

Local food, then and now

Prices compare, but not opportunities

by David Greenberg

James Card is a retired dairy farmer from Centre Burlington on the Hants Shore of Nova Scotia. He grew up on a farm, surrounded by livestock, barns, pastures, orchard trees, and salt marsh. At the top of the hill behind the barns was a million dollar view overlooking the Kennetcook River. He said his parents used to walk up there in the evening to drink it in. From that hill you could see the tidal Kennetcook and Avon rivers, and the eagles soaring overhead. His parents could also see a lot of farming activity on the surrounding land.

Family farms used to be common along the Hants Shore, but many of them have disappeared.

Card is now in his 80s and has moved to a nursing home in nearby Windsor. One day he made a passing remark that his father, Ralph Card, used to sell a wide variety of farm products to the King's-Edgehill School in Windsor, a half-hour away. He had a small booklet recording some of those sales from 1943 and 1944.

Looking through the little booklet was like opening a door on what things were like in the '40s. The bulk of the sales were to King's-Edgehill, but many smaller sales were made to people with names still common in the area. Reading one sales entry after another, I wondered how the prices would compare in today's dollars. I plugged the prices into an inflation calculator.

Overall, Ralph Card's 1943 prices are similar to the prices of locally grown food bought at a farmer's market today. For instance, he sold lamb for 30 cents a pound, which would translate to \$3.60/lb today, close to what you would pay for a whole lamb bought directly from a farmer. Eggs were actually more expensive. On July 13 of 1943 Ralph charged Mrs. Miller 70 cents for two dozen eggs, which would work out to be about \$4.20 per dozen in today's dollars. But the price went way up in the late fall. From the end of October through January of the following year, the price was a whopping 50 cents, or the equivalent of \$6 per dozen today.

The three biggest selling items were lamb (sold at 30

MEMORANDUM		MEMORANDUM	
Jan 27	Edgehill 33 doz eggs 12.00	March 21	80 lbs Veal 25
50 lbs Veal C 25 (67)	20.00	360 turkeys 2	7.00
33 Lamb (24)	9.00	87 1/2 doz eggs 25	20.12
50 doz eggs Lockhart 25	10.50		42.07
Feb 11	Edgehill 55 doz eggs 22.00	March 27	30 doz eggs 13.65
Brookfield 30 doz 4.75		140 turkeys 25	35.00
60 lbs 30 doz 25		100 turkeys	2.00
Feb 28	30 doz eggs 10.50	2 bags potatoes	4.50
Edgehill 7 lbs 25			55.15
Mar 8	30 doz eggs 35 10.50	Apr 12 (25.47)	
3 bags potatoes 25 6.75		Pig head 1.00	7.00
1 1/2 lbs. lamb 4 5.00		J.A.B. 2 bags pot	4.50
	22.25	Moh. San fat	1.60
		Lamb 1	1.60
		Apr 5 1944	8.45
		Mother Brookham 56 doz	
		eggs 25	17.92
		2 potatoes tops for Meger Cross	3.00
			20192

Looking through the small sales booklet is like looking into the 1940s. Most of the value in orders then came from the sale of a wide variety of diverse livestock products.

cents/lb) veal, and pork, which both went for 25 cents/lb. January 13, 1944 was a good day. He delivered 169 lbs of pork, 90 lbs of veal, eight livers, 9 1/2 lbs of beef, 21 half-dozen eggs, and 105 lbs of squash, for a total of \$82.15.

On the same day, he sold the following to a certain "Mrs. Smith:" one hog's head (75 cents), other meat (80 cents), one beef hide (\$4.68), two calfskins (\$1.95), and 123 lbs of meat (\$25.83).

At the bottom of the page his daily total is \$120.86, which in today's dollars is \$1,560.55. On this one page of a long-forgotten little book is a snapshot of a world that supported small independent farms.

Reading through the booklet, I noticed that most of the value in the orders came from selling livestock

products. He sold potatoes, squash, turnips, and apples, but they were a small portion of his business. I was also struck by the diversity of livestock products he was able to sell. He had a market for hog's heads, hides, organ meat, and fleeces. Card said that in his father's time, almost all

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Left to right, Catherine, Ralph, and James Card pose for a family snapshot taken in 1957, taken beside the family farm in Centre Burlington, N.S. (Photo provided by the Card family.)

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Card explained that selling farm products to King's-Edgehill was only a sideline. Several days a week his father also shipped milk products to Halifax, sent bales of wool to Moncton, and shipped hogs by rail to whatever market paid the best price.

Curious to find out if King's-Edgehill was still supporting local farmers, I got in touch with the school's director of food service, Twila MacDonald. She purchases all the local fruits and vegetables she can from distributors in the Annapolis Valley. Honey is bought from Cosman and Whidden in Greenwich and locally-roasted coffee from the Just Us Co-op in Grand Pré.

While the list of Nova Scotian products the school uses is impressive, I noticed that meat was not included. MacDonald explained that Chartwell's, the school's food service company, has a policy to only buy meat from

Bigger not safer

To learn more about federal and provincial regulations of meat processing, and why companies like Chartwell's only buy from federally-inspected plants, I contacted an "industry expert." The conversation lasted more than an hour. He was eager to explain everything he knew about the issue, as long as he was not named in the article.

After listening to the technical details of the meat processing industry, the big picture started to emerge. For meat to be shipped across provincial borders, and to meet the purchasing guidelines of most governmental, institutional, and large chain store buyers, it must be processed in a federally-inspected plant.

As volumes of meat being processed become larger, the risk of contamination increases. As processing plants have grown, the regulations, particularly the federal ones, have become more strict, and much more expensive to implement.

Increasing expense has driven a need for — you guessed it — higher volumes of meat to process! And of course, these increases in volume bring about a new round of regulations, driving up the cost of a meat plant once again.

Over the last half century, this has set in motion a chain reaction of ever-greater centralization and industrialization of meat processing. The federal inspection guidelines are in place to make large-scale meat processing as safe as possible. They also are charged with ensuring the products are accurately graded and weighed. This kind of regulation is necessary when dealing with enormous quantities of meat.

But does this mean that all these rules and regulations, and the extra costs that come with meeting them, are necessary to bring safe, high-quality meat to our tables?

The industry expert was confident in saying that, overall, the smaller, provincially-inspected plants produce a product every bit as safe as the federally-inspected plants, even though the regulations they have to meet are much less demanding. DG

federally-inspected meat processing plants.

It has been 68 years since Ralph Card's big delivery day. Once again, Nova Scotians are starting to support their local farmers. While it is encouraging to hear that King's-Edgehill has a buy-local program, it seems an ironic twist that meat, the very thing Ralph Card based his sales on so many years ago, is excluded from this current effort to buy local.

(David Greenberg lives in Centre Burlington, N.S.)

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