers in Northern Ontario

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**Agri-Food
and Rural**

Mobilizing Agri-Food and
Rural Research Knowledge

A program of the
OMAFRA – U of G
Partnership

Link

Outline of Presentation

- Starting Premise
- Migrating Mennonites
 - Desbarats Community
 - Black River-Matheson Community
- Experiences
- Reflections

Menn

A Mennonite
migration is
transforming
agriculture - and
diets - in the north

By TIM ALAMENCIAK

Mennonites
Moving to
Northern Ont. to
Rework Old
Farmland

By ERIK WHITE

Mennonites
Feeling at Home in
Northern Ontario

Bright
Farming
North

By BENJAMIN AUBE

TIMMINS - This part of the province may be witnessing a slow tide creeping back up towards the Arctic watershed. It has the potential to turn into a wave that could shape the future of Northeastern Ontario's economic and cultural landscape.

The Anabaptist Community

- What is a Mennonite?

Conservative/
Traditional

- Limited use
of
technology

Amish and
Old Order
Mennonite

Independent
Old Order

Old Colony
“Mexican
Mennonite”

Conservative
or Markham
Mennonite

General and
United
Conference
→ “Invisible”

Less conservative/
Modern

- Widespread use
of technology

A horizontal scale bar with tick marks at 0, 1, 2, and 3 miles. The word "Scale" is written above the bar.

Johnson Township

- Orthodox Old Order Mennonites
 - “Ultra” orthodox
- First five families arrived in 2004
- Currently 38 families
- 5-10 children per household
- Represent approximately 30% of the population

Johnson Township

- Interviews conducted in April 2016
- Focus group in November 2016
- Survey - July 2017
 - 38 distributed, 26 completed (68%)

Johnson Township Mennonites

- Based on survey responses:
 - Average length of time in the north - 10 years
 - Average length of time farming in the north - 6.5 years
 - Average farm size - 121 acres
 - Average workable area of farm - 57 acres
 - Largest farm is 425 acres, with 150 acres workable
 - Smallest farm is 3 acres, with 1 acre workable
 - Every respondent had a mixed operation
 - 8 respondents were part-time farmers

Black River-Matheson

DEC 2016

N

COL

- Ⓐ - Country Lane School on Country Lane West
- Ⓑ - Watabeg School on Hwy 101

1 Block = 320 acres
1/2 mile x 1 mile

For Changes Contact

Phares Kraemer
1354 Walker Rd E
Box 32 Val Gagne
POK1W0
765-232-4442

Serviced Roads
Summer Roads
Un Maintained Roads (By Township)
Condition Varies

Black River-Matheson

- Old Order Mennonites
- First five families arrived in 2013
- Currently 34 families
- 5-10 children per household
- Represent approximately 15% of the local population

Black River-Matheson

- First interview in July 2017
- Additional interviews February 2018
- Survey distributed January 2018
- Draft report in March 2018
- Community meeting in April 2018

Black River-Matheson Mennonites

- Based on interviews:
 - Largest farm is 1,600 acres, with 140 acres cleared
 - Smallest farm is 267 acres, with 260 acres cleared
 - Most moved between 2013-2015
 - Only one farmer identified as part-time
 - All have mixed farm operations and diversified income sources
 - Limited fresh produce being grown
 - Significantly less developed than the Johnson Township community

Motivations

- Family/community dynamics
- Abundance of workable or cleared land that is under- or unutilized
- Lower cost of land

Motivations

“It has never been the Anabaptist vision ‘to get rich quick’ and as such, I feel that the north has pretty well come up to or rather, surpassed my expectations. It is a rugged land with constant challenges - at the same time I feel it is a more suitable environment for the Anabaptist vision than a thriving productive progressive environment.”

Challenges

- Distance to markets, suppliers and grain mills
- Logistics to markets
 - Lack of coordination between farmers
- Low levels of competition
- Shorter growing season and fewer heat units
 - But, still trying to grow corn and finish cattle
- Lack of promotion/marketing of agriculture

Challenges

“Compared to southern Ontario, it is not an ‘ideal’ place to farm but that is not saying that I don’t feel there is opportunity if the adversities we face can be dealt with. These are predominantly distance to markets and lower yield per acre than what we were used to in southern Ontario.”

“I grew up here in Algoma since I was nine years old and am adapted to the area. Climates, heat units, etc. are not as much of an issue as to those who well remember farming in the south.”

Challenges

“It is hard to pay off a farm with just farm products due to high feed and seed, fertilizer cost and lack of available labour.”

“We need to do something to make ends meet, something we can depend on.”

Finding Success in the North

- Success growing a variety of crops and raising livestock
- Partnership with other communities
- Mennonite communities will continue to grow

Reflections

- Sense of optimism and strong future for Anabaptist farmers
- There is immense potential but a lot of initiatives are informal and not well-communicated
- Expansion of the Mennonite community will continue and so will the availability of local food
- Strong sense of community is one of their greatest strengths

Reflections

- But is northern agricultural a viable option for non-Anabaptist farmers?
 - Significant differences in terms of labour costs and accumulation of wealth
 - Community-centric approaches
 - Traditional agricultural practices (e.g. crop rotation, diversification) are necessary
 - Diversity and niche markets are important

Thank You

- Questions?