

HOLDING ONTO THE PAST:
Glenn and Sharon Sharp hold a photo of
grandfather William and the original farm
family on the same land a century ago



Making History

Perseverance and innovative thinking have helped farm families like the Sharps survive and prosper for more than a century

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says Glenn Sharp, who
runs a century-old
family farm.

Autumn’s first frost hangs heavy on the trees as Glenn and Sharon Sharp stroll out of the farmhouse Glenn’s grandfather built nearly 90 years ago and survey their barley crop. It’s a wet morning or they’d be out in the fields. Instead, they do what every farmer does when it’s wet during harvest: worry about the weather.

In some ways, life hasn’t changed much since Glenn’s grandfather, William Sharp, bought this central Alberta homestead 109 years ago. The family still lives in the original farmhouse, crops are in the fields, livestock are in the barns, and the weather is still a going concern. While on the surface it may seem like the same farm that Glenn’s father and grandfather ran, in reality this farming operation has changed dramatically in order to survive and prosper for more than a century.

Of the thousands of homesteads that were once found in this province, only 545 farms and ranches have survived as family-run operations for more than a century. Family farms like this one represent an important part of Alberta’s heritage and, as a result, the provincial government has recognized them with an Alberta Century Farm and Ranch Award. The award symbolizes their ability to overcome challenges, persevere in the face of change and continue what has become a family tradition.

When William Sharp, a native of Scotland, farmed this Lacombe County homestead at the turn of the century, he ran a mixed farming operation that included crops and livestock and was successful in its day. “Early homesteaders required determination, hard work, and vision to make a living at farming. They had to focus on the things that needed to be done, so William built a small wooden home and basic barns first,”

explains Glenn. “It was a mixed agricultural operation with field crops, forage, and purebred shorthorn cattle and he gradually expanded his farm as he had the resources to do so. He later married my grandmother, Mary Grose, and they built the family farmhouse that still stands today in 1916. After 20 years on the farm, they were fairly prosperous and their farmhouse was one of the first rural farmhouses in the area to have running water and electricity.”

Much has changed since the early days of this province when thousands of family-run homesteads dotted the landscape. Many small producers have struggled over the past century to keep their operations competitive. Over many generations, children have moved away from the farm and many families have moved into towns and cities. There was even a time when Glenn moved off the farm to pursue other interests. After completing a degree in education, he taught junior high school for three years before realizing that farming was his real passion.

“Farming isn’t just a job; it’s something that comes from the heart. There were people who said that I was crazy to leave a good job to return to farming and some predicted that I wouldn’t last a year, but I went ahead and purchased the farm from my parents anyway,” says Glenn. Fortunately, the naysayers were proven wrong and Glenn and Sharon and their two children, Craig and Katie have been able to live and prosper on the farm for many years. But keeping the dream alive has involved sacrifice and innovation.

“There were many Christmas mornings where I’d put my turkey in the oven and then head out to the barns,” says Sharon. “Our farm has always

been a family endeavour and Craig and Katie have both worked in the barns and done other chores around the farm that have helped them develop a good work ethic. Today it’s a bit easier to have a family dinner, because we have some hired employees and are not doing it all ourselves.”

Innovative thinking has also helped to decrease the workload on the farm and helped to keep it economically viable. Purebred shorthorn cattle have been replaced with hogs and the farm has combined its resources with three other pork producers that share the same vision to form a larger operation known as Eclipse Pork. “Producers today are not competing with their next-door neighbour; they are competing in a global marketplace with large-scale agricultural operators from other provinces and countries around the world. It’s all about economies of scale. If producers work together, they can combine assets and be more competitive,” says Glenn. “It’s gratifying to realize that one of the partners in Eclipse Pork has a link to my grandfather. Shawn Morton’s great grandfather and my grandfather were friends, and the ties between us go back a long way. Today we are working together to keep our family farms viable and profitable.”

By pooling resources with other producers, Glenn and Sharon have been able to purchase high-tech equipment to assist with the operation. From their house, the Sharps can monitor barn temperatures, ventilation, and feeding in their hog barns. The farm employs a computerized liquid feed system, a computerized feed mill, and a three-site hog production system, which helps to decrease the risk of disease. They also have the equipment necessary to transport their own animals to market. Although these innovations help



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *The high-tech hog operation; A collection of old licence plates; Harvesting the fields*



Agriculture Then and Now

- In the two decades between 1881 and 1901, the number of farms in Alberta increased from 285 to 9,479. Immigrants were drawn to Alberta by the opportunity to obtain homestead land for \$10 per quarter section (or 160 acres).
- From 1901 to 1905, 40,000 homestead entries were granted in what later became the Province of Alberta.
- Laws prohibited single women from receiving homestead entries in 1905. It was not until 1930 that women won the right to homestead in Alberta.
- Besides homesteading, settlers could purchase lands. Many European settlers purchased colony farming operations scattered around the province. Colony farms were created when a larger company purchased land and divided it into homesteads.
- At the turn of the century, Alberta's economy revolved around agriculture and coal. Today, there are more than 59,000 farms in the province and primary agriculture supports 82,000 jobs. The agrifood industry remains Alberta's largest manufacturing sector.

to increase productivity, many of them would be out of reach for a solitary family-run hog farm.

Along with the hog operation, the family seeds and harvests 4,500 acres of cropland that produces hay, wheat, barley and canola. They call this side of the business Craigievar Farm Ltd., after a castle in William Sharp's native Scotland. Although the business was named by William, it is doubtful that he could ever have imagined the high-tech modern equipment used for seeding and harvesting the fields today. "Seeding has come a long way in the past century. Today the tractor is equipped with a GPS and an auto-steer seeding system to ensure there are no overlaps or gaps in the fields when crops are seeded," explains Sharon. "While seeding and harvest have evolved over many years, the Craigievar business name reminds us where the farm came from. And as in William Sharp's day, the grain feeds the livestock and the livestock feed the grain. By treating the hog manure with bacteria and injecting it into the soil, we are able to organically fertilize the crops."

Caring for the land and keeping the operation environmentally sustainable is also part of a long-term vision to preserve this family-run farm. The Sharps use methods such as zero-tilling, a seeding technique that protects the soil from erosion, injected organic fertilizer, and modern slatted hog barns to help preserve the land and livestock for

the future. "Using environmentally sustainable farming practices is important to us. We're thinking for the long term, because we want to keep the farm going for another century and pass it down to the next generation," points out Sharon. "To us farming is a lifestyle choice that involves sacrifices, but also rewards you with the satisfaction of producing your own product and the freedom of running your own business."

Whether or not the farm remains in the family is something that will ultimately be decided by Glenn and Sharon's children, Craig and Katie, or perhaps even their grandchildren. "I may take over the farm someday," says 19-year-old Katie, who is currently working on a Bachelor of Commerce degree at Red Deer College. "I'm still deciding what I want to do." Craig is currently apprenticing as a cabinet maker and is not sure whether he will choose to be involved in the family farm in the future either. But farming is in the gene pool for this family and Glenn and Sharon remain optimistic that the farm will continue as a family-run operation.

Though some think the future of the family farm looks bleak, the Sharp family see a bright future ahead. "There's no doubt in my mind that the family farm will continue," says Glenn. "But in order to prosper it will need to continue to evolve using good environmental stewardship practices and sound business management." 