

Hired Men

Ontario Agricultural Wage Labour in Historical Perspective

Joy Parr

Volume 15, 1985

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/llt15cri01>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Parr, J. (1985). Hired Men: Ontario Agricultural Wage Labour in Historical Perspective. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 15, 91–104.

CRITIQUES

Hired Men:

Ontario Agricultural Wage Labour in Historical Perspective

Joy Parr

THIS IS A PAPER ABOUT the men¹ who from the earliest days of settlement worked the land of Ontario for wages. They are a little known group. The myth of the province has been that the workers of the soil are its owners, and that farms were made from forest, swamp, and slabs of rock ill-disguised by brush by independent yeomen. Traditionally, those who worked farms were seen as freeholders who possessed the land they cleared, fenced, and tilled by patent, who were their neighbours' equals in forming rural communities and have remained equal before the law. Scholars too have claimed that from the beginnings of the province, agriculturalists' desire for independence combined with the rigorous seasonality of rural work to determine that "no hierarchical labour organization would persist in Canadian agriculture."² Yet in each successive

¹ The discussion here is gender specific, dealing with stratification among men observable in tenure status, holding size, access to development capital, and resort to wage labour. It excludes gender hierarchies by choice (but not by preference). Female farm labour does not exist as a census category. Elucidating the clash and symbiosis of class and gender hierarchies in a system where market and non-market production are so entwined is a larger project, whose completion will necessarily modify the pattern suggested here. Some fine analyses of female farm labour do exist. See Marjorie Cohen, "The Exit of Women from Dairying," *Histoire sociale/Social History* (1984); Rosemary Ball, "A Perfect Farmer's Wife: Women in 19th Century Rural Ontario," *Canada, an Historical Magazine*, 3.2 (1975), 2-21; Molly McGhee, *Women in Rural Life* (Toronto 1984); Gisele Ireland, *The Farmer Takes a Wife: a Study by Concerned Farm Women* (Chesley, Ontario 1984) and "Women in Agricultural Production," *Resources for Feminist Research*, 11, 1 (1982).

² H. Clare Pentland, *Labour and Capital in Canada 1650-1860* (Toronto 1981), 59.

J. Parr, "Hired Men: Ontario Agricultural Wage Labour in Historical Perspective," *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985), 91-103.

generation from the settlement phase onward, rural wage labourers have been essential to the functioning of the province's persistent and unmistakably hierarchical agricultural system. Through two centuries of clearing, tilling, seeding, and harvesting, the relationships between land and labour and capital and labour have changed, but the reality of the rural hierarchy has been as enduring as the seasons. The purpose of this paper is to explore the genesis and changing nature of that hierarchy.

The first land grants in the colony to Loyalists and military settlers varied in size to reflect the rank and social situation of the recipients. Through time a hierarchy in holding sizes was maintained through differential access to capital and patronage, and by the vagaries of inheritance and family fortune. Men with small cultivated acreages, tenants, and others as yet without title to a farm, worked for payment in wages or in kind on the land of other holders. By the twentieth century, the capital requirements in agriculture had grown relatively, and as the alternatives to farm work became more attractive and numerous, small holders' and farmers' sons and daughters were in part drawn, in part driven to leave the countryside. Their places on the farms as wage labourers were taken up by others who were often migrants, and almost always landless.

In 1981, at least 70,000 wage labourers worked the farms of Ontario without protection under the Occupational Health and Safety Act from unsafe working conditions, or under those sections of the Employment Standards Act which establish the general minimum wage, regular hours of work or overtime pay, and without the rights under the Labour Relations Act to form a union or achieve job security.³

The British architects of Upper Canada intended that the countryside be ordered hierarchically. They planned for the future as most people plan for the future, with their eyes firmly fixed on the past. Lord Haldimand, John Graves Simcoe and Peter Russell, Lord Goderich, John Colborne and James Stephen laid down the political structure and land grant system of the colony hoping to establish there the best of the gentry-tenant-cottar rural pattern of eighteenth-century England and avoid the worst of the dispersed and autonomous frontier freeholder model common in the fractious American republic.⁴

The initial land grants to Loyalist and Highland Scots settlers along the St. Lawrence front townships and to Peter Robinson's Irish colonists in the Rideau and Otonabee districts mixed small placements to the common folk, whose men were to be the labouring class and foot soldier militia defenders of the countryside, with large deeded tracts to those who had been in the pre-emigration period, or were to become in the New World, the settlers' political,

³ Canadian Farmworkers' Union, Toronto Support Committee, "Tobacco Report," typescript, 1981, 1.

⁴ S.R. Mealing, "The Enthusiasms of John Graves Simcoe," Canadian Historical Association, *Annual Report* (1958), 50-62; Lillian Gates, *Land Policies of Upper Canada* (Toronto 1968), 66, 80.

social, and religious leaders.⁵ These allocations took place within a broader governmental system which paid the civil administrative class of the colony through generous land grants, partly because land was the only commodity available in plenty to the crown in a polity whose tax base was still small, partly because large land holdings validated and entrenched the claims to social status and political authority of the young colony's aspiring aristocracy.⁶

In the 1820s this system was criticized by American settlers familiar with a more egalitarian practice, and by British immigrants who, recognizing the proximity of the American frontier and the short supply of wage labour, understood that they had acquired a modicum of political leverage. A wild land tax was imposed on undeveloped speculative holdings; the two-sevenths of the territory within each township previously withheld from settlement in crown and clergy reserves was opened for sale; and in some districts of the colony, at least, small freeholders began to gain ground.⁷

The policy respite was short-lived. In the 1830s these concessions to North American circumstances clashed head on with a forming consensus among British colonial administrators shaped by the quixotic but influential Edward Gibbon Wakefield. Wakefield argued that the less restricted access to land in overseas territories, particularly free grants systems such as that nominally in place in Upper Canada, was producing labour shortages deleterious to the colonies' long-term development along the British model. In Upper Canada the large grantees, rather than emerging as respected leaders, were assuming the unintended and unpopular role of land speculator.⁸ The rising settlements were not cohesive and ordered communities which would provide a bulwark against the republic to the south, but scattered clearings where isolated, ill-equipped settlers grew restive or despaired.⁹ By proscribing free grants, raising the price of land for sale, and shortening the allowable terms of credit, the land grant policy promulgated in the early 1830s by Lord Goderich sought to treat these difficulties.¹⁰ The Canada Company Lands in the west of the province were offered at this time on even more restricted terms.¹¹ The policy change had the

⁵ Helen C. Cowan, *British Emigration to British North America* (Toronto 1961), chapters 3 and 4; H.J.M. Johnston, *British Emigration Policy 1815-1830: Shovelling Out Paupers* (Oxford 1972), chapters 2, 3, and 5.

⁶ Leo Johnson, "Land Policy, Population Growth and Social Structure in the Home District 1793-1851," *Ontario History*, 63 (1971), 41-60; Gates, *Land Policies*, 60, 88.

⁷ Johnson, "Land policy;" Brian Osborne, "Frontier Settlement in Eastern Ontario in the Nineteenth Century: a Study in Changing Perceptions of Land and Opportunity," in D.H. Miller and J.O. Steffen eds., *The Frontier: Comparative Studies* (Norman, Oklahoma 1977), 212-13.

⁸ Gates, *Land Policies*, 43.

⁹ Rainer Baehre, "Pauper Emigration to Upper Canada in the 1830s," *Histoire sociale/Social History*, 14 (1981), 359, 360, 366.

¹⁰ Graeme Wynn, "Notes on Society and Environment in Old Ontario," *Journal of Social History*, 13, (1979), 51; Gates, *Land Policies*, 179.

¹¹ Clarence Karr, *The Canada Land Company: The Early Years* (Toronto 1974), 26, 27, 62.

anticipated result. Those who wished to take up land, among the large stream of impoverished immigrants who subsequently arrived in Upper Canada, engaged first in improving land for others or in wage labour on public works.¹²

The Wakefield system did not become so entrenched in Upper Canada as it did on Vancouver Island or in New South Wales. However, even after 1842, when Canada Company Lands were opened on terms within the means of poorer settlers,¹³ the need to resort to wage labour in agriculture remained crucially linked to the cost of land, and this continuing relationship secured the foundations of hierarchy in rural communities. Land ownership may have been "a basic aspiration of the vast majority of the population"¹⁴ in Upper Canada, but in the settlement stage and after, colonists pursued this goal from vastly different starting positions, and to this common end laboured under starkly different employment conditions.

Arriving immigrants divided into three groups. Those who came without any means began their pursuit of agricultural proprietorship by taking up waged work in the villages and towns or the timber trade, or as hired men in agriculture. With the money thus acquired they then made a payment on a farm in the backwoods. For the first few years on such a farm, the backwoodsman who began without capital was still primarily engaged in waged work:

he cleared his farm between times, and scarcely looked for a crop to sell, relying on making enough to keep his family over the winter on what he could earn on a pilgrimage to the harvest fields along the front.¹⁵

Those who arrived with modest capital used part of it to buy land, and the rest to support the family during the farm-making stage before the land would yield a marketable crop. A third group reached the colony with enough capital to buy unimproved land and employ others to help with the clearing, or to pay the higher prices commanded by farms which had already been cleared and improved by others.

Peter Russell suggests that probably one-quarter of the new farmers in Upper Canada in the pre-union period had the resources to hire choppers for clearing. As one man labouring without a large family or capital to hire others could expect to clear only one and a half acres per year, making a fifty-acre farm would be a lifetime's work. Because most couples on the frontier did rear large families, the commonly understood clearing rate was closer to four acres per year, but even at that rate, farms remained small. In the pre-union period, about half of farm families had under 30 acres clear, under 20 per cent had

¹² Gates, *Land Policies*, 180, 181, 185; Baehre, "Pauper Emigration," 361; Pentland, *Labour and Capital*, 58.

¹³ Karr, *Canada Land Company*, 106, 107, 124.

¹⁴ Wynn, "Notes," 52.

¹⁵ Robert Leslie Jones, *History of Agriculture in Ontario 1613-1880* (Toronto 1946), 60.

farms of 50 to 100 acres, and only 2-5 per cent had over a hundred acres in cultivation.¹⁶

Such typically small holdings would not generate marketable surpluses sufficient to purchase new farms for offspring, so that many sons and daughters began on the agricultural ladder more or less where their parents had begun. Wages of hired men remained fairly steady in Upper Canada through the pre-Confederation period, 50¢ to \$1 per day plus board for a day worker; \$10-12 per month in summer, \$7-9 in winter, or \$8-10 year round for a permanent worker with board, washing, and the hardest chores on the farm as his lot. An intending couple saving assiduously might find itself in a position after four years of waged work to look around for a farm to rent in the front townships.¹⁷

David Gagan estimates that in 1835 one of four rural householders in Peel County was either a tenant or a squatter on someone else's land, "either because they could not afford the upset price of unpatented land or because they were unable to purchase land held for speculation at any price."¹⁸ Thus "the rising generation of Canadians born of settlers in older districts where there was no longer land enough for all, looked to the backcountry for farms on which to establish themselves"¹⁹ and commuted to waged work on the front for several years more. By the 1830s communities at the front had established quarterly fairs to buy and sell stock, produce, and utensils and to hire labourers,²⁰ some of them recent immigrants, others homespun-clad backwoodsmen, landowners who were financing their farm-making through wage labour.

By the most reliable estimates, three-quarters of the population of Ontario was engaged in agricultural pursuits before 1850, perhaps two-thirds at mid-century, and three-fifths by 1870.²¹ Thereafter, the accuracy of the statistics improves: 47 per cent of employed males were in the farm sector in 1901, 31 per cent in 1921, 13 per cent in 1951.²² Among this agricultural portion of the population there has never been a stable group of agricultural labourers, as we might find of, for example, carpenters or machinists in another sector of the economy.²³ There have always been some men working year round for a single

¹⁶ Peter A. Russell, "Upper Canada: A Poor Man's Country? Some Statistical Evidence," *Canadian Papers in Rural History*, III (1982), 136-8, 144; R.M. McInnis, "Childbearing and Land Availability: Some Evidence from Individual Household Data," in Ronald D. Lee, ed., *Population Patterns in the Past* (New York 1979).

¹⁷ Jones, *History*, 55-6.

¹⁸ David Gagan, *Hopeful Travellers: Families, Land and Social Change in Mid-Victorian Peel County, Canada West* (Toronto 1981), 34.

¹⁹ Wynn, "Notes," 52.

²⁰ Jones, *History*, 160.

²¹ John McCallum, *Unequal Beginnings: Agriculture and Economic Development in Quebec and Ontario until 1870* (Toronto 1980), 140.

²² Canada, Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Census of 1951*, V. IV, Table 2.

²³ George V. Haythorne and Leonard C. Marsh, *Land and Labour, a Social Survey of Agriculture and the Farm Labour Market in Central Canada* (Toronto 1941), 213.

employer but they have usually continued in these labour conditions only for a brief time as young men. Agricultural workers have been historically, as they are today, casual labourers dependent upon irregular spates of ill-paid waged work for several different employers in order to maintain material subsistence.

Three factors account for the perpetuation of this large and vulnerable casual labour force lingering at the bottom of the rural hierarchy: the seasonality of the work, the desire to achieve autonomy and security through proprietorship, and the presence of unpaid family labour within the agricultural sector.

The seasonality of the work is founded, of course, upon the rigours of the Ontario climate. This natural pattern, however, has been modulated and exacerbated by human agency: by both the degree and nature of chosen crop specialization and the pace at which mechanization has been applied to various seasonally specific farm tasks. Contrary to expectations, the irregularity of farm employment did not drive agricultural wage labourers from this work to other occupations. Neither did the inefficiencies implicit in recruiting a casual labour force and keeping it fully employed result in rapid mechanization of agriculture.

The farm wage labour force remained large, until World War II comprised of a steadily growing proportion of total farm employment in the province.²¹ As the work has remained unreliable and poorly paid, it is the continuing supply of, rather than the continuing demand for, wage labour in agriculture which needs to be explained. Some men attempted to remain continuously employed by combining waged work in agriculture with other seasonal employment, by "dovetailing" farm work with cutting ice near the towns or wood in the shanties, with work on the roads, in mines, on the lakeboats, in the later prairie harvests or in rural handicrafts, so as to create a year-round schedule of work.²² Such a concatenation of seasonal by-employment, however, would not in and of itself hold many, or for long.

Men continued to participate in the rural wage labour market because they aspired to become economically independent commodity producers in agriculture. Most were not landless wage labourers, but engaged in wage labour because they owned land (or their parents owned land) and they were captivated by the agricultural dream, by the hope of rising on the agricultural ladder. It was the death of this dream as much as reapers or threshing machines or combine harvesters which would cause them to withdraw their paid labour power from the land.

In this connection, unpaid family labour intervenes as a third factor contrib-

²¹ Paid workers as a proportion of total farm employment in Ontario: 1891, 12.4 per cent; 1921, 18.7 per cent; 1941, 21.9 per cent, recalculated from M.C. Urquhart and K.A.H. Buckley, *Historical Statistics of Canada* (Toronto 1965), 355.

²² Jones, *History*, 55; Haythorne and Marsh, *Land and Labour*, 297-306; John Herd Thompson, "Bringing in the Sheaves: The Harvest Excursionists, 1890-1929," *Canadian Historical Review*, 59 (1978); W.J.C. Cherwinski, "The Incredible Harvest Excursion of 1908," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 5 (1980); Joy Parr, *Labouring Children* (Montreal 1980), 133.

uting to the casual nature of waged work in the agricultural sector. Until the early twentieth century, Ontario-born rural children were raised to the understanding that their "families functioned like firms. Children took from the enterprise in supervision, clothing and food and were expected to repay their debts through their labour." They owed their parents "time."²⁶ If their parents' farm was yielding profits and the times were prosperous they might expect to be compensated for this family labour with a farm of their own or some more modest resource with which to begin as a sharecropper or tenant on rented land.²⁷ So long as a heavy reliance on family labour could be sustained, that is so long as farm families were large and labour in the family interest was a plausible route towards agricultural proprietorship, farm waged workers tended to be regarded only as a secondary reserve.²⁸

After the settlement phase, then, the see-saw between demand and supply in the rural labour market was balanced in this way. The demand for agricultural wage labour varied first with seasonal peaks in farm work, peaks shaped by the degree of crop specialization and the amount of machinery available and suitable for each part of the farm work schedule, and, second, with the availability of farmers' labour resource of first choice, unpaid family labour, the supply of which varied with rural family size and the inducements farm parents could offer their offspring to continue to labour in the family interest. The factors influencing the supply of wage labour in agriculture were: 1) the existence in the countryside of an underemployed group of rural land holders or aspiring land holders, whose numbers varied with the fluctuating economies of scale and capital barriers to entry into proprietorship in this sector of the economy; and 2) the effectiveness of government policy in inducing a stream of immigrant labourers to enter the rural sector of the province and share in the dream of independence through farm ownership.

Here we must return to the stage in the chronological narrative where we left the homespun-clad agricultural labourer walking back to the front townships to secure the waged work with which he would finance the clearing of his backwoods farm. By the late 1850s the reasonable territorial limits of agricultural expansion in Ontario had been reached and even as the farmers of Bruce County were embarking upon the settlement phase, the signs of the next major agricultural transition were becoming apparent in the longer established counties of the province. Between 1851 and 1871 farms in Peel and, we might reasonably infer, in other front districts began to grow larger. "It is clear that these expanding farmers gained at the expense of families who occupied between 11 and 100 acres,"²⁹ that is that large holders were buying out small holders. This is a pattern which became even more firmly entrenched in subsequent decades. In the period 1871 to 1891 the array of occupiers of Ontario farms by size looks like this:

²⁶ Parr, *Labouring Children*, 83.

²⁷ Gagan, *Hopeful Travellers*, chapter 3.

²⁸ On this last point see Haythorne and Marsh, *Land and Labour*, 91.

²⁹ Gagan, *Hopeful Travellers*, 43-4.

TABLE 1
Distribution of Occupiers of Farms
by Size of Holding, Ontario 1871-1891

Year		Size of Holding (Acres)			
		<10	11-99	100	total
1871	n	19,954	110,766	41,558	172,278
	%	11.6	63.8	24.1	
1881	n	36,221	116,779	53,989	206,989
	%	17.5	56.4	26.1	
1891	n	39,311	113,590	63,294	216,195
	%	18.2	55.2	29.2	

Source: Census 1871, 1881, 1891 with adjustments following Urquhart and Buckley, p. 342, to remove houselots from the less than 10 acres category in 1891.

A steady rise in the proportion of holdings over a hundred acres in size is clear, accompanied by a parallel diminution in the share of farms in the 11-99 acre range and a more than incidentally related increase in very small rural holdings, still put to agricultural uses. These small plots in late nineteenth-century Ontario are reminiscent of the emplacements, the meagre barn, and garden holdings which Fernand Ouellet notes rising in Quebec on the eve of the 1837-8 rebellions and interprets as a sign of rural impoverishment.³⁰

The inducements to this change are reasonably clear, a shift from the production of grain, that is wheat and barley, as an export staple to the raising of a variety of consumer products for the growing domestic urban market. The "new agriculture" was a relentless winnow. Farmers embarked upon a highly sophisticated market-sensitive mixed agriculture providing fruit, vegetables, and fibre crops as well as dairy and poultry products, beef, and pork to Canadian buyers. A successful agriculturalist needed an efficient and methodical farm practice, regular consultation with county agricultural representatives and the farm press, and despite the fact that machinery prices were dropping, substantial financial backing with which to replace obsolete equipment. To thrive in agriculture, an Ontario farm family now needed better land than other sellers, closer to market, and because these were the days before prepared feed was commercially available, bigger holdings on which to pasture and raise fodder for larger herds.³¹

³⁰ Fernand Ouellet, *Lower Canada 1791-1840* (Toronto 1980), 143-5; and his *Economic and Social History of Quebec 1760-1850* (Ottawa 1980), 354-55, 591.

³¹ This discussion closely follows Parr, "Introduction" to A.W. Currie, *Growing Up in Rural Ontario* (forthcoming); see also D.A. Lawr, "The Development of Ontario Farming, 1870-1914: Patterns of Growth and Change," *Ontario History* 64 (1972), 239, 244-5; William L. Marr, "The Wheat Economy in Reverse: Ontario's Wheat Production, 1887-1917," *Canadian Journal of Economics* (1981), 136-45; Marvin McNis, "The Changing Structure of Canadian Agriculture, 1867-1897," *Journal of Economic History* (1982).

This rise in the scale of economically efficient agriculture compounded the effect of the closing of the territorial frontier. It dashed the hopes of many rural sons and daughters who had aspired to independent proprietorship. Farm parents adapted to these diminished expectations by radically decreasing the size of their families.³² During the period in which this demographic adjustment was taking place, the offspring of rural proprietors sought out other opportunities. The number of farm tenants in the province rose from 39,583 in 1871 to 64,425 in 1891.³³ Many young people, especially those from the most recently settled counties of Grey and Bruce, where the dissonance between farm-making parents' expectations of land abundance and the second generations' experience of high local barriers to proprietorship was greatest, went west to Manitoba, the Dakotas, and the Qu'Appelle.³⁴ And of course a large number went to the cities.

Here the relationship between capital and labour in Ontario agriculture becomes complex. It is true that the period was one of considerable mechanization in agriculture, mechanization which reduced labour input relative to other factors in the production of some crops and which was a response to relative labour scarcity. Economic historians point to the mechanical reaper and thresher which between 1830 and 1850 reduced the labour requirements to produce one acre of wheat from approximately 75 to 43 hours, or to the use of steam power in threshers and haying equipment which caused the man-hours required to thresh the cereal production from one acre of land to diminish from eight to one between 1850 and 1880.³⁵ These were, however, labour economies principally in the production of grains.

Many components of the new mixed agriculture, for example dairying, and fruit, vegetable, and fibre production, had relatively high labour requirements. Mechanization in rural industry, like technological change in manufacturing and transportation, developed unevenly, intensifying the labour demand in some parts of the production process even as it made workers redundant in others.³⁶ In agriculture growing specialization concentrated tasks (not only those in which capital could be substituted for labour but also those which none but human hands could perform) by region and by season. Large dairy herds needed intensive daily tending year round. Fruit, vegetable, and fibre production, particularly the harvest and retting of flax, required huge applications of seasonal labour and were not susceptible to mechanization.

³² Persons per household, rural Ontario: 1861, 6.43; 1871, 5.63; 1881, 5.39; 1891, 5.15; 1901, 4.83; 1911, 4.66; 1921, 4.37; 1931, 4.27. "The Canadian Family," *Census of Canada* 1931, XII, 31.

³³ Recalculated from Buckley and Urquhart, *Historical Statistics*, 351.

³⁴ Marvin McInnis, "Westward Ho," in Alan Brookes, *Proceedings of the Seventh Agricultural History of Ontario Seminar* (Guelph 1982).

³⁵ William L. Marr and Donald G. Paterson, *Canada, An Economic History* (Toronto 1980), 101-4.

³⁶ Raphael Samuel, "The Workshop of the World: Steam, Power and Hand Technology in mid-Victorian Britain," *History Workshop* 3 (1977).

Young people did not leave the rural areas of Ontario in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries because there was no work for them to do in that sector. They left because they were unwilling to embark upon agricultural wage labour without the accompanying prospect of agricultural proprietorship,³⁷ and because they were unwilling to settle for the life of a country hired man when the cities glimmered nearby and urban waged work was better paid. The declining availability of unpaid family labour and of rural young people willing to work in the countryside for wages in hopes of later buying a farm created what was perceived at the time to be an acute labour shortage in the agricultural sector. Governments were forced into a political response. During 1874 and 1875 between 2,500 and 4,000 members of the English National Agricultural Labourers Union were assisted to settle in Canada, principally in Ontario³⁸ and, at a rough estimate, 80 per cent of the eighty thousand British child immigrants brought to the Dominion between 1868 and 1924 were set to work on Ontario farms.

There was a mean and disingenuous aspect to conventional propertied wisdom about rural hierarchy in the farm communities of turn of the century Ontario. Men with large holdings had begun to manage their own farm concerns on the assumption that only one of their offspring was likely to accede to agricultural proprietorship. Yet it was in their interest (and hence, given the preponderant influence of rural ridings in both the Dominion and provincial houses of the period, in the interest of government agencies) to continue to expostulate upon the soundness of the agricultural ladder. Rural leaders persisted in the claim that any younger son or recent arrival to the province was separated from his own hundred acres only by hard work — perhaps, just perhaps — waged work, for small sums in the fields of large holders. Acknowledging that the community in which he was raised was “highly stratified,” John Kenneth Galbraith described the early twentieth century township of Dunwich in this way:³⁹

No hired man had full citizenship. . . . To belong a man had to own land. A man who farmed a fifty was not taken seriously on any important subject and would not ordinarily be elected to public office. Since it was perfectly possible for a hired man, tenant or 50 acre farmer, by combining diligence and rigid economy with a large mortgage to own a hundred acres, these barriers to acceptance were not as harsh as they sounded. . . . The people so excluded were not very competent. If it hadn't been land they would probably have lost out for some other reason.

A different story emerges from the testimonies of the Home Children, the hired

³⁷ David McGinnis describes a similar pattern in Alberta agriculture in a thought-provoking article, “Farm Labour in Transition: Occupational Structure and Economic Dependency in Alberta, 1921-1951,” in Howard Palmer, ed., *The Settlement of the West* (Calgary 1977), 175-86.

³⁸ Timothy L. Demetrioff, “Joseph Arch and the Migration of English Agricultural Labourers to Ontario during the 1870s,” unpublished paper, History Department, Queen's University, 1982, 36.

³⁹ J. K. Galbraith, *The Scotch* (Toronto 1964), 46, 47.

men, the tenants and small holders, and has been told lately in the wonderfully cogent recollections of another economist, A.W. Currie, the son of a man who farmed 50 acres in northwest Middlesex not far from where Galbraith was reared.⁴⁰ They knew that by 1900 the barriers to commercial success in Ontario agriculture were too high to surmount by frugality and hard work alone. Their lives of toil proved it. Yet they never quite gave up on the myth of the agricultural ladder, harboured a lurking and diminishing sense that some moral weakness had kept them from climbing to its higher rungs. The yearning in their voices is painful to hear, a discomfiting declaration of the power of those who have over those who have not. Still, the number of wage labourers in agriculture continued to rise steadily, from 41,000 in 1891 to 58,000 in 1941, as a proportion of the total farm employment from 12 to 22 per cent. At the same time the number of unpaid family workers declined from 113,000 in 1891 to 5,000 in 1941, or a decrease from 34 to 19 per cent of all farm employment.⁴¹

In the inter-war years, holding sizes stabilized relatively, with half of farmers occupying plots of 10-100 acres, and 40 per cent of holdings being above, 10 below this middle range.⁴² The availability of commercial feed and fertilizer, and of large urban markets, allowed more land-intensive agricultural methods to take hold, especially around the cities. Some farmers near large metropolitan centres, particularly dairy farmers, were able to smooth the seasonal variation in their labour demand so that engaging a permanent hired man became attractive, probably also necessary because the children on their farms would be especially likely by virtue of propinquity to succumb to the lure of the city lights. In Ontario in 1930, 39 per cent of agricultural labourers were regularly employed as permanent hands.⁴³ The proportion of Ontario farms occupied by tenants also rose.⁴⁴ Some tenants were, if you like, downwardly mobile towards that position, renters through mortgage default on land to which they had formerly held title. Especially in the Erie-Niagara region and in Essex and Kent counties, however, many tenancies were new farms developed⁴⁵ to take advantage of intensive cultivation methods in specialized cash crops. These tenancy arrangements in effect lowered the barriers to entry to occupier, if not proprietor, status by sharing capital costs between the two. For some Home Children this type of cash crop small tenancy was a happy improvement over labouring work and did lead eventually to farm ownership. More often, heightened capital requirements (the value per improved acre of implements and machinery on Ontario farms rose from \$3.97 in 1911 to \$35.10

⁴⁰ Currie, *Growing Up in Rural Ontario*.

⁴¹ Recalculated from Urquhart and Buckley, *Historical Statistics*, 355.

⁴² *Census of Canada*, 1921, 1931, 1941.

⁴³ Haythorne and Marsh, *Land and Labour*, 216, 217, 293.

⁴⁴ The proportion of Ontario farms occupied by tenants increased from 9.5 to 12.1 per cent between 1921 and 1941, shared by owners and tenants from 4.6 to 8.6 per cent. Urquhart and Buckley, *Historical Statistics*, 351, recalculated.

⁴⁵ Haythorne and Marsh, *Land and Labour*, 200-1.

in 1951)⁴⁶ dictated that tenancy become a continuing condition rather than a stage on the agricultural ladder. If increasing specialization provided some farm workers with steady waged work in dairying, and allowed others to rise to a measure of independence through cash crop tenancies, the growing acreage of stoop crops whose harvest was difficult to mechanize and highly concentrated in a few weeks of the growing season, assured that temporary work would remain a common feature of employment in agriculture. In 1930, five times as many temporary as annual wage-paying farm jobs were offered in Ontario, 67 per cent of these in the Erie-Niagara region, half of all seasonal engagements being of female harvest hands. In the inter-war years most of these temporary workers were drawn from among the ranks of village day labourers and the underemployed in nearby larger urban centres,⁴⁷ the first the lingering vestiges of the small holder class, the second the idle reserves of the industrial sector, and not a group upon whom agricultural employers could regularly rely.

Epilogue

AFTER THE WAR, agriculture in Ontario became big business. Between 1951 and 1971 the number of farms in the province decreased by 40 per cent. Those holdings over 180 acres rose from a quarter to more than a third of the whole. The proportion of farms of over 400 acres more than doubled.⁴⁸ The consolidation of holdings meant that there were fewer farm operators in the province and fewer family members engaged in unpaid farm work. But while by 1971 there were only half the farm operators in Ontario there had been in the inter-war period, there were just about as many waged workers, 60,000, in the sector in the 1970s as there had been in the 1930s.⁴⁹ Relative to salaried employees of corporate farms, owner-occupiers, and unpaid family workers, the number of waged workers in agriculture in the province continued to rise; the pattern which began in the 1890s has been sustained. And in the post-war years, the trend has accelerated.

Finding people to take up this waged work has been difficult. During the war a joint federal-provincial initiative was established to bring migrant workers into the field at harvest time, and this policy continues today in the Canada Farm Labour Programme, paying the bus fares of Maritimers and Québécois from home to the fields of southwestern Ontario. In the early post-war years, that old trope, an agricultural immigration policy, was tried once more. Twenty-nine hundred veterans of the Polish Army were brought to Canada directly from the Mediterranean front.⁵⁰ Department preferences induced more

⁴⁶ Marr and Paterson, *Canada*, 440.

⁴⁷ Haythorne and Marsh, *Land and Labour*, 215, 222.

⁴⁸ *Census of Canada*, 1951, 1961, 1971.

⁴⁹ Urquhart and Buckley, *Historical Statistics*, 355; Don Mitchell, *The Politics of Food* (Toronto 1975), 28-30.

⁵⁰ George V. Haythorne, *Labor in Canadian Agriculture* (Cambridge, MA 1960), 70, 79.

than a third of the new arrivals to Canada in 1950 to declare themselves as intending to become farm workers, though few actually stayed on the land. Twenty-five thousand assisted immigrants were bound to the soil for two years by the terms of their passage, but the most the Department of Labour could claim for this group was that "under this obligation, the workers were available to agriculture for longer periods than might have been the case otherwise."⁵¹ In 1966 systematic recruitment of field workers began offshore and since that time several thousand short-term migrants have come yearly to southwestern Ontario from Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad under the Caribbean Seasonal Workers Programme.⁵²

In recent years, about half of the farm labour force in Ontario has been local, the rest a combination of out-of-province and offshore migrants and exchange students. The conditions of work remain arduous. The most difficult farm tasks are often the least easy to mechanize. The combination of machine work with hand work in the production process only accelerates the breakneck pace established by fear of rain or frost. Chemical fertilizers and sprays make farm produce more attractive, and farm work more dangerous. Agricultural workers remain unprotected by health and safety legislation, divided by their diverse employment conditions, and unorganized because they are excluded from the province's Labour Relations Act.⁵³ Like generations of farm workers before them, the Barbadians, the Acadians, the French exchange students, and the city-dwellers from St. Catharine's enjoy the sun and the work in open air, cursing the cold and the harvest rush against nature. And with the farm labourers before them they also share the entirely reasonable conviction that agricultural waged work should be undertaken only for a short time and as a route towards some other way of earning a living.

The author is grateful to J.K. Johnson, Alan Brookes, George Rawlyk, and Don Akenson for criticism of an earlier draft.

⁵¹ Canada, Department of Labour, Economics and Research Branch, *Trends in the Agricultural Labour Force in Canada from 1921 to 1959* (Ottawa 1960), 47.

⁵² Canada, Department of Manpower and Immigration, *Seasonal Farm Labour Situation in Southwestern Ontario: A Report* (1 August 1973), 14.

⁵³ Canadian Farmworkers' Union, Toronto Support Committee, "Tobacco Report," 1981 typescript. See also four pamphlets from the Ontario Farmworkers Information Centre, Toronto: (1) "Farmworkers the Invisible Minority in Ontario: an Introduction for the Public"; (2) "Farmworkers Speak Out: Our Rights/Our Health and Safety"; (3) Migrant Workers and their Families"; and (4) "Family Life, Women and Child Labour," (Toronto 1983).

Canadians! Adopt a miners' pit village!

THE YEAR-LONG STRIKE of the British miners has involved tremendous courage. It has shown that workers are prepared to fight for the survival of their jobs, their communities and their democratic rights. Whatever its outcome, it cannot be denied that, as Arthur Scargill has recently said, "this has been the most courageous and determined stand by trade unionists anywhere in the world."

But the strike has also involved terrible hardship. Miners' families have had to subsist on less than forty dollars a week and single miners have had no income whatsoever. To provide concrete assistance and to prevent starvation, trade union locals, Labour Party branches, women's organizations and community groups throughout Britain have "adopted" mining villages. Regular monthly income has been provided to these communities so that the essentials of life — heat, electricity, water, food, clothing — could be minimally maintained.

It has recently come to our attention that one mining village, Arkwright Colliery near Chesterfield in Derbyshire, is one of the few that has not been adopted. Basic services are being cut off because bills for utilities and even for such essentials as milk cannot be paid. Even with the strike's coming to an end, there remains a great need for financial support for the rest of this year to get this community back on its feet. It would be an act of true solidarity for Canadians to adopt the Arkwright Colliery.

For a village of this size, a regular monthly contribution of about 300 pounds sterling is the minimum needed to make a significant impact. The money would go directly to the Women's Support Group in the Village who have requested our support.

To provide for a regular flow of support money over the next twelve months, we are appealing to individuals for \$5-\$10 monthly, to union locals and labour councils for \$10-\$25 monthly, and to provincial and national organizations for \$25-\$100 monthly. Post-dated cheques should be made payable to *Women's Support Group, Arkwright Colliery* and sent to Leo Panitch, 527 Palmerston Blvd., Toronto, Ontario, M6G 2P4.

The Women's Support Group will be informed of each of your contributions. Your solidarity with the mining communities in their struggle will not be forgotten.