# A selected (and slightly biased) history of OMAFRA; And in the beginning, there was paperwork

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## FULL TEXT

In 1830, the government of the day recognized the importance of local agricultural societies and starting giving them grants.

By 1850, the government had created a board to oversee the societies and started collecting agricultural statistics. This is probably about the same time farmers started grumbling about filling in forms.

Ontario's Department of Agriculture was not created until 1888. It was the first ministry established by the new province.

At that time, agriculture was dealing with many challenges.

The emerging west meant growing wheat was not profitable and farmers needed to diversify. All the good land had been settled. Labour shortages were common as sons headed into the growing cities or to the west. Ontario was changing and rural Ontario needed some specialized attention.

In the eyes of the government, the solutions lay in two directions.

One, think about where food could be sold -rapidly growing Ontario towns, US neighbors and "back home" to Britain. This created a need for quality products and attention to market preferences. Two, improve production methods by embracing the new scientific information coming out of the recently created Ontario Agricultural College (OAC).

IN THE beginning, the department worked through farm organizations and educational institutions. Progress was slow so, in 1907, the department decided to send six OAC graduates into the field.

The reception to these new District Representatives was decidedly cool. It was Waterloo District Representative Frank Hart who found a way to break in - through the children. He sponsored a competition in rural schools. Students exhibited vegetables, knitting and sewing.

Parents were invited to view the exhibits, and of course, meet the organizer.

Hart enhanced his program by handing out seeds (from the OAC) and asking children to set up plots. This gave him the ability to to visit the farms. It also gave children's parents a chance to compare the new genetics with their existing crops. This was the beginning of the Rural Schools program. It was tremendously successful until 1940 when it was transferred to the Department of Education.

Hart also created Farmer's Clubs. He saw them as an opportunity, not just to share information, but for farmers to learn how to run meetings and make their points. This was a welcomed skill set because, at the time, farmers were trying to gain stronger representation in Parliament.

The rural community was a-still feeling disadvantaged and ignored.

At the urging of Adelaide Hunter Hoodless, members of the Stoney Creek Farmers Club hosted a ladies night in 1887 and the first Women's Institute was created. Aimed at improving homemaking skills and childcare, and with the support of the Department, the concept spread rapidly.

The popularity of the District Representatives grew. So did the work of the Department. By 1910 there were 275 employees in the Department, a dairy school, MacDonald Institute, a Horticultural Experimental Station at Vineland,

and several branches including Dairy, Livestock, Fruit, and Ag and Hort Societies.
"The farmer in the field will be doing as much in this crisis as the man who goes to the front."
Those were the words of Premier W. Hearst as World War 1 began. Farmers were considered "soldiers of the soil" and huge efforts were made to increase production.
The department arranged for farm credit, bought feed for farm livestock in 1918 when crops were poor, introduced women to the decision-making side of farming through the Farmerette Course and even created a pool of tractors in attempts to speed up the adoption of mechanization. (This was only partially successful as people didn't know how to operate the new equipment.)
It was also a time of political unrest. In 1917, young men on farms were exempted from conscription.
This decision was canceled abruptly in the spring of 1918.
MEMBERSHIP IN the United Farmers of Ontario (UFO) exploded and the organization started running candidates in local by-elections. In the 1919 provincial election, 64 candidates were nominated. Fortyfour were elected and the UFO was asked to form the government.
Post-war brought depression.
Farmers needed to think about the cost of production, not just yields. Basic book-keeping and business skills were added to the training resources. Programming expanded in other areas including Home Economics, Boys and Girls Clubs (which became 4-H in 1952) and Junior Farmers.
There was also tremendous growth in new organizations specializing in commodities, co-operative buying and marketing efforts. District representatives played a huge role helping these groups set up and often acted as secretary.
Control efforts were underway for internal parasites, tuberculosis, and warble flies. In 1938, Ontario became the first large jurisdiction in the world to make pasteurization of milk mandatory, thanks in part to the work of the Women's Institute. Artificial insemination clubs (dairy) were being established and the crop information started to emphasize new tools such as fertilizer, pest and weed control and efficient labour. A Crops, Seeds and Weeds Branch was established in 1934.
In 1936, the Ontario Chamber of Agriculture, now the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, was established. It's top priority? To lobby the government for mandatory provincial marketing legislation.
A similar demand was being made nationally.
The federal government enacted the Agricultural Products Marketing Act in 1937.
Ontario passed the Farm Products Control Act that same year.
Early plans included fruit, asparagus and cheddar cheese.
In 1949, the federal government passed the Agricultural Products Marketing Act which allowed it to control supply and thus price.
By the end of World War 2 (1945), farms were larger, more specialized and more capital intensive. Within the Department, staff were convinced that farm management skills were as important as production ability. A Farm Economics Branch was created to help marketing boards with their cost studies and support individual farmers. Farm Business Management clubs were also established.
Farmers were also looking for more specialized production information. The Department of Soils was established in 1945, a separate Fruit &Vegetable extension service in 1947 and the Agricultural Engineering Service in 1950.
If you were farming in the middle of the 20th century, you could expect to have your children involved in Junior Farmers and Boys and Girls Clubs. They could go for further training to schools in Kemptville (1918) Ridgetown (1951) Centralia (1967) or New Liskeard (1966), along with MacDonald College, the Ontario Veterinary College or the OAC in Guelph.
IF YOU were female, you might be learning that household management and farm management were connected and how both affected the welfare of your family and your community. You were also learning how to be a better consumer and to keep household accounts, along with the more traditional subjects such as nutrition, health, home furnishing and clothing. All this was thanks to the Home Economics Service.

Men might be taking advantage of a new Farm Business Management club or officially serving on a Farm Advisory Council. You had likely been in a few contentious meetings and participated in votes about marketing systems. More than likely, the local department official had been there to provide information and help make sure the meeting went smoothly. You had a choice of new workshops including farm buildings, farm machinery, livestock economics, financial management and marketing and you may have participated in the Farm Accident Survey of 1959.

Those from the north had seen demonstration farms at New Liskeard and Hearst open, close and open again. The demonstration farm at Hearst closed again in 1957. You had also seen the creation of the Northern Ontario Branch (1938) and its demise (1955).

Dairy farmers could participate in the first dairy herd improvement program (1949). Beef farmers could sell cattle at either the Manitoulin feeder cattle sale (1944) or the Grey-Bruce Livestock sale (1952.) By 1959, crop producers had access to a national crop insurance program (the first formal federal-provincial cost-shared program), and fruit and vegetable producers and processors could take advantage of the new Ontario Food Terminal (1954).

Marketing tensions continued in the 1960s and '70s. Canada took a bold step and created supply management. Both provincial and national schemes were introduced for dairy, tobacco, poultry and eggs.

Less than 10 per cent of the province's farmers have an adequate farm income, and nearly 20 per cent are living in poverty. The majority of farm operators lack management understanding and ability. Those were some of the conclusions of the 1966 Special Committee on Farm Income in Ontario. The committee's report, The Challenge of Abundance, served as a wake-up call to both the industry and the government.

Inside the Department, the response was dramatic. Financial management, livestock management and crop/horticulture management became the mainstay of the programming. More attention was paid to staff training and standardized programming.

The number of regional specialists increased, and other services, such as a feed advisory service, were added. By the time the name was changed to the Ministry of Agriculture and Food (OMAF)in 1974, there were over 1400 employees in the department. MARKET TURBULENCE and cost-price squeezes continued.

Provinces began making payouts and the federal government extended its income maintenance programs. By 1976, there were federal income protection programs for industrial milk and cream, corn, soybeans, slaughter cattle, hogs, sheep, oats, barley, wheat, canola, flax seed and rye. It wasn't enough. Over the next decade there were several payments by both levels of government for events such as flooding, plant closures and winter kill.

The cries for "ad hoc" payments continued. The new US-Canada Free Trade Agreement and emerging threats of countervail increased the tension. In 1989, elected leaders concluded the safety-net programs were not working.

Federal-provincial governments launched a major policy review. The result was new criteria for government programming: avoid influencing farmer decisions with payouts; maintain regional equity; incorporate economic and social sustainability into agricultural policy; be sensitive to trade irritants and to environmental concerns.

The GRIP and NISA programs began at this time, as did the convention of a 60:40 federal-provincial cost share.

The 1980s were not all about farm prices. OMAF was starting to see food processors and rural communities as distinct clients with unique needs. The Food Processing Branch was created at that time and the support for food manufacturing has only grown since then.

As rural Ontario changed, the need for concerted rural economic development programs and community support became more urgent. Rural Affairs was officially added to the Ministry's mandate in 1994.

Also at that time, environmental concerns were becoming stronger. This lead to one of the most successful industry-government partnerships to date - the creation of Environmental Farm Plan and associated Best Management Practices (1993).

By the mid-1990s, budgetary restraints and international trading rules had caused dramatic reform of agricultural policies in Canada. There were significant reductions in support programs by the Government of Canada along with reductions in research, and new cost recovery initiatives in areas such as food inspection.

Ontario was facing similar challenges. Declining enrollments and budget pressures in the early 1990s lead to the

closure of both Centralia and New Liskeard agricultural colleges.
The creation of the University of Guelph - OMAFRA Partnership occurred in 1996 when what remained of diploma education (at Ridgetown, Alfred and Kemptville), field research (including Vineland) and laboratory services were transferred to the University.
Moving these programs off the provincial books, and changing how revenues were applied, lessened what otherwise would have been a far more drastic cut. It also allowed the institutions to take on new business.
AgriCorp was created in 1997 based on a similar rational.
"We didn't ask you to come, but we sure hate to see you go."
This statement was reportedly spoken in 1913 to a departing District Representative. It also reflects the reaction to the changes announced in 1999 when the OMAFRA restructured it's field presence. Thirtytwo field offices were replaced by 20 Agricultural or Rural Business Centers and a call center in Guelph. The position of "Ag Rep" was eliminated as were regional client representatives.
The Ministry announced it would no longer provide routine face-to-face local advisory services but work through the internet, media, workshops and partnerships.
WHILE BUDGET constraints played a role, there was an even more important driver of this change. The Ministry had reviewed its extension services (the Agriculture and Rural Advisory Services Study) and concluded that it needed a new approach.
Never-the-less, the restructuring was not an easy sell in rural Ontario. To this day, people talk about when county staff, and meeting rooms were readily available.
The reaction to the loss of OMAFRA staff was not a surprise.
Good public service comes down to good people and OMAFRA has always had some of the best. Year after year, decade after decade, individual staff are routinely recognized by industry/community associations, professional groups or international societies. At present, over 20 per cent of inductees in the Ontario Agricultural Hall of Fame spent as least some of their career in the Ministry.
Walkerton, Haines, BSE, Avian Influenza. For those involved in the food and agriculture sector in the first decade of this century, those words bring back memories of tragedy, crisis management, intense policy effort (often working with other Ministries such as Environment and Health) and rapid design and delivery of programs to support new regulations.
FOOD PRODUCTION was in the spotlight and it seemed society was looking to be reassured.
Between 1998 and 2010 the Ontario government enacted the Farming and Food Production Act (1998), the Nutrient Management Act (2002), the Clean Water Act (2006) and Source Protection Planning, the Food Safety and Quality Act (2001) and new Meat Regs, including a ban on Specified Risk Materials, the GreenBelt Act (2005), the Endangered Species Act (2007), and the Animal Health Act (2009). Industry leaders soon learned that it was not enough to talk to OMAFRA. They needed to take their messages to other departments.
Society's changing expectations were not unique to Ontario.
The 2007 Agriculture Policy Framework (APF) recognized that the food and farming system was being asked to provide safe, affordable food, and clean energy all the while protecting the environment. Funding was directed at initiatives to support these growing expectations.
Ministry staff began focusing their efforts on things like the bioeconomy, innovation, food safety, animal welfare and environment stewardship. This trend continues to this day.
As Canada and Ontario celebrate their 150th birthday, the OMAFRA remains an important part of Ontario's food and agriculture system.
Just as it was in 1888, supporting rural communities and selling safe, high-quality food to urban neighbours and international markets are priorities. So are mitigating climate change, environmental stewardship and preventing disease in both animals and people.
Right from the beginning, the people in Ontario's Department of Agriculture understood that farming is a team sport.

Only by working with everyone, farmer and family, food system and community, can Ontario agriculture live up to it's potential. Almost instinctively, they have also continued to follow a piece of advice given to the inaugural District Representatives so many years ago.

"Study the people, their conditions, and their needs. Arrange your work accordingly." This approach has served the people of Ontario well.

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