

Development of Holland Marsh A Tremendous Boost To District

The Holland Marsh garden development is a story of progress which, during a period of less than one-quarter of a century, has advanced the living conditions of its residents from pioneer existence, comparable to the life of Bradford's first settlers, to prosperity and the ultimate in modern living, and has transformed thousands of acres of marshy waste land into the finest gardens in Canada. Because this transition took place within less than thirty-five miles of the world's fastest growing city, and beside broad highways leading to and from that city, because it was accomplished by people of varied racial origins, and because of the famed produce, world-wide interest has been aroused in the enterprise.

The Holland Marsh borders two sides of Bradford, and through it winds the Holland River. Until thirty odd years ago this land produced only marsh hay, frogs and mosquitoes, and of these only the hay was a marketable crop. In the late 1800's and the early years of this century marsh hay was cut, curled, dried and shipped for mattress-making. The horses drawing the mowers to cut this hay wore snow-shoe like boards tied to their feet, to carry them over the bog. Mattress-making was a small industry in Bradford during the early 1900's, when this curled marsh hay was used to fill mattresses.

As early as 1910, Wm. H. Day, Professor of Physics at Ontario Agricultural College, Guelph, became interested in the then swamp, but before any action was taken regarding his ideas, the outbreak of war in 1914 interrupted progress. Professor Day did not forget and, with the war over, he resumed his investigations and in 1923 he resigned his position at the College, moved to Bradford, and began an energetic campaign to interest municipal councils in a drainage scheme for the Holland Marsh. Two years later his efforts were rewarded when the council of Bradford, in which the late Dennis Nolan was reeve, the council of West Gwillimbury Township, with the late J. F. Hambly as reeve, with councillors L. A. Neilly, Percy Selby, W. J. Dales and the late Herman Lennox, and the council of King Township, signed a contract for the drainage of the Holland Marsh. The late T. W. W. Evans Q.C., was legal adviser for the transaction.

The first crop on the drained marsh land was grown in 1927 on the section of the marsh located within Bradford's boundaries. In 1930 a triumphant Professor Day reported to the councils that a \$26,000 crop had been sold off thirty-seven acres of marsh garden land. Thus began the Holland Marsh garden industry, which during recent years has calculated its acres under cultivation in the thousands, and the sale of vegetables in the millions of dollars.

The Holland Marsh Drainage System

The Holland Marsh drainage system serves two purposes—it drains, and it irrigates.

The beautifully cultivated fields on the marsh are bounded by ditches which drain into the drainage canals. This network of ditches serves a two-fold purpose. The huge pumps, which control the water levels, pump the water from the canal and ditches in periods of heavy rain; and in seasons of drought, these same canals and ditches irrigate the soil when water is pumped into them.

Land values in the area have soared with the price per acre now reaching into four figures.

A group of Dutchmen, with their families, came to the marsh in the autumn of 1934 to become the first year-round settlers in the area. Their little settlement was named Ansnorveld and comprised a row of small houses. The pictures of those first homes,

which formed the first settlement, and of the first little church, built a couple of years after the arrival of the settlers, tell their own story.

The first settlers were: Jan Rupke, Abraham Havinga, Albert Biemold, M. Van Dyken, H. Prins, E. de Jong, John Van Dyke, Geo. Brouwer (returned to Holland, and home became property of John Rupke), L. Doonstra, Wm. Valenteijn, H. Neinhuis, Misiner (now H. Bierling), J. Vandergoot, K. Miedema, S. Winter, K. Oosterhuis.

Church and Social Life On The Marsh

Dutch Canadians comprise nearly one-third of the Holland Marsh population and of these a big proportion are members of the Christian Reformed Church, while a majority of the other residents are of the Catholic faith and attend church in Bradford.

When the Christian Reformed Church congregation became large enough to support a school, the church people of that congregation built a private Christian school for the education and training of their children. The four room school in Ansnorveld is too small for the attendance and now Springdale, too, has its Christian school.

The children of the Roman Catholic church attend St. Mary's and St. Charles' schools in Bradford, travelling by bus.

For a number of years the marsh residents had their own hall, or community centre, in Ansnorveld. This building was in almost continual use and served as a happy, social meeting place. The weakness of this arrangement was that it inclined residents of the neighbourhood to isolate themselves from Bradford, socially. When plans were advanced for Bradford District Memorial Community Centre, the good people of the marsh joined wholeheartedly in assisting with its cost, and sold their own hall, making the building in Bradford a truly community one.

The Flood of October 15, 1954

On the night of October 15, 1954, Hurricane Hazel struck a devastating blow to this march of progress. Days of rain were followed by the hurricane and torrents of rain, in cloudburst proportion. The pumps, to keep the water in the dikes under control, were unable to cope with the situation, and despite frantic work with sandbags, the dike broke at the west end of the marsh and the flood waters poured over the area. Homes were flooded, buildings were washed away, and the rich onion crop, bagged, and piled in long rows like cord wood, together with all types of expensive motorized equipment, disappeared beneath the muddy waters. About three thousand persons either made their own escape, or were rescued by men from the marsh, Bradford and West Gwillimbury, and arrived in Bradford that night. Miraculously, only one life was lost.

The residents of Bradford and West Gwillimbury rose to the emergency magnificently. The town hall became a flood disaster centre. Every home opened its doors and gave kind welcome to the flood victims, and before morning Bradford's population, which had more than doubled over night, was sheltered and fed.

As soon as daylight showed the enormity of the disaster, organization work began to reclaim the area and to provide for the refugees. Committees were set up to arrange for the pumping of water from the marsh land before winter. Emergency hydro power lines were erected and pumps were secured from every possible source. Manned by willing workers, the pumps operated day and night, and the tremendous task was accomplished more quickly than even the most optimistic had dared hope. The completion of drainage operations revealed the extent of the damage and that

the task of removing debris, including spoiled vegetables, home furnishings, etc. was going to be a major effort. Many homes were unfit for habitation and temporary housing was needed for their owners.

Meanwhile in Bradford and West Gwillimbury homes, marsh residents remained as guests, and at Bradford town hall, three free meals were served each day to hundreds of flood refugees. Bradford Lions Club and Bradford women's organizations supervised this huge restaurant and, when it became evident that the need for this service would continue for some time, township organizations undertook part of the work, which included the making and packing of quantities of sandwiches each day, and the filling of thermos jugs of coffee, for the men manning the pumps and repairing the dikes.

Christmas at the trailer camp was quite an event, with an interesting programme and gift presentations. The annual Christmas community concert, to which all churches of the community contributed Christmas music, was enjoyed even more than usual by marsh garden residents that year.

Homes were renovated by early spring and the trailer camp was deserted. Most of the garden land was ready for spring cultivation, and it is claimed that the flood waters benefitted the soil. Today no evidence of the disaster remains.

The Years Since The Flood

The recovery of the marsh residents since the big flood has been remarkable. The fine homes and buildings damaged in the flood were restored to their former state of modern excellence, and the poorer ones were either replaced by new, or completely renovated, resulting in a much more prosperous looking marsh area.

The expansion of the big packing and packaging plants in Bradford, and the addition of another on the marsh at Springdale, the marsh's village in West Gwillimbury, have helped solve marketing problems, with local plants shipping to practically all parts of the world.

"The Marsh", as it is commonly called, is an area of prosperity and is a big contributor to making the district, and especially the town of Bradford, Canada's busiest and most prosperous small town.