

WORK THROUGH TIME

Cape Breton Stories of Land & Sea



Dairy Farming in Rankinville

Joe and his wife Flossie live in Rankinville, on a small rural dirt road on the outskirts of the village of Mabou. This community was first settled by Scottish immigrants who were pushed from Scotland by the Highland Clearances and pulled to Cape Breton by offers of free land. Mabou was chosen by many because it was located near an inlet and ships could sail in to the 'Landing' to discharge cargo and passengers. Joe's home is situated directly above this landing place. These fertile rolling hills, with many now-abandoned farms, were prime areas for the hard working Dutch to settle.

Joe van den Hoogen is a tall kindly man, strong from the physical work on the farm. His accent does not divulge the twelve years he spent in his homeland. He was born in 1944, the year before the war was over, so he doesn't remember the fighting but he remembers his father telling him how his family risked their lives by hiding Canadian soldiers in their barn to keep them safe from the Germans. The Dutch have a special relationship with Canadians as it was Canadians who liberated Holland from the Germans at the end of the war.

Joe van den Hoogen was only eleven years old when his family of eleven boarded the Maasdam on March 22, 1956 and sailed across the stormy Atlantic to Nova Scotia. They were saddened to leave behind their many friends and relatives in Holland, but they sought a better life in Canada. The village where they lived hadn't suffered a lot of damage in the war, but the country as a whole had endured great destruction. Joe's family wanted to escape the overcrowding and unemployment and they were apprehensive about Russia's strength and ambitions.

Canada was offering incentives in the form of affordable, arable land for farmers, so his family sold their house and packed their belongings. They couldn't take a lot of money with them but they were able to buy things and ship them to Canada. Joe remembers the voyage fondly for the food was good and the crew kind. When he celebrated his twelfth birthday on the ship, the ship's cook made him a birthday cake. His mother, however, suffered from extreme seasickness for the entire eleven day journey.

The Maasdam arrived in Halifax on April 1, 1956. The van den Hoogen family went through immigration in Halifax and boarded a train for Port Hawkesbury the following day. The train ride provided them with their first real impression of Canada. They could not believe all the trees, rocks and uninhabited areas. Then

there was the snow! It was still four feet high in April. Joe compares Holland to the climate in British Columbia. Our shorter growing season was a big surprise to the new immigrants.

The eleven van den Hoogens were met in Port Hawkesbury by their cousins, the van Zutphens, with whom they had corresponded before the move to Canada. With nine tired people crowded in the back of the van Zutphen's half-tonne truck, they drove the forty-five miles down Route 19, in the chilly April weather to Port Hood, where they stayed with the van Zutphens for five weeks until they moved to their own farm in Southwest Mabou.

Life was difficult at first for the van den Hoogens, for they didn't speak English. They couldn't even read the labels on food. In Holland because of the overcrowding they were never far from places they needed to go, but in Canada they lived far from neighbours, stores, school and church. They started farming with a milk quota and pigs and chickens. Their new farm didn't have running water or indoor bathrooms as they had been accustomed to in Holland. They had to pump water with an outdoor hand pump and carry it a distance for their own use and for the animals. In winter, the water was usually frozen.

Soon after moving to their farm, Joe's brother fell off the back of a moving truck and was seriously injured. He was in the hospital in Halifax for a long time and his parents made many trips to Halifax to visit. This brother, in later years, became a technologist at the Halifax hospital.

Joe went to a one room school in Southwest Mabou which had Grades Primary to Nine. There were no school busses, so he and his family walked to school each day. Eventually Joe married Flossie and they started a family of their own.

Joe and his brother took over their family farm in Southwest Mabou and worked it together until nine years ago when Joe bought a farm in Rankinville. Joe hopes that when he retires his son will take over the farm. At present, Joe is building a new home at the end of the driveway as his farmhouse is over one hundred years old.

Joe and Flossie went back to Holland nine years ago where he visited a war cemetery that made a great impression on him. He saw thousands of headstones, all for young Canadians between seventeen and thirty years old; young men who gave their lives to liberate Holland. He found this connection between his two countries very moving.

He found it difficult to recognize the village where he lived, until he came to his old house. It was still the same brick structure with a tile roof, but there had been so much reconstruction after the war that many new buildings had replaced the other old familiar structures. When asked if he wanted to return to Holland, he replied, "Canada is my country. I like the space."

This excerpt was composed by Colleen MacLeod and William Smith of Inverness County in 2006 for educational purposes. A version of it appeared on the National Geographic website.

Dairy Farming in Mabou: An Interview with Joe van den Hoogen

Joe: My family came over in 1956; we landed in Halifax on April 1st. We were sponsored by my uncle; they already lived down here at the Southwest, the van Zutphens. So we landed there and my father went looking for a farm. We ended up buying the farm down at the Southwest, it was John Alex Big Dan's – they called it, he was retiring and we bought that farm. It had about 20 head of cattle on it, there was a milk quota on it, and we shipped probably 15 cans of milk a week.

We cleared land there and we expanded and eventually we bought a bigger cooler, I think it held, if I'm right, eighteen cans of milk, which was a lot then. It was one of those cement coolers where you put the milk in the water and there was a unit on it that cooled the water.

We were in a manure pack, we never cleaned out the manure, we just kept putting sawdust on top. I see they're actually going back to that now – to the manure pack, where the cows are on top of the manure. The bedding is put on top. It was loose housing: the cows weren't tied up. We milked in an old barn when we came here, the cows were tied in stanchions or bales, or whatever they called at that time, and we milked by hand.

That's where we started; the cows were milked by hand. Everybody at home milked cows, the whole family pretty much milked a few cows. We built a new barn, I don't remember what year it was, but that was the free-loafing barn, where the cows were on the manure pack and we had a milking parlour in that. I think it was a four tandem, where the cows were one behind the other. The cows were up on a pedestal, we call them milking parlours now.

You didn't have to bend down, before it was with a stool and a bucket. Then we had milking machines, and we gradually got bigger, until we went to bulk milk in 1970 or '71. We shifted from the cans to bulk milk, which was a big improvement. You didn't have to go to the stand anymore, take the cans to the stand every two days. Then you'd have to go back and collect the empties and fill them. When it first came out, the bulk milk, a lot of people weren't too pleased with it, they thought these trucks wouldn't be able to get in their yards. But later on, it wasn't very long and everybody was pretty happy that they had gone that way.

After that, we made silage in a bunker silo, you tramped it down with a tractor and you took it out with a front end loader and fed it to the cows.

We made some hay too. We probably made quite a bit of hay. You didn't have to depend so much on the weather, when we made silage. Well, we made hay and we used to have to make 15,000 bales of hay, and it was hard – we'd be making hay all summer, pretty much.

And the weather would have to be right. So, silage was pretty handy then; it still had to be wilted, you couldn't put it in soaking wet. It still had to be dry, to about fifty percent, fifty-five percent moisture, sixty percent moisture, somewhere around that would be ideal. Which made life a lot easier, you know?

So then my brother and I - that's when my father was still farming – then my brother, Herman, and I took over the farm. My father retired and he moved to Antigonish. We built two tower silos, those upright silos, and we were probably milking at that time, around 65 cows and we're probably shipping around 2500 to 3000 litres of milk. We made silage, we made some hay. We farmed together for probably 25 or 26 years.

Then I had sons, and Herman had sons, they were kind of interested in farming, so then I decided that I'd move out and I went out on my own and I bought this vacant farm. It had been farmed a year before that, but when I bought it there was nobody on it. So the land wasn't too bad, it had no barn on it. I built a barn here. We started off with very little milk, I think we were milking about twenty cows. Now we're up to about 35 cows. We gradually bought quota and built the place up, did some land clearing.

We farm here about 125 acres, and our herd is about 65, counting calves and milk cows, about 65 I guess, so that's about two acres, two and a half, two acres per cow.

Calum: How would your job change as the seasons change?

Joe: In the spring, there's fertilizer to be spread, manure to be put out, fences to mend, then there's silage to be made, which we usually start around the second week of June. If we get good weather, it takes about a good week to do our silage, not like the old days where you were at it all summer – now with the equipment you've got, it makes it a lot easier. We have two men here in the summer. My son is here in the summertime, he helps us. So there's not that much physical work, it's a lot of driving, tractor-driving.

Calum: So then the summer comes around, is that the height of the milking?

Joe: We have to have a steady supply for the dairy all year round. It's not like at one time, you got a lot more milk in the summer time. You still have a little more, but no it doesn't change because the feed we put up is basically the same as what we grow in the summertime. It's pretty basically the same.

[In the wintertime] all the cows are inside, we have a freestyle barn, it's a slatted floor and a parallel milking parlour. It's a naturally ventilated barn, the pitch on the ceiling is V-shaped. So the air comes in the side and flows out the top through three by four chimneys, which keeps the air fresh in the barn. And the manure is stored underneath; it's under the cows. So it's pumped out in the spring, with a pump, into a manure spreader and then spread on the field.

The cows keep [the barn] warm. We try to keep it around ten, fifteen degrees in the wintertime; it stays there pretty well. There's enough animals in there, the barn is insulated. Helps keep it warm. In the fall, you've got to put out more manure and maybe do some plowing.

The calves are born all year round, so that keeps the milk steady. We just had two calves, one yesterday and one today. They calve year round, you don't breed them all at once – you stagger the breeding.

Calum: Are you in charge of the birthing, or do you have to call in a specialist?

Joe: It's not very often we have a vet. We try to minimize the vet bill. Those two cows calved on their own. I keep track of them, to see if everything's alright. But if we need a vet we call the vet.

When a cow comes in season, she gets bred. Then it's nine months, the gestation period. We dry them off for two months, after seven months, you dry them off and give them a rest. After they calve, you start milking them.

Calum: Did you ever attempt to raise other animals?

Joe: We had pigs and hens when we first came over. I don't know how many pigs we had. We had an old barn that we filled up with hens, but eventually we got out of that and we just became dairy. Strictly dairy. We did that for probably ten years, maybe, then we just got out of the pigs and hens altogether. We focused more on the dairy aspect.

I don't really know why we got out of pigs and hens, but anyway they didn't last too long. Actually, most farmers that first came over started that way, with some pigs and hens, but they all changed over to just dairy. I know the van Zutphens had pigs and hens, we had pigs and hens, Heukshorst's up on the Ridge had pigs and hens. A.J. Beaton, I think he had pigs and hens in Port Hood. So they all started that way.

Calum: How much longer do you think you're going to be farming for?

Joe: Hopefully this is my last year, my son is taking over.

This farm is basically a one man operation. There's a thirty kilogram quota here, it's called butter fat. So one kg of butter fat equals probably what the average one cow would give.

We're probably right on that now. Well, thirty kilograms, that's thirty cows, thirty-five cows, something like that. We have some young cattle and calves.

Calum: Do you have any stories, about what it was like in the early days compared to today?

Joe: Water was a big problem where we first farmed, there was no water. We used to have to haul water in the winter time with a tractor or toboggan at the neighbours' pond.

There was a little well at the house, but it was just enough for the tea. There was a scarcity of water on that place, until we got a well. We dug a well, and then it was hard water. Then we got another well, I don't remember what year it was. But that was about a mile and a half away. Everybody down there got on that well, all the neighbors. There was probably about ten people on that one well, so a lot of water there. They're still on it.

When we got here, there was hardly any water until we dug the well. We've got a well right there and it's overflowing all the time now. Lots of water and good water here too.

Here there's quite a few springs around here, there's good water around here.

Years ago -- all the milk in cans, we used to have to carry it, on a toboggan or somehow, get it out to the stand. The lanes weren't plowed open in those days.

You'd be going to the stand, and you'd put them on the truck, and then maybe sometimes on a cold day you'd get them all back and they were all frozen. Oh! It was quite the thing when the bulk truck came in, anyways, saved a lot of headaches.

This piece was edited from an interview with Joe van den Hoogen, conducted at his home in February 2009 by a member of the Work through Time project team.

© 2009 CAP Society of Cape Breton County