MANITOBA CO-OPERATOR
The Farmers' Newspaper
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Vol. 62, No. 18 April 29, 2004

Ordinary Morden is an inspiration

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Morden is attractive, by any standards, and the fact was officially noted this month when *Harrowsmith Country Life* magazine made the town of 6,200 one of its top 10 rural Canadian settings for 2004. I heard a *Harrowsmith* person on the radio say Morden was "extraordinarily ordinary," and the magazine write-up quoted someone saying "It's like a scene out of 'Leave it to Beaver.'

I had been to Morden half a dozen times before, but usually to cover something at the Ag Canada station. I had to go back to see the whole town; to see what the *Harrowsmith* people saw.

Before stopping in town I did a highway drive-by, in both directions, for a new first impression. From the east, Highway No. 3 cuts through a wall of trees and passes through the centre of town under a canopy of elms. You pass by the old Stodder's House on the left, then beautiful Maple Leaf School on the right (please, never tear it down) and not long after, cosy Morden Park. The west side of town, with its big, modern stores, creeps up the escarpment.

I took a left at the top of the hill and stopped at Colert Beach on man-made Lake Minnewasta. I got out and looked around the lake. Everything was idyllic, except for the hideous water treatment plant on the opposite shore. "Morden drinking water better be good," I thought to myself as I looked at the plant. That's an improvement over the old plant, ag rep Brian Nedohin told me later.

I got back in the car and returned to town. As nice as Morden looks from the east, coming over the escarpment and dropping into town from the west is spectacular. All you can see is sky at the crest and then forest as you descend.

In town, I went south a block to Stephen St., the commercial corridor. It looks like what a small-town strip should look. Almost every building is occupied, and not by chain stores.

I parked and walked a few blocks to the Civic Centre to meet with Carol Martin, community resources officer with the town. She gave me a short tour of the modern north end, then we went for lunch.

She arranged for Pat Plett, executive director of the Morden Friendship Centre to meet us. I had spoken with Nedohin the day before and suggested he come, too.

I told Carol I wanted great local food, so she suggested the Kopper Kettle. I ordered off the "Mennonite favorites" part of the menu. I had summa borscht, a soup with farmer's sausage. Then I had perogies stuffed with blueberry and cottage cheese and covered in white gravy. This is apparently a main course dish, not dessert. And stupid me, I ordered only three perogies. I could have eaten 20. I also had a few glasses of water. It's excellent.

Morden's roots are Anglo-Saxon, not Mennonite, but the town has a large Mennonite population, with some estimates putting it near 50 per cent. So in fairness, in eating the food I did, I was getting a traditional Morden dish.

Between bites, we talked. Plett and Martin both grew up in Morden, moved away for many years, then moved back. Plett is clearly proud of the beauty of her town. "I've lived here a number of years, and it still catches my breath. It grabs you," she said.

"Morden is the best in country living," said Martin, who got back a year ago after 18 years in England. "And it has a more active social life than any large centre."

Do you need to move to the city to appreciate small-town life? I asked them. They both nodded in agreement.

Nedohin grew up on a farm near Overstoneville near Tolstoi in eastern Manitoba. His first job was in Melita, and he drove through Morden every time he returned to the farm. "I always thought that if a job ever came up in Morden, I'd like to get a transfer." He got his wish in 1979. "Morden is a good place to work, and a good place to live."

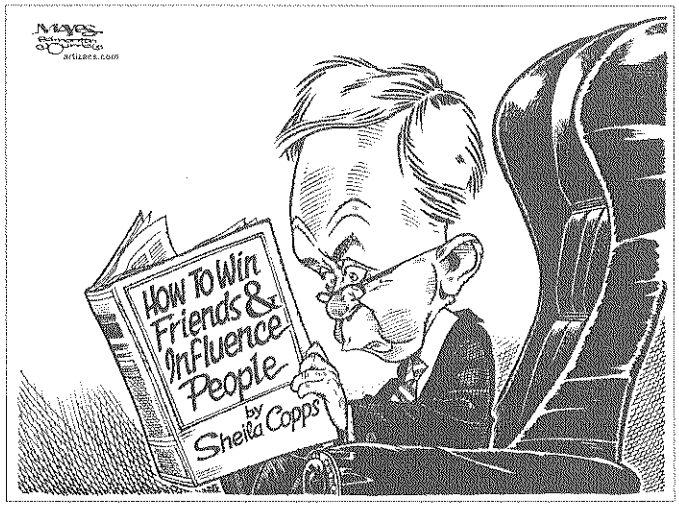
As we finished our lunch, Lenore Laverty joined us. Lenore was born in Winnipeg and spent most all of her life there working for the provincial government. She hated it. "I wanted to blow myself up," she said.

Then her sister suggested she move to "boonieville" — Lenore's term — without specific reference to Morden. So Lenore thought about it. She asked her brother and sister-in-law, who were already in Morden, whether it would bother them terribly if she moved there. They said no, so she quit her job and relocated.

She poked around looking for jobs and got something with the Millennium Committee. Then she got a term job with — surprise — the provincial government. Now she works full time as regional recreation planner with the province, and loves it. What's the difference? She travels outside the office more than she did in the city. And when she's working in town she walks to work, doesn't pay for parking and goes home for lunch.

She has embraced small-town life, taking part in the community more than she ever did in Winnipeg. "You can make an impact in a small town," she said.

Morden is a special town, no doubt, and it deserves the recognition of *Harrowsmith Country Life*. But this column is about more than Morden. It's about finding rural strengths and feeding on them. May every Manitoba community be thus inspired.



Manitoba government must stand by livestock producers

Harry Siemens is an agricultural journalist based in south-central Manitoba.

All those with a stake in livestock production and expansion in Manitoba and those who reside in rural Manitoba will be interested in proposed changes to the Planning Act.

The livestock industry has long called for the provincial government to provide some certainty in the future of livestock expansion. This doesn't apply to intensive livestock operations only. This applies to all those who raise livestock.

For many producers, expanding an existing barn or farm to involve another family member has become all but impossible in some municipalities because of emotional decisions by R.M. councils quick to appease a growing non-farming population.

In the past, it was often easier to go to another site, apply for a new permit and increase the size of the operation and overhead costs because it was impossible to expand on an existing site.

Bill 40, the Planning Amendment Act to the provincial Planning Act, has hog and grain farmer Weldon Newton of Neepawa concerned because it still gives the municipalities the right to refuse an application after the farmer has met all the conditions.

At the same time, Newton, the past president of Keystone Agriculture Producers, commends the government for removing the conditions regarding storage, application and use of manure once the producer has approval for his application.

What he doesn't like, and he'll make the case at upcoming hearings, is that municipalities can still refuse an application, even if an applicant meets all the conditions.

"There is no certainty in this bill that I can still go ahead and build the barn," he told me following a hog industry meeting in Winnipeg. "I could spend $10,000 to provide the information I need on engineering services, meet all the provincial conditions, but the municipality can turn me down."

He thinks the legislation must provide some certainty by ensuring the municipality can't turn down the legislation if it meets all the conditions.

"The government appears to have backtracked on that one in the last couple of months," said Newton. "They certainly gave us indications before, that when they brought this in there would be some certainty in it."

He likes the fact municipalities will have to indicate which areas are sensitive environmental areas so producers know they can't build a barn there. However, the development plans in each municipality will also indicate which areas are environmentally safe. He wants the legislation to guarantee if a producer's application meets all the conditions for those so-called safe areas that a producer can build in that area. Otherwise, there's no certainty of whether any barns will go up in the future. Emotions or politics can still sway the rural council in question and turn down an application without looking at the facts and regulations.

He and other members of KAP will try to persuade government at upcoming hearings they need to look at what the livestock industry in Manitoba needs to continue to expand and be profitable.

"But also recognize we are good environmental stewards," said Newton. "We'll meet reasonable expectations."

It's a matter of survival for the family farm. People have to recognize family farms are different today.

"We're seeing the mid-sized farms disappearing," he said. "Generally, we're either very large or very small."

Farms are often large enough to support a complete family unit, or small enough that a person can still work full time off the farm.

"For those families who wish to have a complete family income from the farm, we have to be sure rules and regulations are in place that allow for a farm of that size," Newton said. "We have to recognize the size that farm has to be and that is a struggle. It doesn't matter in which part of agriculture you're in."

I agree with him completely. The Manitoba government must provide certainty by making it mandatory for municipalities through development plans to designate areas suitable and safe for livestock farms. And then, when a producer meets all the requirements to expand or build new, don't refuse the application at the last moment. If it's suitable and people so decide during the development hearings, then stand by that plan. ❑

MANITOBA CO-OPERATOR
The Farmers' Newspaper

The farm newspaper that reaches virtually all farms in Manitoba with news, features and opinions on all matters of interest to Manitoba farmers. The Co-operator also publishes Seed Manitoba

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Publications Mail Agreement #40062968
PAP Registration #10062
We acknowledge the financial assistance of the Government of Canada, through the Publications Assistance program (PAP), toward our mailing costs.

Canadian Postmaster: Return undeliverable Canadian addresses (covers only) to:
Circulation Dept., PO Box 9800,
Winnipeg, MB R3C 3K7

Subscription rates:
(All rates in Canadian funds)
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