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Sharedon Farms Ltd., The Curry Family, Grey County
In this photo, Cheryl, Joel, Karis, Hannah, & Jeff Curry

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Member Spotlight



Elevators at Sharedon Farms Ltd.

If you have stopped at the lights at Mennonite Corners, in Grey County, you have probably seen the elevators and bins at Sharedon Farms Ltd. shining on the horizon. Don Curry, his son Jeff, their families, and employees, make up this successful operation. In the four decades since this farm was established, they have continued to expand into the cash crop business that they are today. We are delighted to feature Sharedon Farms in this issue of the Georgian Bulletin.

Family

Farming can be traced back generations in the Curry family. Don's forefathers homesteaded in the Rocklyn area of Grey County, in the late 1800s. Don joked that the name of that community, starting with rock, should have been enough to send them off running, but instead, they cleared the very stony land, and farmed. One of the Curry boys was offered free land in the Midland Penetang area, and that is where Don's father, William Arthur Curry grew up. When William returned from the second World War, he farmed in that area, and then made a move to a farm in Grey County near Irish Lake, where he farmed and lived for 65 years. Typical of those times, William had a mixed farm. He had dairy cows and sold milk and cream. He also raised pigs, and he grew crops to feed the livestock. Don grew up on that farm, and that is where his appreciation for farming began. When Don was in his late teens, he was given the choice to go to university or farm. He decided on the latter, and at 18, he rented farmland and got a full-time job in Owen Sound at a machine shop. Those machining skills have certainly come in handy on the farm over the years!

Don married his wife Sharon in 1976. He noted that Sharon was not from a farm background, but her Dad was in construction. Don laughed and said, "That was a good thing



Sharon and Don Curry

for me because she was used to the long hours that I would be putting in". Sharon was a full-time nurse, but she also did the books and helped with whatever was needed on the farm. Don and Sharon have two children, Jeff, born in 1980, and Rebecca, born in 1982. Jeff attended West Hill

Secondary School, and then worked at a printing factory in Owen Sound for 14 years. Jeff shared, "When I was a teen, Dad thought it would be a good idea for me to get a job elsewhere – work for somebody else." That is what he did,

and he thought it was a good practice as it allowed him to get used to someone else's rules.

Jeff married his wife Cheryl in 2001. They have three children, Joel (16), Karis (13) and Hannah (8). Cheryl assists on the farm by doing all the farm books. Jeff thinks that it is harder to gauge the girls' interest in farming yet because there is no livestock on the farm. Their son Joel likes the equipment. Jeff would like his son to follow in his footsteps, but they have made it clear to him that he must go get educated first. Jeff commented, "At 16, you think maybe I will quit school and go farming. I have always thought that you should get a trade or something under your belt before you farm." Jeff added that "he just has a high school diploma." The fact that he did not go off to post secondary school is one of his biggest regrets. "It has worked out ok for me, but I wouldn't recommend that to coming generations", explained Jeff.

Jeff returned to work full time on the farm in 2012, joining what Jeff refers to as one of the fastest growing industries. When asked why he chose that time to return to the farm, he said that it was getting to the point where his Dad had to think about whether to wind down, or have Jeff come on board to carry-on. Jeff joked that Don is not winding down yet.

Farm History

One of the early investments that Don made was to buy some property in Owen Sound. In 1980, Don and Sharon bought the property where they are today, but his initial intention was not to farm, nor stay long in that location. Instead, he thought he could duplicate the profit that he made with the Owen Sound property. However, that first winter he bought a tractor and cultivator, and sowed a crop in the spring. He then realized that he was hooked on farming, and Sharedon Farms, a blending of Don's and his wife's name, was created.

Initially, Don and Sharon had cows and pigs. He once told his Dad after cleaning out the pigs at home, that he would never have those "stinking things" on his farm, but they were a fast turn-around for cash. Don bought calves in the fall and sold half in the spring and the other half went to grass. Over time, Don realized that he did not like cattle as much as cropping, so in the early 2000s they streamlined the operation. Jeff feels that that was probably the best decision that was made on the farm. Jeff recalls that his Dad said, "You can maybe do a lot of things, but you are not going to do them all well." Don decided to focus on just the cropping and got out of livestock all together. In 2001, Don built his first bin - a single dryer bin, on the current site along with a moderate sized storage bin to serve their own needs. As the farm continued to grow, so did the drying and storage, and in 2011 the pit, elevator and two silos were built along with a larger dryer. It was at that time that they became a licenced elevator and began commercially drying/storing/purchasing crops.

Farm Operation

The workload is split at Sharedon Farms. As Don says, "The elevators are Jeff's baby, and I work with the guys on the crops." Today, Sharedon Farms has 12 employees. Jeff commented that "we have a great bunch of guys working for us, and they seem to stick around." Don believes that it is important to pay your workers well and offer them benefits. They appreciate their employees, try to treat them well, and

Member Spotlight cont.

they hope that they can make the job interesting. About eight employees work in the fields with Don, and four work at the elevators with Jeff. Sunday is always a quiet day on the farm, so that attention can be placed on family.

In the spring, everyone takes part in seeding. The equipment is fairly new, and precision ag touches everything. Most of the employees are in the younger generation, and Jeff thinks that “precision ag seems to come easier to them”. Jeff reflected that “there are some pieces of equipment that Dad does not care to learn.” Don really liked planting corn, but he does not enjoy the variable rate technology, so now he works the dirt, and others can plant. Overall, Jeff finds that the equipment is user friendly, and you do not need a degree in computer science to use it. If you keep up with the technology by upgrading your equipment regularly, the learning curve is not too steep.

Sharedon Farms works around 12,000 acres, with 75% of the crops being produced on rented land - from Markdale, Ferndale, Meaford to Burgoyne, with every soil type on the map. They grow corn, soybeans, wheat, canola, and sometimes white beans, and IP soybeans for the tofu market. Jeff commented that it was a good cropping year for everything except canola. Beans had excellent yields! Jeff added, “There were good yields, and prices have rallied. Not very often do you get both in the same year. Everybody should be happy this year.”



Some of the Sharedon Fleet

They used to grow cover crops, but they have not grown them for many years. Jeff remarked that “Dad used to put red clover in wheat, but when it came to getting the straw off, that was a pain, and we found that we either had a super good crop of wheat, and nothing underneath; or a super poor crop of wheat, and lots of

cover crops.” Don added that when they were planting red clover in the wheat rotation, they had white mold issues on their soybeans because there was nothing to break the cycle. Also, today with a lot of the crops coming off later in the fall, a cover crop would not have much of a chance to get established before winter.

Their typical rotation is canola, wheat, corn, and soybeans. Crop rotation is an extremely important factor in this operation as it plays a significant role in boosting organic matter and weed control. With a good crop rotation, fields are seldom being sprayed with the same chemistry two years in a row. There is no hay in their rotation now. In 2013, the year after Jeff returned to the farm, they stopped haying. Jeff explained that hay falls in at the only time that you have a break in the year. Farmers just finish seeding, the busiest 5-6 weeks of the year, and then hay is ready for harvesting. So, by taking that out of the rotation, it gave them some breather time. Jeff added that “you don’t need to work 24/7!”

The Elevators

Since the beginning, Sharedon Farms has been continuously expanding their elevators and storage bins. In 2018, they upgraded their facility with a much larger dryer, that has the capacity to dry 4000 bu/H of wet corn. They also added a second receiving pit to handle the customer deliveries more

expediently. The number of farmers delivering their crops to the elevators has increased over the years. They hail from close to Markdale, near Meaford and the Tara area. The Sharedon elevators receive all the main crops, totalling 50,000 tonnes a year (includes their own crops). Their goal is to keep expanding and increase that value by 50% in the coming years. Jeff has learned a lot through the years about marketing. His self-described biggest regret of a lack of post secondary education, has certainly not been an impairment!

Challenges

Affordability of land, either to purchase or lease, and overhead capital costs, are the biggest concerns for Don and Jeff. Don pointed out that “good land is worth a premium, but if it does not pencil out, why are we wearing out our machinery?” Don cannot see how beginner farmers would be able to start farming today, “You can’t start from nothing!” He also commented that his generation was probably the last to be able to start farming without family support. It takes a deep purse to farm today, and as margins get smaller, and the costs of equipment etc. increase, only the low interest rates are saving farmers. Statistics indicating that farmers are experiencing more debt today than ever before could foreshadow tough roads ahead, especially with the unknowns that this pandemic brings.

Industry wide, there are a lot of roadblocks going up with respect to farming. Whether it be farming practices, or treatment of livestock, urban people have a lot to say about the farming community. They also have a lot to say about farm machinery on the roads. The location of the Curry home farm, and the large radius that they travel, has shown them firsthand that some drivers have zero patience, and a lack of respect for what they do. In addition, rules and laws are tabled that only make sense on paper, and they are not based on real science. Jeff expects to see a time when farmers will not be able to use glyphosate. He was quick to add though, that farmers are sometimes their own worst enemy, “We don’t do things right all the time.”

Future

Jeff hopes to maintain or grow the size of their land base. Like most, they want the farm to be at a level that it is sustainable, keep the workers employed, and be profitable at the end of the year. Jeff and Don both hope that there will be another generation to follow them on the farm. Jeff noted that he has often said that he had a lot more opportunity than his son has in terms of exposure to farming at a younger age. He continued, “When I grew up, the equipment was a lot smaller, and there was a lot less chance of bad things happening. With the equipment the way it is, and laws and rules, it hardly makes sense to send a kid out on a huge piece of equipment.” This limits the opportunities for our up and coming generation of budding farmers.

We would like to thank Grey County SCIA for suggesting that we interview the Curry family. It was a delight to speak to both Don and Jeff. They have a very busy operation, so I thank them for taking the time to share their farm story. I am left with a couple key take-aways: streamline your operations so that you can focus on doing one thing well, versus a number of things marginally well; and, you can’t work 24/7. Regardless of our occupation, we should all take note!

Lorie Smith