Introduction and Research Goals

James Bowman was a purebred cattle herder living on Paisley Road, on the western outskirts of Guelph. Writing over twelve volumes during his lifetime between 1866 and 1944, his diaries are now housed and available for viewing at the University of Guelph McLaughlin Library Archives. Research for this project used approximately 240 pages of Bowman’s diaries that were written during the First World War. Bowman’s diaries use a choppy and conversational tone that reveal a day to day synopsis of how Guelph farmers sought to improve their financial and social standing. His diaries also reveal how farmers bound together to create a delicate balance between business, family and community, to endure wartime conditions.

This research explores:

• What role did a Guelph cattle raiser play in the wartime cattle economy?
• How disruptive was the First World War to Guelph’s farming communities?

Business on the Exhibition Circuit

Every July during the First World War Bowman went on a month long tour of Canada’s Prairie provinces to sell stock and win prizes in regional competitions. In the weeks before, he budgeted over $725 to attend 11 exhibitions each year. Like many farmers, he relied on family members to share the load of farm work. Before train journeys his nephews, Harry Bowman and Willie Walker, spent the days grooming and inspecting the show animals before loading them into train cars. Each time Bowman arrived in a Prairie city, he unloaded his cattle at the exhibition ground, entered the shows and competed for several days, repacked the cattle, and left for the next city on his travels.

Everyday Life on the Farm

Bowman’s farm, Elm Park, was a large estate. At the centre was the Italianate style manor where Bowman and his family lived. The house was surrounded by 100 acres of livestock, crops, farrow land, and forest. James’ nephew, Harry, lived with them on the farm. The boys spent the summer days planting and cultivating wheat, buckwheat, potatoes, oats, barley, chard, carrots, corn, rape seed, turnips. These crops were all to be stored to sustain the family and the surplus would be sold in the surrounding area.

Family, Religion, and Community

The Bowman’s were a large, extended family. James lived with his wife, mother, and four daughters (Jenny, Beatie, Mary, and Margarette); his father passing a few years before. As practising Methodists, the church created a close network of community engagement, with at least a few family members attending regularly on a weekly basis. During the war, church attendance served as the basis of small-town community formation and it also provided followers time to vent about wartime gossip.

GUELPH FARMERS AND THE GREAT WAR
An Account of James Bowman’s Diaries

Figure 1. James Bowman with one of his many award winning cows, Kyama’s Heir, on his farm in Guelph.

A Journey through Time: Bowman’s Business Trip to Toronto

Farmers like Bowman were just as much businessmen, establishing contracts and securing deals with an interested clientele. In February 1915, James left for Toronto to attend a ‘patriotism and production meeting’ and stayed overnight at the King Edwards Hotel. The large doorway of the hotel gave way to a rounded neo-classical interior. Marble columns in Corinthian style raised to the ceiling where dozens of Union Jacks hung from the walls. In the banquet halls, chandeliers hung above white linen tables. Likely familiar with many of them, Bowman sat among Canada’s leading government officials, industrialists, and agriculturalists. As he listened to speakers discussing the important role each of them played in doing their part for the British Empire, Bowman was very much a businessman among businessmen. Meetings and events with these other businessmen allowed greater coordination for food being sent overseas to support the war WWI efforts. The rumble of artillery on ocean away strengthened Bowman’s sense of urgency and need to support his country. The businessmen also allowed Bowman the needed time to establish contacts and build networks necessary to pursuing his business ties.

CONCLUSIONS

• Bowman’s family were fortunate to be in a market which benefitted from wartime demands
• While rising meat costs ultimately provided a profitable source of income to Guelph cattle raisers, WWI also brought about years of intensive labour, uncertainty, and the feeling of ‘harder times’

To find out more about local history and how you can read or transcribe historical rural diaries, check out one of 130 other diarists on the Rural Diary Archive (ruraldiaries.lib.uoguelph.ca). This website is funded by the Francis and Ruth Redelmeier Professorship in Rural History and supported by the McLaughlin Library at the University of Guelph. Bowman’s Diary is also featured as part of a radio series available from the CFRU 93.3 Radio Archives, which originally aired on June 16 2016.

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