



PORTRAITS OF THE OTTAWA VALLEY SEED GROWERS

GETTING THE HANG OF THE OTTAWA VALLEY FARM SHOW

By [Tom Van Dusen](#) (March, 1999)

A funny thing happened to me on my way to a permanent career in "mainstream" journalism or politics... I became general manager of next week's Ottawa Valley Farm Show, the premier annual gathering of rural business folk and those who drop by to examine their wares. "Funny" as in unexpected... and fascinating too. Come to think of it, it's probably a natural progression that I should end up so deeply immersed in things rural and agricultural. The real aberrations were more likely the decade I spent in a big city newsroom, followed by a decade in the hallowed precincts of Parliament Hill as a communications advisor.

A country resident my entire life except for a dismal 10-month sojourn in a damp downtown Ottawa basement apartment, I was always more interested in rural rather than urban ways. It goes back to the early days growing up in the Wychwood sector of Aylmer when the roads were gravel, the facilities - a least at the beginning - were the little shack out back, and we swam in the murky neighborhood pond alongside the bullfrogs when bullfrogs were a much more plentiful species.

Early in my journalism career, I covered events in rural Eastern Ontario from my home near Chesterville south of Ottawa. My rural interest was cemented later as an aide to former Deputy Prime Minister Don Mazankowski, including during his two-year stint as Minister of Agriculture, when my eyes were opened to the amazing global intricacies of what appears at first glance to be the simple business of producing food. In recent years, I've served as a rural councillor and have been chronicling agricultural and general rural affairs for various newspapers on a freelance basis.

Thanks to directors of the Ottawa Valley Seed Growers Association, I've also become manager of their annual Ottawa Valley Farm Show (OVFS) held since 1955 at Lansdowne Park. This year, the show opens on St. Patrick's Day and runs through to Friday. The publicity-savvy directors have a tradition of hiring managers with at least as much understanding of promotion as of organizing a major event. For several years until his death in 1997, Smiths Falls farm broadcaster Hal Botham filled the role, and last year it was TV personality Cindy Day, a farm girl from Glengarry County, who moved to Halifax. With the recent demise of the Ottawa Winter Fair, the OVFS has become the single largest annual gathering of rural residents from throughout Eastern



Tom Van Dusen chats with photographer Lynn Ball (2001)

Ontario and West Quebec, sharing a common interest in the growing season and in the latest innovations to help get them through it with maximum benefits.

Now, don't get the idea as some of my "mainstream" journalist friends do that this is some kind of hokey hoedown full of giddays, blue gingham and barn boots. It's a multi-million dollar business show featuring up to 280 exhibitors (*now 315*) catering to as many as 12,000 visitors, many of them with lots of ready cash to spend. Recent marketing setbacks for pork producers aside, Ontario's farm economy is booming, a fact supported by the popularity of winter farm trade shows in Ottawa, London and Toronto.

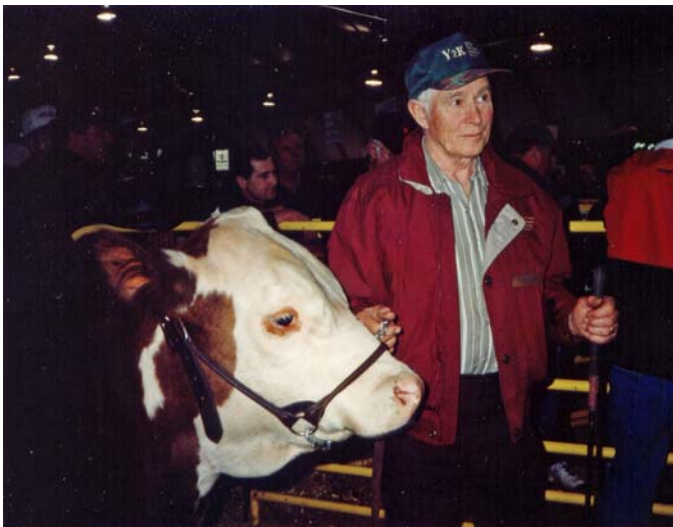
The Ottawa Valley Farm Show traces its humble beginnings back to 1927, back in time and up the line to the Town of Renfrew. It was there and then that the newly formed Seed Growers Association sponsored its first local fair at Renfrew Collegiate. The primary objective of that first show was consistent with today's main purpose: to assist in producing, grading, selling and distributing high class and registered seed. In the early days, the Seed Fair rotated each year from community to community throughout Eastern Ontario and West Quebec. Much later, after it had grown too big for rural venues, what became the Ottawa Valley Farm Show ironically found a permanent home at Lansdowne Park near the heart of the urban core.

"It was in 1955 that we opened the Championship Feed and Seed Show at Lansdowne," recalls Mack James of Carleton Place who was there then and continues as a Farm Show director. James remembers clearly when the original show used to move around the Valley: "I was in seed judging back in 1947 and that year it was at Alexandria in Glengarry County." Back then, local residents were quite proud when their community was picked to host the travelling show: "One lad I know still says the best show ever was the one held in Shawville on the Quebec side," says James.

When the show settled in Ottawa, a major equipment manufacturer, spotting a good opportunity, set up a display of new machinery. The idea caught on, transforming the annual event into the biggest seed and machinery show east of Toronto; it gradually grew out of one building into the present six display areas.

Presented by farmers for farmers, the Ottawa Valley Farm Show continues to expand its offerings to the regional agricultural community. In addition to seed and machinery, the OVFS includes cattle shows and sales, farm toys and books, tools, equipment, special interest associations, financial institutions, and just about every other product and service of special interest to the farm and rural community.

This year, Mack James has rounded up 17 breeds of cattle for display at the show, highlighted by an auction sale of Simmentals on Wednesday and Herefords on Friday. Other livestock on hand will include sheep, Clydesdale horses, alpacas and their cousins, llamas; demonstrations will include shearing and spinning alpaca wool, pack-carrying abilities, and an outline of the uses of llama meat.



Not to be left behind, Mack's wife Lois organizes what used to be called "ladies' displays" in the dark days before political correctness. The feature this year is the art of quilting as demonstrated by Kim Darwin of Almonte. Another feature at this year's show is the revolutionary crop, industrial hemp, cannabis' kissing cousin; Jeff McDougall, Marvelville hemp grower and hemp product dealer, has organized a comprehensive display.

Smiths Falls farmer and auctioneer John Joynt, an OVFS director, will sell off some 60 lots of fancy birds including pheasants and peacocks and, as is the custom, Friday will focus on the annual Pedigreed Seed Sale. Proving once again the farm show is often a family affair, John's wife Mary is secretary-treasurer of the board.

As for me, I'll be spinning around Lansdowne Park next week trying to make it all come off without a hitch. Fortunately, I'll be ably directed by several veterans who've pulled off the feat many times before.

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