

## Notes on the History of Agriculture in the Yukon

### **Introduction**

The story of farming in the Yukon is one of experiment, adaptation and resilience. Less than two percent of the Yukon's total land base is suitable for agriculture. Growing conditions are difficult, production costs high and local markets sometimes limited. But Yukon farmers have been tenacious, and over the 175 years of Yukon farming history, have provided Yukoners with access to delicious, high-quality, locally grown fresh food.

### **First Farmer 1840-52 (approx.) Farms followed trade.**

- Robert Campbell, Hudson's Bay Company fur trader, first farmer in the Yukon. Born on a sheep farm in Perthshire, Scotland, came to Rupert's Land at age 22 to manage the experimental farm at Red River Settlement.
- 1834 Asked for transfer to fur trade; life of adventure! Much hunger, threat of scurvy: Dease Lake, last meal was boiled parchment windows and gut from snowshoes=porridge.
- Campbell brought seeds with him to each fort he established in the Yukon: Fort Frances, Pelly Banks, Fort Selkirk.
- Crops mostly failure. Sudden frosts. Starvation at Fort Frances. Barley successful at Fort Selkirk.
- Discovery that Pelly and Yukon River one and same, new safer route to Fort Simpson via Porcupine River, Mackenzie R. results in optimism about future, Campbell's request for livestock.
- Campbell haying (in prep for livestock?) at original Ft. Selkirk in 1852 when Chilkat attacked. Fort Selkirk abandoned.

### **Trader, Miner-Farmers 1880s, early 90s**

- Traders and miners in Yukon drainage: Forty Mile, Stewart River, Fort Reliance. Intermittent supply and poor quality food delivered from Alaska Commercial Company. Threat of scurvy constant.
- Jack McQuesten, Arthur Harper, Al Mayo, Joe Ladue, all traders. Planted gardens. Had to get good at gardening. McQuesten, Forty Mile, 89/90: 10 tons turnips, one weighed 7 lbs.
- Arthur Harper had moved to Ft. Selkirk with family, Joe Ladue joined him fall 1888. Planted potatoes, turnips, radishes, cabbages. FROST! Same challenge as Campbell.
- Harper orders heavy cloth, covered plants on cold nights, SUCCESS! Potatoes, turnips, carrots, parsnips cabbage. Barley good. Good example: Adaptation to micro climate.
- SCURVY! At Forty Mile, 1892-93. Miners became gardeners too. Radishes, leaf lettuce, carrots, turnips. Visitor impressed with gardens, 1896.
- MORE adaptation: Sam Patch, Forty Mile. Planted potatoes south side river, no sun til noon, avoided frost damage. Made good \$\$ on potatoes sold at McQuesten's post.

- INCIDENTAL BUT FUN: McQuesten and Harper tried to plough with a tame moose. Hired labourers in the end.

### **Gold Rush**

- 1896, Willis Thorp, first cattle drive from Haines Mission, chased off Dalton Trail by Dalton, made it to Selkrid, headed for Dawson, stopped at mouth of Klondike, sold to hundreds hungry miners. In Circle 10-lb piece of beef auctioned @\$35/lb.
- 1896-97, not much farming, everybody busy mining. Cattle drives continue. Threat of starvation winter 97-98.
- 97 federal director experimental farms sent seeds with commissioner Thomas Fawcett; potatoes, radishes, lettuce, turnips, cabbage, spinach, garden peas, beets, carrots, onions, rhubarb. Also oats, wheat, hay.
- 98, serious experimentation began. 1898 lots of scurvy on creeks. Spruce needle tea, raw potatoes remedy.
- 99, 12 market gardens near Dawson, banks of Klondike and Yukon Rivers.
- Horses become working animals of north, hay cutting begins. Hay barges: harvest from Fort Selkirk, Yukon Flats, meadows in Klondike drainage.
- Cattle grazing on banks of Yukon River.
- 1901 several small farms Klondike Valley, Sunnydale Slough, West Dawson, Klondike Island. Small farms, 4-5 acres, farmed by 2 men.
- BIG YEILD! Especially veg. John Charles, Sunnydale Slough: 1,000 cauliflowers; one 30-lb, 5-foot diameter cabbage.
- 1901: Fox: 2 acres:5,000 cabbages, 1,000 celery plants, ½ acre potatoes, 1 ton carrots.
- 1901: Daub: 1 acre: 750 cauliflower, 4,000 cabbage, 500 bunches celery, 2 tons turnip, 1 ½ tons potatoes.
- 1901: Pelly Farm starts.
- 1902: Winter road—roadhouses every 30 miles, small farms providing hay to WPYR, also oats; woodcutters along banks of Yukon become gardeners in summer, sell to WPYR.
- WHITEHORSE: lots of gardens, RCMP barracks gardens growing vegetables.

### **Population Decline**

- From 27,000 in 1901 to 8,500 in 1911 but people still buying local food, some farmers making a decent living. Farms situated on rivers. Dawson the major market.
- 1915: 48 homesteads, 4500 acres. Farms at Burwash (Jacquot brothers), Rampart House on Porcupine, Maisie Mae on Stewart River. (Nice story— Sylvia Frisch planting parsley from Maisie Mae at birch syrup camp on McQuesten River, 2014. Continuity.)
- 1917 experimental farm Dawson—JR Farr, mostly forage and feed crops, ended 1925.
- 1920s: increased mechanization, less need for forage crops, decline and abandonment of small farms along rivers, but market gardens still doing well.

- 1920s, outfitting takes off; horses, feed crop, especially grazing leases
- Silver-lead discoveries lead to resurgence of farming in Mayo area, especially hay, veg.

### **Alaska Highway, Mayo Road**

- 1941: 26 farms, 511 acres.
- Alaska highway: cheaper transport. Less incentive to buy local.
- 1944 Experimental farm near Pine Creek, Haines Junction
- Road to Mayo and Dawson early 1950s, end of river farms easy access to transport.
- Decline of farming next 20 years. BUT still action:
  - Bradley's buy Pelly Farm 1954; rename Pelly River Ranch.
  - 1962 Bill Drury Sr. started homesteading;
  - 1964 Rod and Enid Tait, experimental farm, when farm closed continued to sell vegetables at Madley's;
  - mid 70s, Alan and Irma Falle sod farm near Whitehorses;
  - 1986: Grant and Karen Dowdell, farm on Yukon River; same year, Del and Virginia Buerge.
- 1971: 12 in farms in Yukon, totalling, 2,271 acres
- 1974: Yukon Agricultural and Livestock Association founded

### **Where's the Land?**

- 1975: Moratorium on release of land for Agriculture—lack of agricultural policy, need for research, uncertainty re: land claims
- Early 1980s: Really hard to find land
- 1982: Agricultural Development Council founded through legislation. Commissioner's Land became available—about 1,000 sq km.
- Outfitters with grazing leases apply for agricultural land, become farmers.
- Horses largest market for hay in Yukon.
- 1985: 71 agricultural and grazing leases transferred from the federal to the Yukon government, and by the end of 1985 there were a total of 284 agricultural land applications received, and 28,000 hectares under application.
- 1993: UFA signed, 2003: Devolution=more certainty.
- 2015: focus on planned release of lands for agriculture, consultation with community plans and First Nations governments.

### **1990 to Present**

- 1991: 137 farms in Yukon, 5 regions: Dawson-Mayo, Kluane, Pelly-Faro-Carmacks, Watson Lake, Whitehorse. 70% of farms near Whitehorse—following population, ie market. Also, farmers need day jobs.
- mid 1990s: Del Buerge—egg grader, abattoir; processed white and red meat from mid 1990s to mid 2000s.
- 2006: purchase of mobile abattoir for red meat
- 2000s, growing interest in local food.

- GOOFY (2003), Fireweed Market (2005) , farmers markets in communities. (1985 was first “Six Carrots Farmers Market’, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. Whse, run by YAA)
- 2011: 130 farms in Yukon. Livestock & hay dominant with steady growth in vegetables and berries. Local food available in supermarkets and grocery stores.
- 2013: City of Whitehorse okays backyard chickens.
- 2013: flooding on Alaska Highway = empty shelves in grocery stores.

### **Today**

- Interest in local food trumps organic.
- Many farmers still need day jobs.
- Potluck Food Co-op, Alpine Bakery, Farmer Roberts (egg grading station!) allow year-round access to locally grown food.
- The number of Yukon agriculture industry associations has multiplied since 1974. Now:
  - Growers of Organic Food Yukon (GOOFY), whose members grow organic hay, vegetables, livestock, vegetables and berries (five organic farms and three in transition);
  - Fireweed Community Market Society;
  - Yukon Game Grower’s Association (there are four farms raising game in the Yukon);
  - Yukon Young Farmers (a subsection of YAA);
  - Yukon Food Processors Association
  - Yukon 4-H,
  - most sit on the Agriculture Industry Advisory Committee.
- Community gardens in many communities, several First Nations initiatives: Yukon College Master Gardener’s Course since 1997, assisting Yukon First Nations and other communities to set up and operate community gardens and greenhouses.
- Yukon College and Yukon Research Centre research and experimentation into longer and year-round growth of some vegetables: innovative greenhouse designs. Also climate change adaptation.
- McCabe Creek experimental station—research continues.
- Food sovereignty and food security continue to be hot issues in North.
- In 2016, Agriculture Branch released Food Policy. Extensive consultation.
- Possibly more support from public, not-for-profits and government than at any time in Yukon history.