

## Whispers from the Land

A streak of red caught my eye as the red-wing blackbird flew straight towards me, stopping to rest on a cattail that had already burst. He pipped and whistled at a dull-brown feathered female, as she flitted from cattail to cattail. I stood in awe as I watched this mating ritual, thankful I was there to experience this momentary gift. Then, more wonders greeted me when I saw wild roses forming a low wall of pink along a stand of poplar trees. Brilliant blue dragonflies graced the roses while robins and other song-birds filled the air with their sweet trilling.

Earlier that day, we left the big city of Edmonton to drive to a family camping weekend several hours southeast of the city. My husband was raised on a farm east of the city and his eyes scanned the fields as we drove along. He commented on how the countryside was hollowing out and on the changes he had seen during his life. His parents had emigrated from the Netherlands in the Fifties at a time when Canada was begging for agricultural workers. We passed close by the first farm they had worked on when they began their new life in Canada.

Many small farms supported families from the Fifties to the Eighties. Since then, the face of the family farm, and thus, the countryside, has changed. I cannot do justice to the challenges faced by family farmers in this column, I can only acknowledge that the challenges exist. Debt, subsidies in other countries and fluctuations in world commodity prices have squeezed out many.

The post-war immigrants who could provide for their families on small farms have given way to immigrants who now work in huge packing plants. Lakeside Packers in Brooks, Alberta has over two thousand workers. The plant made the headlines due to a bitter strike in the fall of 2005. The strike ended when the UFCW was able to negotiate a first contract. The forgotten news behind the headlines is that 80% of the labour force are newcomers from countries such as Sudan and Somalia, while the remaining 20% are from Atlantic Canada.

We observed that the countryside is now used more for recreation than for work. When my husband was a child, he remembers a quick three-day trip to the mountains, squeezed in between haying and chores. The holiday could only happen because the family had reached the stage when they could hire someone to mind the farm. Now, our extended family plans an annual camping weekend, and individual families plan two to three week holidays. These are luxuries his parents couldn't even imagine. Life was work and leisure was Sunday church, lunch and discussing the sermon.

As he reminisced along the highway, we started to count the signs for golf courses, noting at least ten. We knew there must be more golf courses we couldn't see. We passed small communities that almost blended into the countryside. In the past, their grain elevators stood like sentinels, marking the community on the horizon. While researching for this column, I learned there were over 5,485 elevators in Western Canada in 1933, and less than 389 in 2003. (Lynda Swanson, [www.familyfarmers.com](http://www.familyfarmers.com))

I write as a descendant of European settlers, whose coming changed the landscape known to the First Nations people. Buffalo do not roam any longer, except in a few national parks. Teepees are limited to ceremonial gatherings rather than daily living. With each generation, there seems to be more urbanization and less intimate connection to the land. Farms replaced rangeland, golf courses replace farms.

In the midst of our reflections, we laughed at ourselves. Where were we going? We were headed to a small golf course for an intergenerational round of golf, one of the activities of the camping weekend. It was on the golf course that I experienced the birds, the dragonflies and the wild roses. I said a silent prayer, thankful that our young people could be imprinted with the Alberta landscape as they swung their clubs. I hoped that their eyes could see the poplars and wild roses as they searched for their balls on the fairway. I am thankful that the voice of the land can still be heard, even if only in whispers.

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