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Large versus Small Farms



RESOLVED, that large farming is best adapted to the interests and circumstances of Ontario." This formed the subject of an interesting debate before the Political Science Club of Toronto University on Thursday of last week. The affirmative was led by Mr. Amos, who laid down the principle that as it was the tendency of the age in industrial life to carry on operations on a large scale by companies or capitalists, so it would be found more economical to have very large farms controlled by companies or individuals, who could carry on the farming operations on the most scientific plan. Such a plan would mean a large saving in machinery, fences, etc. The negative was upheld by Mr. Chapman, who contended that a population of farm owners, rather than laborers and tenants, meant a sturdy, independent people, who had a deep, abiding interest in the country. In France, Belgium and other European countries, small farming had proved a success. He instanced the fact that in Ontario to-day there are 224,000 land owners who are farmers, as against 60,000 tenants, a fact that means much for the welfare and stability of this, the banner province of the Dominion.

Previous to the opening of the debate, Dr. Coleman gave a valuable address, dealing with the geological conditions of the province in relation to agriculture. It contains a variety of soil well adapted for growing all kinds of crops common to a temperate climate. Mr. Kitchen, manager of the Massey farm, east of the city, spoke strongly in favor of more intensive farming. Better cultivation of the soil was needed. What is known as the soiling system enabled the farmer to greatly increase the number of animals he could keep on his land. By this system the man with a small farm need not necessarily be a small farmer. Where, according to the old plan, it would require five acres for one animal, instances were given where 14 animals could be kept on 11 acres by the soiling process. Another instance given by Mr. Kitchen showed that on a hundred-acre farm only 12 animals were kept by the old plan, requiring 60 acres of the 100 to do it, but by adopting the soiling system, 36 animals were kept on 30 acres, leaving 70 acres for other operations. At the Massey farm the soiling system had been adopted altogether with a herd of 60 cows during the past summer. The results so far have been most gratifying, resulting in increased fertility in the land and a much larger output per acre.

With proper methods and facilities there is no doubt that a large farm can be worked and made as profitable as a small farm, as many instances in this province will bear witness to. But with the average farmer and the means he has at his disposal we think the small farm well worked and well managed will pay better than a large one. Some ten

or fifteen years ago there was a desire on the part of many farmers in this province to increase the size of their farms. Many of them did so, having to go in debt for the land purchased and we venture to say that the majority of these are not as well off to-day as they were before enlarging their farms. With the average farmer an increase in his acreage means a spreading out of his effort, more help, and less time for thorough cultivation and preparation of the land for the crop. It is on the last point, perhaps, that the question of the wisdom of large or small farms hinges.

What this country needs more than any one thing to-day is better cultivation of the land and the maintaining and increasing of the fertility of the soil. In other words what is wanted is more intensive farming, making one acre produce what two acres formerly did. In many sections we believe this can be done, and the best way to do it is for farmers to cultivate less land and do it well. Why is it that Great Britain and the countries of Europe are so productive to-day as compared with newer and more favorably situated lands on this continent? It is because more attention is paid to maintaining the fertility of the land. True, in great Britain many of the farms are large. But even there it has been shown of late years that the smaller farms return a larger profit than the larger ones on the capital invested. It is a striking fact that the average production of wheat per acre in Great Britain is double of what it is on this continent, or about 28 bushels as against about 14 bushels. This was not the case when this country was new and our farmers reaped from virgin soil containing abundance of plant food. The fact of the matter is that for a number of years our soils have been gradually depleted of their plant food with not enough being put back in its place to supply that taken away. Some years ago many farmers realizing that their farms were not so productive concluded that the remedy was to secure more land. But this instead of helping matters only made things worse.

But a new era has dawned. Farmers to-day in the older parts of Canada at least are not looking for more land, but are realizing that to make their farms profitable they must restore and increase the plant food in the soil. If an acre of land that to-day produces 20 bushels of wheat which sell for 60c. per bushel, can be made to produce 40 bushels which sell at the same price, the farmer's profit can be more than doubled. This in our opinion is the solution of the difficulty that now confronts every farmer as to how he is going to make his farm more profitable. It cannot be done in a day. It may take years for many farms in this province, even by the most modern methods, to regain their former standard of fertility and to reach a point from which they can go forward to greater things in the way of crop and livestock production than this country has ever witnessed. This is the goal that our farmers should aim to reach, and the one who will arrive first will be the farmer who makes the maintaining and increasing of the soil fertility the chief aim in his farming operations.