

# Farming — good life but poor livelihood'

## Land owner now trimming luxury homes

Reporter  
N — Bob Hobson has found an additional opportunity for his farm — for 15 years he has been growing apples and other crops. Poor weather causing a loss of not too healthy years' crops, Hobson looked for an opportunity to "pick up the slack." Initially we did not set big goals but demands have greatly exceeded expectations. "I don't want it to get too big, but I don't want to restrict its growth either." Hobson refrains from giving out numbers when talking about just how well things are going. "Business is amazingly good. I don't want to give figures because they're misleading." Supply problems slowed the early production but with equipment now purchased from Toronto and a lumber yard in Pembroke supplying the wood, the trims are rolling through the molding machine more steadily. But it will not be all smooth sailing from here on, Hobson admitted. There are predictable clashes between the crop and trim businesses at Mountain Orchards. Already Hobson is putting in nine hour days, seven days a week.

a house. Much of the work so far for Hobson has been making trims for heritage buildings.

People are also going back to old style houses, Hobson said.

Most of the past half year for Hobson has been spent setting up shop in his barn. A molding machine was bought second-hand for considerably less than the \$150,000 tag a new one would fetch.

He said business is off to a promising start. "It is a lot larger now than we envisioned six months ago. Initially we did not set big goals but demands have greatly exceeded expectations.

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"And we haven't even got busy yet. That's the scary part."

Strawberry season is only about two weeks away, Hobson predicted. However, Hobson said he has been "coping long enough to know what critical things to take care of."

There is another type of conflict also confronting Hobson — his love of farming and of working outdoors.

He said such common farm duties as pruning are "missed only when you are not doing it. Farming is a fairly good life but not a great livelihood."

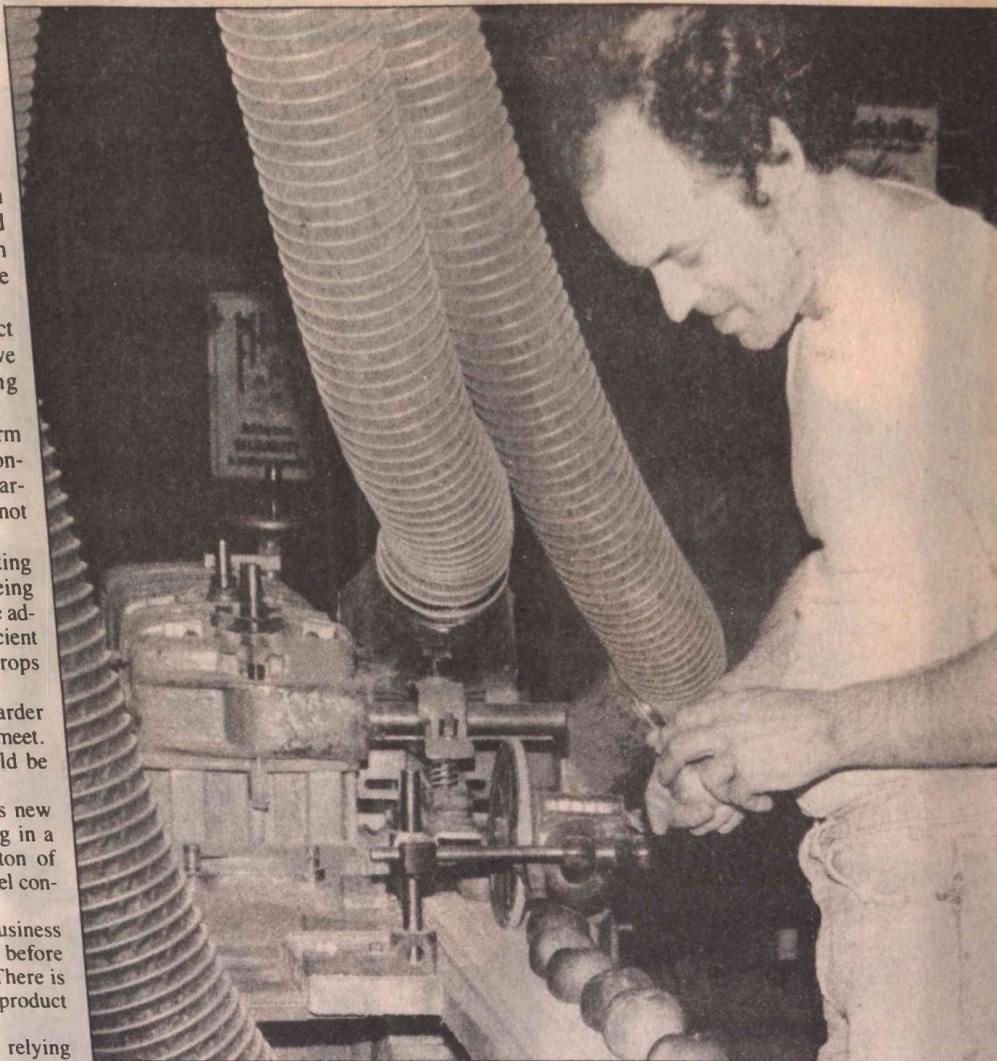
Hobson said he is "not getting tired" of farming even after being in the field for 15 years. But, he admitted there simply is not sufficient money to be made from his crops these days.

"Agriculture is getting harder and harder just to make ends meet. A nice reliable income would be nice."

And Hobson is hoping his new trimming business will bring in a stable income. "I have a ton of money invested so I better feel confident."

He said he realizes the business still has a "fair way to go" before he can sit back and relax. There is the job still of getting the product into the public eye.

Hobson so far has been relying on word of mouth to bring his trimming business to the attention of potential customers.



Bob Hobson has run into a problem finding storage space for his crops now that his

Mountain Orchards' barn houses a new business.

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## Berry growers predict bountiful season



Bob Hobson of Mountain Orchards expects to have a good crop of strawberries this year, thanks to irrigation last summer and no frost this spring.

MOUNTAIN — As the days get warmer and the taste buds get a yearning for delicious fresh picked strawberries, area residents can head up to the Mountain Orchards' farm to pick their own supply.

Mountain Orchards has been owned and operated by Bob Hobson and Phil Lyall for the past 15 years, although according to Hobson "with the eight-day weeks it seems longer than that."

Hobson, Lyall and their families each share the large house on the farm and Lyall and Hobson have their sons help out on the farm. Hobson says that Lyall is hoping his 13-year-old daughter Jessica will also be helping out this year.

Mountain Orchards is an 80-acre farm with six-and-a-half acres of strawberries, seven acres of raspberries and more than 45 acres of apples.

Hobson said more strawberries could be grown but it would not be possible to sell them all, and he doesn't want to be like some strawberry producers who let their berries rot in the fields.

As Hobson inspected his strawberry patch, he predicted an excellent crop this year with the berries ready near June 20.

"Last year it was embarrassing. It was the most depressing year for strawberries we had ever seen," said Hobson, as he recalled winter kill virtually destroying last year's strawberry crop.

This year the two farmers are expecting a bountiful crop because they irrigated all through the dry summer, and protected the crops with hay during the winter, as there has not been enough snow the past few years to protect the crops properly.

As well, strawberry growers usually have to worry about frost in the spring killing their plants or berries, but this spring there has been no frost.

Although the strawberries were not successfully last year, Hobson and Lyall were able to offset some of their losses with their raspberry crop. "We had a bumper crop of raspberries last year which made for easy picking," explained Hobson.

Hobson estimates that half their sales in strawberries and raspberries are through pick-your-own customers while the rest of the berries are sold at the house or to local stores.

"We don't really advertise too much," said Hobson, who explained signs are put up and regular clientele from around Mountain and Winchester is counted on to pick the fields clean during the three weeks of strawberry season.

Hobson said there are many berry farmers closer to the city so he does not rely on pulling in customers from the Ottawa area. "When we started with strawberries, there were only about 40 strawberry farmers in Eastern Ontario, now there are close to 700," said the fruit farmer.

"After all," said Hobson, "Eastern

Ontario residents eat more strawberries per capita than other Ontario residents." Hobson feels this is because they have a good crop and an excellent Strawberry Grower's Association to promote their product.

Although only a small number of customers from Ottawa come to Mountain Orchards for their strawberries, the opposite is the case with their pick-your-own apples, as numerous families converge from the city on the farm in September.

"On busy Saturday and Sunday afternoons we have more than 5,000 customers a day and turn over 250 cars an hour," said Hobson.

Picking apples is a family thing as parents and children come out and make a day of it, said Hobson. He added that a second generation of pickers who came to Mountain Orchard for apples as youngsters, now bring their own children.

As one of the top five orchards in Eastern Ontario, Hobson said Mountain Orchards sells about 20 per cent of its apples as pick-your-own and the rest of the apples, and their apple cider goes to major stores in Ottawa. "Why, we even supply the Boy Scouts in Ottawa," said Hobson.

Although apple sales have been good, Hobson said his business suffered last year with the alar scare. Hobson felt the media blew the effect of alar on humans way out of proportion and he said he believes that peanut butter is more carcinogenic than alar, and that beer is 100 times more carcinogenic than alar.

Although the federal government has not declared alar to be harmful, until further studies are done to show it is safe, Mountain Orchards has stopped using the chemical.

"I have a family of my own and I understand the customers' concerns," said Hobson, who said he hopes to gain back the confidence of the market now that Mountain Orchards, along with the majority of apple orchards, stopped spraying alar last year.

As well, last Friday the Canadian producer of alar, Uniroyal Chemicals Limited announced that it was withdrawing alar from sales in the Canadian market, and that it had already done so in the U.S. on June 2. The company said it would review its decision in 1990 when the American Environmental Protection Association had finished its tests on alar.

Hobson did not think the fact that they no longer use alar would hurt his crops that much, but would rather condense the harvest and picking into two weeks rather than three.

Hobson said the ban on alar may cause some farmers to grow a fewer number of McIntosh apples, which would be unfortunate since Eastern Ontario is known world wide as the best producers of McIntosh.

"Macs need hot days and cool nights and we have the perfect climate for that," said Hobson, who added that other apple varieties, such as red delicious, do not fare so well at such a northerly location.

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