

# Co-operative Consuming: Ontario Beef Rings, 1899-1945

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*While Canadian historians are increasingly examining consumption practices and patterns, their work generally focuses on urban areas. Rural Canadians, however, continued to account for a significant portion of the population into the early 1940s. Focusing on Ontario, this article examines a rural institution, known as the fresh beef association or beefring. It argues that beefrings were a specifically agrarian method of consumption, and that participants were typically 'middling' or 'well-to-do' landowning farmers. Challenging the apparent dichotomy between self-sufficiency and complete market integration, shareholders blended notions of co-operation and market relations. They overcame technological limitations and accessed fresh beef on-farm during the warmest months of the year.*

*Les historiens canadiens se penchent de plus en plus sur les pratiques et les modes de consommation, mais leur travail porte habituellement sur les zones urbaines. Les habitants des campagnes ont pourtant continué de former une proportion importante de la population canadienne jusqu'au début des années 1940. Le présent article, axé sur l'Ontario, traite d'une institution caractéristique du milieu rural : l'association ou le cercle de consommateurs de bœuf frais. Selon l'auteure, il s'agit d'une méthode de consommation propre aux agriculteurs, et les participants étaient en général des propriétaires d'exploitations moyennement ou bien à l'aise. Remettant en question l'apparente dichotomie entre l'autosuffisance et l'intégration complète au marché, les membres de ces regroupements ont combiné des notions de coopération et de relations au marché. Ils ont surmonté les limites de la technologie et eu accès à de la viande de bœuf fraîche à la ferme au cours des mois les plus chauds de l'année.*

FARM FAMILIES hold a unique role in the North American economy, being both producers of agricultural commodities and consumers of a wide range of goods, including foods. There are, however, differing views as to when and how farm families took on the latter role; idealized portrayals in popular culture, for

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example, present pioneers as self-sufficient, and much of the historiography surrounding the rural transition to capitalism emphasizes a revolution in rural consumption practices, with farm families “becoming consumers” in the capitalist marketplace.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, agrarian leaders also grappled with the notion of farm families as consumers, believing that these families were removed from the benefits of urban society. In the early twentieth century, for example, organizations such as the Women’s Institute (WI), a farm women’s group formed in Saltfleet, Ontario, in 1897, trained rural women in efficient methods of home production and the effective consumption of purchased goods.<sup>2</sup> More recently, historians of rural America are also entering into these debates, examining how specifically rural consumption practices developed, and whether or when they declined.<sup>3</sup>

In the Canadian context, in contrast, the field on rural consumption is much narrower, and the key works of Douglas McCalla and Béatrice Craig focus on the nineteenth and the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, respectively.<sup>4</sup> Rural Canadians, however, composed a significant proportion of the population well into the twentieth century; as late as 1941, rural Canadians formed approximately 46 to 49 per cent of the total population, and slightly more than half of these rural Canadians resided on farms.<sup>5</sup> Ontario had the largest rural population of all the

- 1 Allan Kulikoff argues, for example, that social historians and anthropologists place this transition to capitalism in the mid-nineteenth century for the American rural North. Prior to the development of this commercial economy, some social historians argue, rural households produced goods mainly for their own use or for trade in their local communities. In the American context, scholars such as Carole Shammas, Jeremy Atack, and Fred Bateman complicate ideas of agrarian self-sufficiency. Douglas McCalla also effectively challenges this simplistic view of the transition of North American farm families from producers to consumers. See Douglas McCalla, “A World Without Chocolate: Grocery Purchases at Some Upper Canadian Country Stores, 1801-1861,” *Agricultural History*, vol. 79, no. 2 (2005), p. 150; Allan Kulikoff, *The Agrarian Origins of American Capitalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), pp. 13-15; Carole Shammas, “How Self-Sufficient was Early America?” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1982), pp. 247-272; Jeremy Atack and Fred Bateman, “Self-Sufficiency and the Marketable Surplus in the Rural North, 1860,” *Agricultural History*, vol. 58, no. 3 (1984), pp. 293-313. For explanations of this traditional definition of consumption, linked more narrowly to capitalist transactions, see, for example, Donica Belisle, *Retail Nation: Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), pp. 9-10; Joy Parr, *Domestic Goods: The Material, the Moral, and the Economic in the Postwar Years* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), p. 6; Frank Trentmann, “Introduction,” in Frank Trentmann, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 3.
- 2 See, for example, “The Formation of the Women’s Institute,” *Women’s Institutes from the Report of the Superintendent of the Farmers’ Institute of the Province of Ontario, 1900* (Toronto: L. K. Cameron, 1901), p. 4; Miss Blanche Maddock, “Domestic Science” in *Women’s Institutes*, p. 9; Ronald R. Kline, *Consumers in the Country: Technology and Social Change in Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 2; Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), pp. 33 and 62.
- 3 See, for example, Hal S. Barron, *Mixed Harvest: The Second Great Transformation in the Rural North, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Kline, *Consumers in the Country*; David Blanke, *Sowing the American Dream: How Consumer Culture Took Root in the Rural Midwest* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000); Douglas McCalla, *Consumers in the Bush: Shopping in Rural Upper Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015).
- 4 McCalla, “A World Without Chocolate,” pp. 157-172; Béatrice Craig, *Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists: The Rise of a Market Culture in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
- 5 The 1941 Census provided two different figures for the total Canadian rural population, hence the slight range in the percentage presented. According to the 1941 Census, “rural” “include[d] the population of all incorporated centres under 1,000, and exclude[d] all the population either in rural areas or in urban

provinces in this period, and Ontario farms were generally mixed, meaning that families raised a variety of livestock, grew cash crops such as wheat, and grew fodder crops such as oats and corn.<sup>6</sup> Ontario farm families continued to blend their roles as producers and consumers in the first half of the twentieth century; as late as 1941, according to Ian Drummond, these families received 20 per cent of their income “in kind,” including “considerable amounts of food.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, due to the nature of farming operations in this period, Ontario farm families could theoretically produce a significant proportion of their own food, including dairy products, meat, and fruits and vegetables. Examining what they actually produced and purchased gives insight into household and familial dynamics as well as urban-rural ties and relations.

This article examines a case study of farm families’ blending of roles as producers and consumers, discussing a particularly rural and, more specifically, agrarian Ontario institution of household provisioning known as the fresh beef association.<sup>8</sup> More commonly referred to as the beef ring, this institution provided families with a co-operative resource to ensure weekly access to beef during the summer months. Beef rings originated in approximately the mid-1880s and were relatively common in early to mid-twentieth-century southern Ontario. They ranged from Lambton County in the west to Renfrew County in the east, and the Bruce peninsula in the north to the Grand River Valley in the south.<sup>9</sup> The original records of these beef rings rarely were preserved or donated to local archives; nevertheless, to date, the records of three of these organizations have been found, and an analysis of these records forms the basis of this paper. The Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association was located in Glenelg Township, Grey County, and operated

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communities under 1,000 which are in metropolitan areas.” See Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941, Volume I: General Review and Summary Tables* (Ottawa: Edmond Cloutier, 1947), p. 36, and *Volume II: Population by Local Subdivisions*, p. 177.

6 See Margaret Derry, *Ontario’s Cattle Kingdom: Purebred Breeders and Their World, 1870-1920* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), pp. 6-7; D. A. Lawr, “The Development of Ontario Farming, 1870-1914: Patterns of Growth and Change,” *Ontario History*, vol. 64 (December 1972), p. 246; Ian Drummond, *Progress without Planning: The Economic History of Ontario from Confederation to the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), pp. 30-32.

7 Drummond, *Progress without Planning*, p. 39.

8 See Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941, Volume II*, p. 177.

9 Local histories, museum collections, farm diaries, and the farm press note the existence of beef rings in such counties as Bruce, Durham, Grey, Halton, Huron, Lambton, Northumberland, Ontario, Oxford, Renfrew, Simcoe, Victoria, Wellington, and Waterloo. See Mildred Young Hubbert, *Split Rail Country: A History of Artemesia Township* (Owen Sound, ON: Stan Brown Printers Limited, 1986), pp. 22-23, 45, 82, and 189; Laura M. Gateman, ed., *The History of the Township of Brant, 1854-1979* (Owen Sound, ON: RBW, 1979), p. 368; Lambton Heritage Museum, <http://www.lclmg.org/lclmg/?TabId=113>; Ross Museum, *Self-Guided Tours: Westmeath*, [http://www.rossmuseum.ca/sgt\\_we\\_kennys.htm](http://www.rossmuseum.ca/sgt_we_kennys.htm); Scugog Shores Museum Village, *Greenbank: The Heart of Reach Township – The Beef Ring*, [http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/histoires\\_de\\_chez\\_nous-community\\_memories/pm\\_v2.php?id=story\\_line&lg=English&fl=0&ex=412&sl=3085&pos=1](http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/histoires_de_chez_nous-community_memories/pm_v2.php?id=story_line&lg=English&fl=0&ex=412&sl=3085&pos=1); Pickering Museum Village, *Beef Ring Barn*, <http://www.picnet.org/pmv/beefringbarn.htm>; [Ring to Begin its Operations in May], *Daily Packet & Times*, March 14, 1912, p. 4, <http://images.ourontario.ca/orillia/1718646/data?n=1>; Wellington County Museum and Archives, James Ross Diaries Fonds, A1996.42, MU 322, pp. 14, 16, 65, and 88, “Rosmead Diary,” July 1 and 7, 1914, December 3, 1914, and February 6, 1915; Mennonite Archives of Ontario, Isador B. Snyder Collection, Hist.Mss.1.229.3, 1892 Account Book; Private Collection, Account Book of Russell Innes, 1933-1934; “The Popular Beef Ring,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, June 29, 1911, p. 1087; “Beef Rings,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, July 1, 1926, p. 989.

from approximately 1899 to the early 1960s. The Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring ran for much of the same period, operating from 1897 until 1960, overlapping Bentinck Township, Grey County, and Brant Township, Bruce County.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the Blenheim Centre Beef Syndicate was located in Blenheim Township, Oxford County, and operated from 1914 until at least 1929.<sup>11</sup> Focusing on the period of approximately 1899 to 1945, this article argues that Ontario beef ring shareholders blended notions of co-operation and market relations, creating stable, healthy, and long-lasting institutions that allowed them access to fresh beef on the farm. This study contributes to the developing historiography that extends understandings of consumption beyond “simple monetary transactions” to include such activities as co-operative efforts, bartering, and window-shopping.<sup>12</sup>

As described in the by-laws of the Blenheim ring, the association’s “object shall be to furnish each member his quota of fresh beef weekly.”<sup>13</sup> Over the course of the season, each full shareholder took a turn supplying a young heifer or steer to be butchered and split between all members.<sup>14</sup> The length of the season varied slightly among rings, depending on the number of full shares; the Edge Hill ring, for example, typically had 16 full shares, while the Blenheim ring had 20 full shares.<sup>15</sup> The typical season, then, lasted from June to late September or mid-

10 The minutes are missing from 1911 to 1924.

11 While Bruce and Grey Counties focused on beef cattle production, Oxford County has a long history of dairy production; as Margaret Derry argues, however, at least in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, beef was often a “by-product of the dairy industry” (*Ontario’s Cattle Kingdom*, p. 110).

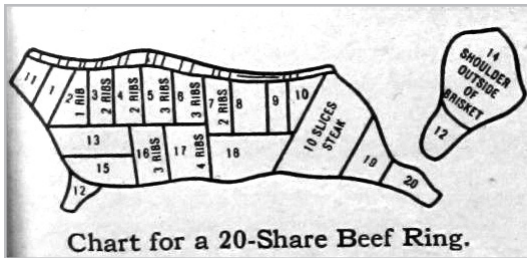
12 See Parr, *Domestic Goods*, p. 6; Cynthia Wright, “‘Feminine Trifles of Vast Importance’: Writing Gender into the History of Consumption” in Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women’s History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 232; Frank Trentmann, “Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2004), pp. 373-401, and “Introduction,” pp. 1-19; Michelle Craig McDonald, “Transatlantic Consumption” in Trentmann, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, p. 124. For more information on co-operative movements, see, for example, Ian MacPherson, “Of Spheres, Perspectives, Cultures, and Stages: The Consumer Co-operative Movement in English-Speaking Canada 1830-1980” in Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda, eds., *Consumers Against Capitalism? Consumer Cooperation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840-1990* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), pp. 331-358; Dana Frank, “Cooperatives” in *Purchasing Power: Consumer Organizing, Gender, and the Seattle Labour Movement, 1919-1929* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 40-65; Tracey Deutsch, “Moments of Rebellion: The Consumer Movement and Consumer Cooperatives, 1930-50” in *Building a Housewife’s Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), pp. 105-132.

13 Princeton Museum [hereafter PM], The Beef Ring and Woman’s Foreign Mission, Binder M1, [February 24, 1914]. The records of the Blenheim Centre Beef Syndicate are archived with the records of the Woman’s Foreign Mission; they were two separate organizations. No clear date was provided for the meeting at which the bylaws were enacted; from the context of the previous minutes, the presumed date for this meeting was February 24, 1914.

14 See PM, The Beef Ring and Woman’s Foreign Mission, [February 24, 1914]; Grey Roots Museum and Archives [hereafter GRMA], Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, PF 75, “Rules & Regulations Governing the Members of the Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association”; Bruce County Museum and Cultural Centre [hereafter BCMCC], AX2011.114.001, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Minutes 1897-1911, [Original Regulations].

15 While the Brant & Bentinck ring began with 16 shares, it was expanded to 20 shares in 1910. The ring was so popular that there were multiple rings running within the organization for the years 1918 to 1926, 1934, and 1936 to 1938. See, for example, GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, “Rules & Regulations Governing the Members of the Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association,” June 2, 1941, September 21, 1941, and September 30, 1942; PM, The Beef Ring and Woman’s Foreign Mission, [February 24, 1914]; BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Minutes, [Original Regulations], and [1910 Meeting]; BCMCC,

October, providing shareholders with fresh meat during the most challenging season for food preservation.<sup>16</sup> Each week, members picked up their shares at the place of slaughter, which, in the case of the Edge Hill ring, was the property of longstanding member Robert Ector.<sup>17</sup> Shareholders ultimately received the full range of cuts over the course of the season; typically, full shareholders in rings with 20 shares received “a roast, a boil, and a slice of steak” each week.<sup>18</sup> Depending on the final dressed weight of the supplied animal for the week, full shareholders could have expected approximately 18.75 to 25 pounds of beef per week, while half shareholders could have expected approximately 9.38 to 12.5 pounds.<sup>19</sup>



**Figure 1:** Chart for a 20-share beef ring.

Source: “Beef Rings,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, May 19, 1910, p. 843. Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph Library.

A number of factors converged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to allow for the creation of beef rings. In the warmer months of the year,

AX2011.114.006, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Butcher Ledger, 1918-1926, 1934, and 1936-1938, pp. 160-163, 166-203, 242-245, and 248-269; “Fresh Meat of Choice Quality Every Week,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, April 13, 1916, p. 652; and “Beef Rings,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, July 1, 1926, p. 989.

- 16 The date for the commencement of the new season was decided at the annual meeting, held at the close of the preceding season. According to the farm press, a late May or early June start date enabled farmers to have access to fresh beef for their silo-fillings and threshings. See, for example, BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Minutes, October 21, 1932; “Fresh Meat of Choice Quality Every Week,” p. 652; “Summer Meat Supply at Cost Price,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, May 16, 1918, p. 856.
- 17 See, for example, PM, The Beef Ring and Woman’s Foreign Mission, [February 24, 1914]; GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, “Rules & Regulations Governing the Members of the Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association,” October 17, 1900.
- 18 According to Mrs. Chester Allan, presumed to be of Wellington County, half shareholders received “a roast one week and a boil and steak the alternate week.” See, for example, “Beef Rings as they are Conducted,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, March 15, 1900, pp. 158-159; “Advantages of a Beef Ring,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, April 14, 1921, p. 599; Mrs. Chester Allan, “Recollections of a Local Beef Ring” in Greenock Women’s Institute, ed., *Tweedsmuir History*, p. 129, <http://www.wellington.ca/en/discover/tweedsmuirhistory.asp>; “How to Set Fresh Meat on the Farm,” *The Farming World & the Canadian Farm & Home*, May 15, 1906, p. 344. See also Figure 1.
- 19 The farm press typically specified 400 pounds as the ideal dressed weight. See, for example, GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, “Rules & Regulations Governing the Members of the Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association,” June 9, 1899, October 30, 1901, October 31, 1902, November 7, 1903, October 27, 1905, and October 17, 1906; PM, The Beef Ring and Woman’s Foreign Mission, [February 24, 1914]; BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Minutes, [Original Regulations], [1910 Annual Meeting], and October 23, 1925; “Beef Rings,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, May 19, 1910, p. 843; “Fresh Meat at Cost Price,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, May 29, 1924, p. 818.

according to the farm press, families often relied on cured pork preserved on the farm.<sup>20</sup> Participation in a beef ring allowed families to break out of this monotony and gave them access to fresh beef processed locally. Beef ring prices were set “at cost,” meaning that shareholders received quality beef at market prices, as opposed to the more expensive retail prices in butcher shops.<sup>21</sup> Thus, through participation in beef rings, farm families were able to “supply themselves during hot weather with fresh and wholesome meat economically.”<sup>22</sup>

The farm press also frequently touched on the co-operative nature of the institution. For example, a 1926 article stressed that beef rings were “a co-operative concern and [could] only succeed when built on mutual understanding and mutual benefit.”<sup>23</sup> A. A. Werner of Haldimand County even argued in 1925 that participation in a beef ring was “well worth while, just for the fun of co-operating, if for no other reason.”<sup>24</sup> This co-operative element to beef ring participation can be contextualized with other, more formalized co-operative efforts in the agricultural community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such organizations included the Patrons of Husbandry (more commonly known as the Grange), mutual insurance companies, co-operative creameries, and, later, the United Farmers’ Co-operative Company.<sup>25</sup> Beef rings built on this co-operative ethos evident in rural Ontario to meet a clear desire for fresh beef in the summer.

The butcher, of course, was central to the operation of the ring. He was a formal employee who received weekly payments for his services, amounting to about a day’s work a week.<sup>26</sup> Often the butcher was also a shareholder himself, as was

- 20 A. A. Werner of Haldimand County, in contrast, suggested that an early June start time also aligned with “[w]hen the pork barrel [was] empty” (“Fresh Beef at Cost,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, May 7, 1925, p. 718). Perhaps families that relied on pork for the full duration of the summer processed multiple pigs for the year, while those who “ran out” in June processed a single pig. Pork could be cured more easily than beef. See Roger Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table: Taste, Technology, and Preservation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 18-19 and 45; Dean Robinson, ed., *Historically Bound: Embro and West Zorra, 1820-2007*, vol. 1 (Aylmer, ON: The Aylmer Express Ltd., 2008), p. 507; “Summer Meat Supply at Cost Price,” p. 856; “Fresh Meat at Cost Price,” p. 818; Vina Rose Ufland, *History of Sydenham Township: Centennial Project* (Owen Sound, ON: R. Bond & Wright, 1967), pp. 733-734; Alma Women’s Institute, “The Beef Ring,” p. 292; Allan, “Recollections of a Local Beef Ring,” p. 130.
- 21 The farm press suggested that some farm families were unhappy with the quality of meat available in butcher shops or that some households were beyond the weekly routes of local butchers. See “The Summer’s Meat Supply on the Farm,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, May 10, 1917, pp. 786-787; “Summer Meat Supply at Cost Price,” p. 856; “Advantages of a Beef Ring,” p. 599; “Fresh Meat at Cost Price,” p. 818; Werner, “Fresh Beef at Cost,” p. 718; “Beef Rings,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, May 19, 1910, p. 843; Russell Linn, “The Beef Ring & its Advantages,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, February 29, 1912, p. 374; “How You Can Smoke Your Summer Meat,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, March 2, 1916, p. 347; “Fresh Meat of Choice Quality Every Week,” p. 652; and “Beef Rings,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, July 1, 1926, p. 989.
- 22 “The Popular Beef Ring,” p. 1087.
- 23 “Beef Rings,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, July 1, 1926, p. 989.
- 24 Werner, “Fresh Beef at Cost,” p. 718.
- 25 See, for example, Ian MacPherson, *Each for All: A History of the Co-operative Movement in English Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1979), pp. 8-11 and 19; Kerry Badgley, *Ringling in the Common Love of Good: The United Farmers of Ontario, 1914-1926* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), pp. 142-169; Louis Aubrey Wood, *A History of Farmers’ Movements in Canada: The Origins and Development of Agrarian Protest, 1872-1924* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), pp. 75-85, 276, and 312-313.
- 26 “Summer Meat Supply at Cost Price,” p. 856; Werner, “Fresh Beef at Cost,” p. 718; Allan, “Recollections of a Local Beef Ring,” p. 129.

the case with Thomas Turnbull, L. E. Peterson, Chris Engel, and Herman Engel.<sup>27</sup> Some of these men, such as Edge Hill butchers Thomas Turnbull and Clifford McCracken, worked for other rings.<sup>28</sup> Others, such as Brant and Bentinck butcher Chris Engel, even sold beef privately, interweaving the beef ring accounts into personal meat accounts.<sup>29</sup>

Butchering, however, was not the primary vocation of these men; rather, they engaged in occupational pluralism, identifying themselves as farmers and processing meat to supplement their agricultural incomes.<sup>30</sup> The practice of butchering on the farm was common throughout this period; farm women typically processed poultry, while farm men, together with extended kin and neighbours, processed pork and, to a lesser extent, cattle and sheep.<sup>31</sup> Farmer-butchers continued to play an important role in a niche, rural market into the mid-twentieth century. This evidence adds a valuable caveat to Margaret Derry's argument that, by the early twentieth century, slaughtering had largely passed from butchers working at a local level to the packing industry.<sup>32</sup>

Upon first inspection, the relationship between members and the butcher clearly followed the dictates of the market economy. The butcher was paid weekly upon delivery of the animal for butchering by the supplying shareholder.<sup>33</sup> During its first year of operation, the Edge Hill association passed an amendment that allowed the butcher to sell the beef hide and keep his wages out of this sale if he

- 27 GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Ring 1912, Members 1914, and Membership 1916; PM, The Beef Ring and Woman's Foreign Mission; BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Ledger, 1889-1928 and 1934-1943, pp. 112-119, 122-149, 152-155, 158-163, 166-207, 210-213, 242-269, and 272-281.
- 28 Mary Ann Neville, ed., *A History of Glenelg Township* (Owen Sound, ON: Stan Brown Printers, 1985), pp. 46-47; GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, October 9, 1929.
- 29 See BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Butcher Ledger, pp. 1-109.
- 30 R. W. Sandwell highlights the centrality of occupational pluralism to rural Canadian homes, particularly in the nineteenth century. See R. W. Sandwell, "Rural Reconstruction: Towards a New Synthesis in Canadian History," *Histoire sociale / Social History*, vol. 27, no. 53 (1994), pp. 13-15; R. Marvin McInnis, *Perspectives on Ontario Agriculture, 1815-1930* (Gananoque, ON: Langdale Press, 1992), pp. 93-94. See, for example, "Thomas Turnbull," Glenelg Township, Grey County (South), *Census of Canada, 1901*, pp. 1, 13; "Thomas Turnbull," Glenelg Township, Grey County (South East), *Census of Canada, 1921*, pp. 1, 5; "L. E. Peterson," Blenheim Township, Canning Village, Oxford County (North), Ontario, *Census of Canada, 1911*, pp. 3, 33; "L. E. Peterson," Blenheim Township, Oxford County (North), Ontario, *Census of Canada, 1921*, pp. 7, 72; "Chris Engel," Brant Township, Bruce County (East), Ontario, *Census of Canada, 1901*, pp. 1, 8; "Christian Engel," Brant Township, Bruce County (South), Ontario, *Census of Canada, 1911*, pp. 3, 32; "Christ Engel," Brant Township, Bruce County (South), Ontario, *Census of Canada, 1921*, pp. 2, 21; Brockton Heritage Committee [hereafter BHC], Township of Brant Assessment Roll, H. Engel, 741, 1935, p. 45; BHC, Township of Brant Assessment Roll, H. Engel, 526, 1940, p. 46; BCH, Township of Brant Assessment Roll, John Engel, 1945, pp. 44 and 55; GRMA, Municipality of Sullivan Assessment Roll, Clifford McCracken, 259, 1929; Library and Archives Canada, Voters Lists, Federal Elections, 1935-1980, R1003-6-3-E (RG113-B), Reel M-4769, p. 1, Grey-Bruce, Sullivan, Clifford McCracken, 1940; "The Popular Beef Ring," p. 1087; "Summer Meat Supply at Cost Price," p. 856; Werner, "Fresh Beef at Cost," p. 718.
- 31 For a more detailed discussion of on-farm meat processing, see Andrea M. Gal, "Where was the Beef? Ontario Farm Families' Meat Consumption in the Early Twentieth Century" (paper presented at the Agricultural History Society Annual Meeting, Provo, Utah, June 21, 2014).
- 32 Derry, *Ontario's Cattle Kingdom*, pp. 144-145.
- 33 PM, The Beef Ring and Woman's Foreign Mission, [February 24, 1914]; GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, "Rules & Regulations Governing the Members of the Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association."

had not received full payment by the morning the meat was to be distributed.<sup>34</sup> This amendment underscores the central role of the butcher in the smooth operation of the ring and the desire to ensure he received prompt payment. The butcher's significance is further highlighted by the willingness of the Blenheim ring to be flexible on slaughter dates in the 1920 season for the convenience of its long-standing butcher.<sup>35</sup> In all three rings, the same men continued in the position of butcher for much of the operation of the ring; L. E. Peterson held the Blenheim position for the full span of years covered in the minutes, Thomas Turnbull held the Edge Hill position until approximately the end of the 1927 season, and Clifford McCracken largely held the Edge Hill position from the 1930 season to 1945.<sup>36</sup> In the case of the Brant and Bentinck ring, the role of butcher stayed within a single family for almost the whole period of analysis; Chris Engel held the role for 37 years before his brother Herman took over for another nine years.<sup>37</sup>

The relationship between the butcher and shareholders, however, was not purely defined in economic terms. A study of the Edge Hill ring demonstrates the importance of a strong connection between butcher and shareholders to facilitate the smooth operation of the ring.<sup>38</sup> The employment and payment rates of its first butcher, Turnbull, received relatively little attention in the annual meetings during his years of service, suggesting that Turnbull and the membership had reached what both parties perceived to be a fair arrangement. The close connection between the two parties was also evident at the time of Turnbull's death, despite the fact that he had not worked as the ring's butcher since the 1928 season.<sup>39</sup> At the 1933 annual meeting, shareholders decided to purchase flowers to present to his widow, which cost slightly more than the year's operating expenses.<sup>40</sup> Although the relationship between Turnbull and the association had been a formally paid position, a number of the members continued to feel a connection with their former butcher, honouring his position in their organization and the wider community.

Turnbull may also have been remembered positively because of the seemingly more tenuous relationship between shareholders and their subsequent butcher, Clifford McCracken. The issue of payment was discussed extensively at a number of meetings in the early 1930s, and McCracken actually refused the

34 Typically, the hide, heart, liver, head, and "rough part" of the beef were returned to the supplying member. See, for example, GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, "Rules & Regulations Governing the Members of the Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association" and June 9, 1899; "Beef Rings," *Farmer's Advocate*, May 19, 1910, p. 843; "The Summer's Meat Supply on the Farm," pp. 786-787.

35 PM, The Beef Ring and Woman's Foreign Mission, [1919 Minutes].

36 See GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, October 19, 1927, October 17, 1928, October 18, 193[3], October 17, 1934, and September 30, 1942.

37 Gateman, ed., *The History of the Township of Brant*, p. 368.

38 Similarly, a 1916 article by W. G. O. stressed the integrity of an Oxford County beef ring butcher, E. B. Palmer, and his ability "to [keep the ring] running harmoniously" for over two decades ("Integrity in the Beef Ring," *The Farm & Dairy & Rural Home*, October 19, 1916, p. 5).

39 Presumably, Turnbull's final season as butcher was in 1928; at the annual meeting that fall, shareholders passed a motion to thank Turnbull, and the president and secretary were appointed to find a butcher for the 1929 season. See GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, October 19, 1927, October 17, 1928, and October 9, 1929.

40 These operating expenses included two gallon pails, a wooden bucket, a broom, and the inspection fees for Dr. Wolfe. See GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, October 18, 193[3] and October 17, 1934.



offered price for the 1934 season, leading to the employment of Henry Watts for the year.<sup>41</sup> While McCracken had been rehired by the 1936 season, a committee was again formed to hire a butcher for 1943, suggesting discontent on the part of McCracken or the shareholders regarding their arrangements.<sup>42</sup> McCracken was not a shareholder in the ring, unlike the other longstanding butchers; perhaps, as a result, he did not have the same sense of loyalty to the association. The challenges between the shareholders and McCracken suggest the importance of a strong working relationship to help support and strengthen the more formal economic arrangements between the butcher and shareholders.

In contrast to the weekly payments made to the butcher, money only exchanged hands between shareholders at the year-end meeting. This arrangement necessitated a level of trust and co-operation among members. The butcher kept records of the dressed weight of the animal supplied by each shareholder and the total amount of meat each shareholder received over the course of the season.<sup>43</sup> If the amount of meat they received exceeded the amount they had contributed (in terms of the dressed weight of the animal provided for slaughter), members paid the difference to the association. Conversely, if the amount they had contributed exceeded the amount they received, members were paid the difference. All shareholders made or received yearly settlements, as some difference between the amount of meat put into and taken out of the ring could not be avoided.<sup>44</sup> These fees thus provided a way to “even out” the yearly variations for shareholders and were based on that season’s price per pound of beef.

Typically, shareholders settled on the cost of beef per pound at the annual meeting held at the close of the preceding season. Direct price comparisons between at least two of the rings can be made for 30 of the years under analysis.<sup>45</sup> In fully half of these years of overlap, the price per pound of beef was the same.<sup>46</sup> In another seven years, the difference in price only ranged from half a cent to one full cent.<sup>47</sup> The prices of the Blenheim and Edge Hill rings also reached their respective peaks only two years apart, in the late 1910s.<sup>48</sup> These peaks correspond

41 GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, October 18, 193[3].

42 McCracken was rehired for the 1944 and 1945 seasons. See GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, September 30, 1942, October 20, 1943, and October 10, 1944.

43 GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, “Rules & Regulations Governing the Members of the Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association”; BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Minutes, [Original Regulations]; PM, The Beef Ring and Woman’s Foreign Mission, [February 24, 1914]; “Beef Rings,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, May 19, 1910, p. 843.

44 “How to Get Fresh Meat on the Farm,” *The Farming World & the Canadian Farm & Home*, May 15, 1906, p. 344.

45 Direct price comparisons cannot be made from 1939 through 1944, as the Brant and Bentinck ring arranged a committee to set the final price near the end of the “current” season. See BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Minutes, [Original Regulations], October 22, 1937, October 20, 1939, October 25, 1940, [Minutes for 1941], Minutes for 1942, [Minutes for 1943], and Minutes for 1944.

46 The price of beef per pound in the Brant and Bentinck and Edge Hill rings was 14 cents in 1928, but was 16 cents in the Blenheim ring. There were similarities in pricing with some of the rings discussed in the farm press. See “The Popular Beef Ring,” p. 1087; BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Minutes, [1910 Meeting]; George J. Lowe, “A Thirty-five-year-old Beef Ring,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, October 16, 1930, pp. 1519-1520.

47 These years were 1901, 1903 to 1907, and 1932.

48 GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, November 8, 1917; PM, The Beef Ring and Woman’s Foreign

with inflation and the wholesale prices of fresh meat; significant increases in prices began in approximately 1917 and peaked in 1920.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the peak price in the available records for the Brant and Bentinck ring was reached in 1928 and lasted to 1930. Again, this peak corresponds with the wholesale prices of fresh meat, which significantly increased from 1928 to 1930, dropping again in 1932 with the economic depression.<sup>50</sup> These findings are in keeping with the prescriptive literature of the farm press, which stressed that the price per pound of beef in the rings was “at actual cost.”<sup>51</sup>

In addition to confirming the cost per pound of beef, members of the Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association implemented a structure of fines in 1905 for animals that did not reach the minimum dressed weight of 400 pounds, and these fines were amended periodically.<sup>52</sup> In the 1906 season, for example, members who supplied a young heifer or steer that dressed under the minimum were fined an extra two cents a pound.<sup>53</sup> In the 1930s and early 1940s, another regulation was occasionally discussed regarding the collection of fines on animals dressing over the maximum weight.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps shareholders were trying to limit the extent of their direct cash outlay, given the economic situation in the 1930s, or perhaps, as suggested by a 1923 article in the *Farmer's Advocate*, some were concerned about being unable to consume these larger weekly shares.<sup>55</sup> The inclusion and ongoing revision of fine structures and the formal collection of fines suggest the association had some difficulty ensuring all shareholders contributed an appropriately sized animal.<sup>56</sup> The fine structure demonstrates concern on the part of other shareholders to obtain acceptable compensation in lieu of the expected amount of fresh beef.

Periodically, the rings discussed motions and implemented regulations to help prevent problems that can be loosely grouped under the categories of settling accounts and the quality of meat. In their original regulations, all three rings stipulated that shareholders could not leave before the end of a season without settling their accounts and without the consent of a majority of shareholders.<sup>57</sup> Early departure does not appear to have been a significant issue, however, as only

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Mission, Minutes of Annual Meeting of Blenheim Beef Ass[ociation] for 1919.

49 See M. C. Urquhart and K. A. H. Buckley, eds., *Historical Statistics of Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1965), p. 361; Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond, and John English, *Canada, 1900-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), p. 181.

50 See Urquhart and Buckley, eds., *Historical Statistics of Canada*, p. 361; Kenneth Norrie and Douglas Owram, *A History of the Canadian Economy* (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), p. 475.

51 See, for example, “How to Get Fresh Meat on the Farm,” p. 344; “Summer Meat Supply at Cost Price,” p. 856.

52 See, for example, GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, October 12, 1916, November 8, 1917, November 13, 1918, October 30, 1919, 1920, October 13, 1921, November 13, 1922, October 25, 1923, and November 5, 1924.

53 GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, October 27, 1905.

54 GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association Minutes, October 18, [1933], October 17, 1934, October 7, 1936, October 27, 1937, and September 30, 1942.

55 “Preserving the Summer Beef,” *Farmer's Advocate*, July 5, 1923, p. 1003.

56 Fines were collected in the years 1909 to 1922, 1924 to 1932, and 1936.

57 GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, “Rules & Regulations Governing the Members of the Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association”; BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Minutes, [Original Regulations]; PM, The Beef Ring and Woman's Foreign Mission, [February 24, 1914].

two cases were noted overall of shareholders requesting at year-end meetings that the ring find replacements for them before the start of the upcoming season.<sup>58</sup>

Some members appear to have been concerned about the fair collection of outstanding fees. In the Blenheim ring, for example, a motion stipulating “that [each] shareholder must make provision for his overdraft and the drawing of his number[,] or he will forfeit his share in the ring” was successfully passed in 1919.<sup>59</sup> In all of the rings, however, only two problem cases were noted. In the 1930 Edge Hill financial statement, there was an outstanding fine of 16 cents from 1929.<sup>60</sup> A more substantial case was found in the Brant and Bentinck records, as Bert Logie had an outstanding account of \$16.77 at the close of the 1940 season.<sup>61</sup> Unfortunately, the secretary did not detail the reason for the outstanding account, nor did he document whether Logie ever settled his account. Rather, Christopher Engel provided the money for year-end settlement, and “the Ring [was] to stand good on this amount if not collected.”<sup>62</sup> According to the minute books and the butcher’s ledger, Logie did not participate for the rest of the period under analysis. Overall, it appears that community bonds and economic ties were strong enough to help informally regulate concerns over shareholders “completing” the season and to ensure the collection of fees and fines.

Another significant potential issue was the quality of beef, both in terms of a degree of uniformity in taste and tenderness, and in terms of ensuring that meat from a diseased animal was not distributed. All of the rings had regulations regarding the acceptable age range for furnished animals; according to the Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, for example, cattle had to be less than three years old.<sup>63</sup> Presumably, these specifications related to concerns over quality; younger beef is typically assumed to be more tender. The regulations of both the Edge Hill and Brant and Bentinck rings also specified a preference for heifers, which can perhaps be tied to market influences.<sup>64</sup> The use of heifers in the ring allowed farmers in these predominately beef cattle counties to keep their higher grade steers for market sale.<sup>65</sup>

Through regulations, the rings worked to ensure that shareholders did not receive diseased meat. Each ring had an inspection process; typically, an elected committee of inspectors made the final decision regarding the “fitness of animal for slaughtering.”<sup>66</sup> The rings also periodically passed motions regarding the

58 GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, November 8, 1917, and October 5, 1932.

59 PM, The Beef Ring and Woman’s Foreign Mission, December 8, 1919.

60 GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, October 9, 1929.

61 BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Minutes, October 25, 1940; BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Butcher Ledger, 1940, pp. 274-275.

62 BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Minutes, October 25, 1940.

63 See, for example, GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, “Rules & Regulations Governing the Members of the Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association”; “Fresh Meat of Choice Quality Every Week,” p. 652; “Advantages of a Beef Ring,” p. 599.

64 See GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, “Rules & Regulations Governing the Members of the Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association,” and October 19, 1909; BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring, [Original Regulations].

65 For more information on the grading of beef cattle, see Derry, *Ontario’s Cattle Kingdom*, pp. 90 and 99.

66 It appears that, for two seasons in the early 1930s, the Edge Hill ring paid a Dr. Wolfe to inspect the beef, but returned to a reliance on its own inspectors shortly thereafter. See PM, The Beef Ring and Woman’s

health of supplied animals. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for example, the Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring specified that “no beast be brought in with lumps on,” while the Edge Hill ring stated in 1944 that “beef delivered by truck must be able to walk into the slaughterhouse or not be accepted.”<sup>67</sup> Through these regulations, the rings worked to ensure that the animals were healthy and that the quality of beef was relatively standard.

Both the Edge Hill and Blenheim rings implemented regulations regarding animals found to be sick or diseased, and these regulations demonstrated cooperative values. According to Blenheim’s original by-laws, the supplying shareholder was given an extra week to supply another animal if the original one was found to be unfit before butchering. In this case, the shareholder who was supposed to supply a heifer or a steer for the following week would simply supply it a week early. If the inspectors did not decide the animal was unfit until after it was slaughtered, the contributing member was given until the end of the season to supply another.<sup>68</sup> In this case, either shareholders received no meat for one week partway through the season, or shareholders who were supposed to supply the subsequent animals had their dates moved up by a week. These bylaws suggest a degree of empathy for the shareholder supplying the unfit meat and the perception that it was not the “fault” of this shareholder. Consequently, to assist this member, alternative arrangements provided a degree of inconvenience for other shareholders.

In a new regulation in 1928, Blenheim shareholders extended their support to the owner of an unfit animal even further. This regulation stipulated that, in cases where the animal was declared “unfit for human consumption” after slaughter, it would be destroyed, and “each share [would] be assessed two dollars[,] which [would] be paid to the loser of the beef.”<sup>69</sup> Presumably, this was an amendment on the original bylaw, with the ring at large offsetting the financial burden on the single shareholder. Such an arrangement meant that the ring at large “stood” the loss of the “extra” animal, rather than leaving the burden on the supplying shareholder.

The Edge Hill ring also implemented regulations concerning the issue of unfit beef. Shareholders successfully passed a motion in 1915 that “the Ring [would] stan[d] the loss” if the animal was declared unfit after slaughter.<sup>70</sup> Presumably, this meant that the farmer who supplied the animal was not expected to provide another

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Foreign Mission, [February 24, 1914]; BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Minutes, October 1, 1897 to October 18, 1901 and October 16, 1903 to 1944; GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, “Rules & Regulations Governing the Members of the Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association,” Annual Meeting 1932, October 18, 193[3], September 30, 1942, October 20, 1943, and October 10, 1944.

67 A similar regulation regarding lumps was passed at yearly Brant and Bentinck meetings until at least 1907. Perhaps these regulations referred to cattle affected by warble flies; not only did the grubs of these flies ruin the beef hide, but they also affected the meat. See, for example, BCMCC, Brant & Bentinck Beef Ring, October 18, 1898; GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, October 10, 1944; “Ox Warble Very Prevalent this Year,” *Canadian Farm*, April 30, 1915, p. 3; C. S., “Warbles in Cattle Cause Heavy Loss,” *Farmer’s Advocate*, July 12, 1928, p. 1098.

68 PM, The Beef Ring and Woman’s Foreign Mission, [February 24, 1914].

69 PM, The Beef Ring and Woman’s Foreign Mission, December 10, 1928.

70 See, for example, GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, October 25, 1915, November 8, 1917, and October 25, 1923.

and that shareholders missed a week of fresh beef.<sup>71</sup> The farm press discussed a similar regulation, suggesting a broader desire to protect individual shareholders.<sup>72</sup> In handling cases of diseased animals in such a co-operative manner, the rings were reminiscent of the mutual insurance companies in which English Canadian farmers had participated since approximately the 1830s.<sup>73</sup>

In all of the minutes, only two cases were noted regarding “unfit beef,” both in the Edge Hill ring. In 1942, \$2 was added to the organization’s accounts, presumably the amount left over after the sale of the condemned animal’s hide and payment of the butcher.<sup>74</sup> A special meeting was held in September 1944 to address another case, in which it was decided that “the ring would stand the loss of the beef of Mr. F. Staples the same as if it were diseased beef.”<sup>75</sup> Overall, however, the loss of beef appears to have been relatively rare, given the number of animals butchered each season and the length of the study.<sup>76</sup> As with the collection of fees and fines, it appears that the co-operative ties helped to regulate informally the quality of supplied animals. Indeed, A. A. Werner suggested that such quality issues were rare, as “most men, having a good reputation to uphold, furnish choice animals – animals such as they like to have furnished.”<sup>77</sup>

The regulations and operations of the beef rings thus exhibited a blending of co-operative values and market relations, and shareholders participated over a number of years. The records of the Edge Hill and Blenheim rings suggest a relative stability of membership.<sup>78</sup> Blenheim shareholders participated on average for five years.<sup>79</sup> The average was longer in the Edge Hill ring, which can presumably be related to the longevity of its operation. On average, Edge Hill members participated as “full” shareholders for six years. This average, however, does not include years of participation on half shares, which appear to have been settled informally outside the scope of the minutes.<sup>80</sup> It can be hypothesized that

71 Although payment for the hide traditionally went to the supplying farmer, in this case, the payment would have been used to cover the cost of butchering, and any remaining funds would “go to the ring.” Certainly, however, the price for the hide, especially when the butcher’s fees had been subtracted, would not be enough to supplement the cost of the fresh beef. See GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, October 25, 1915.

72 “Fresh Meat of Choice Quality Every Week,” p. 652; “The Summer’s Meat Supply on the Farm,” pp. 786-787; “Advantages of a Beef Ring,” p. 599; Werner, “Fresh Beef at Cost,” p. 718; Hubbert, *Split Rail Country*, p. 23.

73 See, for example, MacPherson, *Each for All*, p. 10; Badgley, *Ringling in the Common Love of Good*, p. 151; Wood, *A History of Farmers’ Movements in Canada*, pp. 83-85.

74 See GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, October 25, 1915, and September 30, 1942.

75 GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, September 1, 1944.

76 A. A. Werner had a similar impression from beef rings in his area (“Fresh Beef at Cost,” p. 718).

77 *Ibid.*

78 An analysis of years of participation for Brant and Bentinck shareholders could not be undertaken, as the minutes of the organization are missing for the years 1911 to 1925, and there is a gap in the butcher’s accounts.

79 The average might have been slightly higher for participants in the Blenheim ring, as only the shareholders providing animals were listed for the 1914, 1920, 1922, and 1923 seasons. The “adding” of half shares (as discussed in the case of the Edge Hill ring) was only possible for the 1920 season. Years of participation in this paragraph have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

80 Minutes did occasionally mention the settling of half-share accounts. See, for example, GRMA, Edge Hill Fresh Beef Association, October 17, 1900, October 30, 1901, October 31, 1902, October 17, 1906, and October 14, 1914.

families who provided an animal every other year actually had half shares and took turns with their half-share partners in supplying animals. Thus, if single-year gaps between the “full” membership of some families are factored into the calculations, the average total years of Edge Hill participation could be extended to ten years. The relative stability of membership within the ring is further suggested by the sibling and father-son relationships found between approximately 40 per cent of Edge Hill participants for the seasons of 1899 to 1929.<sup>81</sup> Long-standing membership, as well as familial connections, might also have contributed to the co-operative relations and smooth functioning of the rings.

Basic statistical information was collected for shareholders in each of the rings at 10-year intervals. In the case of the Edge Hill and Brant and Bentinck rings, this analysis covered the 1900 to 1940 seasons.<sup>82</sup> Given the narrower time frame for the Blenheim ring, this analysis focused on the 1920 season.<sup>83</sup> The statistical information was drawn from the relevant township assessment rolls, land abstracts, land instruments, and the 1901, 1911 and 1921 censuses.<sup>84</sup>

In all three rings, the overwhelming majority of shareholders resided on family-owned properties, although a few tenant farmers participated.<sup>85</sup> Typically, the shareholder was the household head, although farmers’ sons periodically attended on behalf of their families.<sup>86</sup> In keeping with the male dominance of the beef

81 Similarly, George J. Lowe highlighted that there were “several sons of the original members in places occupied by their fathers” in the 35-year-old Mutual Fresh Beef Supply Company (“A Thirty-five-year-old Beef Ring,” pp. 1519-1520).

82 In the case of Edge Hill shareholders, the analysis was limited to those supplying animals listed in the minutes. In the case of Brant and Bentinck shareholders, the butcher’s accounts were used, as they listed both full and part shareholders. The subscription list from the October 24, 1929 meeting was used for the 1930 shareholders, however, as there is a gap in the butcher’s accounts. The subscription list only includes the names of shareholders supplying animals.

83 While the Blenheim minutes typically included the names of part shareholders, the list of 1920 shareholders only included the names of the men supplying animals for the season. See PM, The Beef Ring and Woman’s Foreign Mission, December 8, 1919.

84 The subsequent analysis, tables, and maps present all available information, drawn from these sources. If a specific figure was omitted from the assessment rolls, the shareholder was not included in the given calculations. Similarly, if there were multiple men with the same name in the township, the shareholder was not included in the given calculations or maps. A total of five men, three of whom were Edge Hill shareholders and two of whom were Brant and Bentinck shareholders, could not be found in the assessment rolls or local histories. The sources are as follows: GRMA, Township of Glenelg Abstract Books 1-2; GRMA, Township of Glenelg Assessment Rolls, 1899, 1909, 1919, 1929, and 1939; GRMA, Township of Bentinck Assessment Rolls, 1900, 1911, 1920, 1930, and 1940; GRMA, Township of Bentinck Abstract Books 2A-3; BHC, Township of Brant Assessment Rolls, 1900, 1910, 1920, 1930, and 1940; BCMCC, Township of Brant Abstract Books Volumes 1-3; Norwich & District Historical Society [hereafter NDHS], Township of Blenheim Collector’s Roll, 1919; Oxford Historical Society [hereafter OHS], Township of Blenheim Land Abstracts. (The 1911 Township of Bentinck Assessment Roll was used, as the 1910 Roll is unavailable.) Individual land abstracts, held by the GRMA, BCMCC, and OHS, were consulted as needed to clarify the ownership of properties and the locations of part lots.

85 If the shareholder was listed as part of the household of the property owner, he was not classified as a tenant. A total of six men, one of whom was an Edge Hill shareholder and five of whom were Brant and Bentinck shareholders, were clearly listed as tenants.

86 With the possible exceptions of two men, all of these shareholders went on to purchase or inherit farms. In two cases in the Brant and Bentinck ring, female family members owned the farms, but their adult male relatives participated in the ring. As discussed by Catharine Wilson, different family members might attend or participate in co-operative activities on behalf of their families. See Catharine Wilson, “Reciprocal Work Bees and the Meaning of Neighbourhood,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 82, no. 3 (2001), pp. 431-464.

cattle industry, shareholders were overwhelmingly male.<sup>87</sup> Female participation was typically limited to widowed farm women continuing their late husbands' participation.<sup>88</sup> Thus the overwhelmingly male shareholders can be seen as following the trend, both in their respective townships and in the province, of owning the land that they occupied, together with their families.<sup>89</sup>

Beginning in 1921, the federal census provided information on the landholding patterns of farmers at the township or county level.<sup>90</sup> Together, farmers holding between 51 to 100 and 101 to 200 acres of land accounted for approximately 71 to 76 per cent of farmers in their respective townships (in 1921) and counties (in 1931 and 1941). Farmers holding fewer than 51 acres accounted for a small portion of the township or county figures, comprising about 12 to 23 per cent of the totals. Farmers holding 201 acres or more typically accounted for a smaller proportion of the township or county figures, comprising about 3 to 14 per cent of the totals.<sup>91</sup>

With this understanding of the largely "middling" farmers at the township and county levels more generally, we can examine the landholdings of beef ring shareholders.<sup>92</sup> The two landholding categories of 51 to 100 acres and 101 to 200 acres accounted for the overwhelming majority, approximately 88 to 95 per cent, of shareholders. Small farmers with fewer than 51 acres typically did not

87 See Margaret Dow Gebby, *Farm Wife: A Self-Portrait, 1886-1896*, ed. Virginia E. McCormick (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990), pp. 46-52 and 91-98; Margaret Derry, "Gender Conflicts in Dairying: Ontario's Butter Industry, 1880-1920," *Ontario History*, vol. 90, no. 1 (1998), pp. 31-47.

88 There were a total of 10 female participants, three of whom were Edge Hill shareholders and seven of whom were Brant and Bentinck shareholders. Eight of these shareholders appear to have been widowed farm women continuing their late husbands' participation. Similarly, women did not participate in the annual meetings of the Mutual Fresh Beef Supply Company until approximately 1928, when the ring incorporated a supper and social programme into its annual meetings. See Lowe, "A Thirty-five-year-old Beef Ring," pp. 1519-1520.

89 The land abstract records, collector's rolls, and assessment rolls most clearly show land ownership, meaning that some of the participants may also have rented some land. See Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Fifth Census of Canada, 1911, Volume IV: Agriculture*, pp. 56, 62, and 66; *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921, Volume V: Agriculture* (Ottawa: F. A. Acland, 1925), pp. 222, 224, 226, and 236; *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931, Volume VIII: Agriculture* (Ottawa: J. O. Patenaude, 1936), pp. 17, 392, 394, 488, and 492; and *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941, Volume VIII: Agriculture*, pp. 868 and 870.

90 This information was not compiled in the 1901 or 1911 agricultural censuses. In 1921, the calculations were done at the township level, but, beginning in 1931, the calculations were done at the county level. The subsequent comparisons between the township or county data and shareholder data focus on the shareholders who farmed; the few cases of shareholders employed in other types of work are addressed later.

91 See Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921, Volume V*, pp. 149-150 and 154; *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931, Volume VIII*, pp. 392 and 394; and *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941, Volume VIII*, pp. 868 and 870.

92 I am influenced by Gordon Darroch's definition of "middling," which included "farm families occupying between 70 and 169 acres." As his work focuses on an earlier period, my arguments are also shaped by the census data from the period of analysis. Given the availability of records from the three rings, the landholding patterns of the Blenheim shareholders were compared only to the 1921 data, while the landholding patterns of the Edge Hill shareholders and the Brant and Bentinck shareholders were compared to the 1921, 1931, and 1941 data. The landholdings of both the Edge Hill and Blenheim shareholders were calculated in the years of subscription, but typically remained the same in subsequent seasons. See Gordon Darroch, "Scanty Fortunes and Rural Middle-Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century Ontario," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 79, no. 4 (1998), pp. 621-659.

join beef rings; perhaps such farmers did not have the resources to participate.<sup>93</sup> Shareholders with more than 201 acres accounted for a small proportion (about 5 to 13 per cent) of the total participants. Shareholders in the three rings were thus typically reflective of the “middling” and “well-to-do” farmers in their townships and counties.

The assessment rolls also included basic demographic information on township residents, allowing further insight into the characteristics of Edge Hill and Brant and Bentinck shareholders.<sup>94</sup> Shareholders were typically middle-aged, which can perhaps be seen as in keeping with their status as landowning household heads. On average, shareholders had five people in their households, although the average was slightly higher for both rings in 1900 and slightly lower for the Edge Hill ring in 1940.<sup>95</sup> A core group of shareholders in each ring had the same religious affiliation; the largest group of Brant and Bentinck shareholders, for example, identified themselves as Lutheran.<sup>96</sup> There were always, however, a few participants of different faiths, such as Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists, and even Mennonites. Shareholders thus had established families large enough to consume the weekly shares of meat and were more united by proximity and economic stability and security than by cultural attributes such as religious affiliation; these demographic factors may have fostered the blending of co-operative values and market relations.

The maps showing the locations of agrarian shareholders further support these arguments.<sup>97</sup> Shareholders were geographically clustered within a relatively small segment of their respective townships. Edge Hill shareholders, for example, typically resided in the southwest part of Glenelg Township, north of Durham, while Blenheim shareholders resided in the southern part of the township. Such relative proximity makes sense, given the fact that shareholders needed to have easy access to their weekly meat shares and to make the delivery of a heifer (or steer).

Not all farmers within close geographic distance to the slaughterhouses, however, participated in the rings. To examine possible reasons for non-participation, basic demographic data was collected at 10-year intervals on non-

93 Only twice did farmers with less than 51 acres participate, and both men were shareholders in the Brant and Bentinck ring. See “Chris Sacks” and “William Sacks,” Bentinck Township, Grey County, *Census of Canada, 1891*, 68, p. 16.

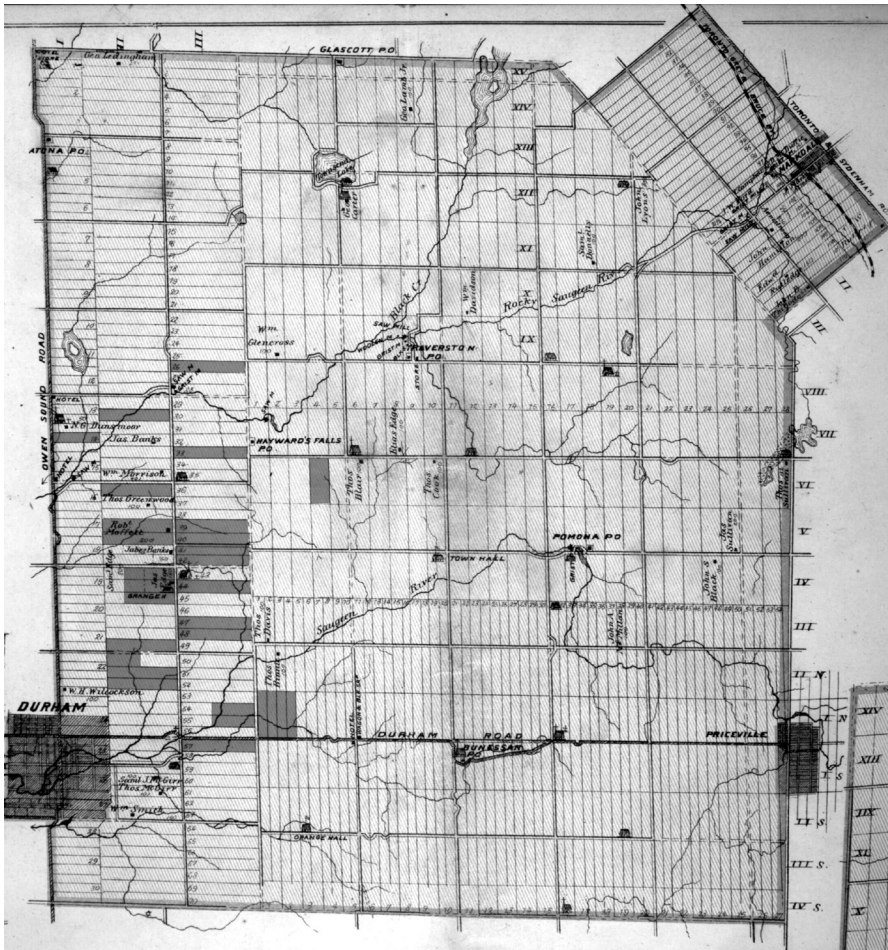
94 The 1919 collector’s roll for Blenheim Township did not include this information.

95 In 1899, Edge Hill shareholders had an average of seven people in their households, while, in 1900, Brant and Bentinck shareholder households had an average of six people. In 1939, Edge Hill shareholders had an average of four people in their households.

96 This finding is in keeping with the religious profiles of Brant and Bentinck Townships, which had sizeable Lutheran populations, as well as a mix of other Christian denominations. See Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Fourth Census of Canada, 1901, Volume I: Population* (Ottawa: S. E. Dawson, 1902), pp. 188-189 and 194-95; *Fifth Census of Canada, 1911, Volume 2: Religions, Origins, Birthplace, Citizenship, Literacy, & Infirmities, by Provinces, Districts, and Sub-Districts*, pp. 46-47 and 52-53; *Sixth Census of Canada, 1921, Volume I: Population*, pp. 672-673 and 678-679; *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931, Volume III: Population by Areas*, pp. 606-607 and 612-613; and *Eighth Census of Canada, 1941, Volume II*, pp. 592 and 595.

97 Given the complexity of the divisions of the original 200-acre lots, the Blenheim map shows approximate locations. Three small part lots (under 20 acres), as well as village properties, were not included on the Brant and Bentinck maps. See Figures 2, 3 and 4 for maps showing the locations of Edge Hill, Blenheim, and Brant and Bentinck shareholders in 1920.

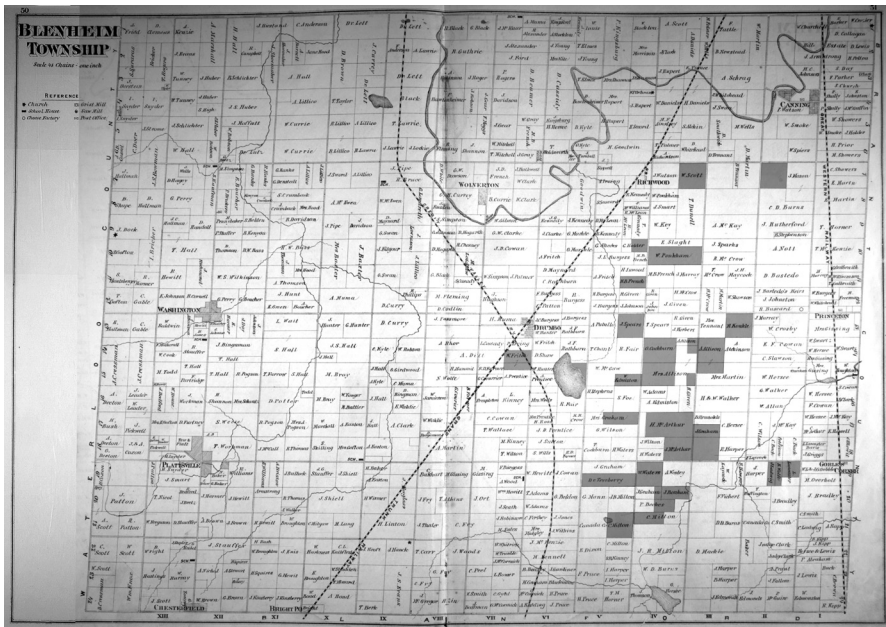




**Figure 2:** Map of Glenelg Township, showing the farms of shareholders in 1920. Source: The Canadian County Atlas Digital Project, “Township of Glenelg,” <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/countyatlas>. Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library. Shading done by author.

shareholders residing within the same geographic area as Brant and Bentinck shareholders.<sup>98</sup> The differences between the average ages, household sizes, and farm sizes of non-shareholders and shareholders were small, further supporting the argument that shareholders were generally reflective of the “middling” and “well-to-do” farmers in the area. Farmers’ non-participation could be linked to their slightly younger age and smaller household size, coinciding with the

<sup>98</sup> This analysis was not undertaken for the 1930 season, as the full list of shareholders was unavailable. Similarly, such an analysis could not be undertaken in the case of the Blenheim and Edge Hill rings, as complete lists of shareholders are unavailable. As has been noted, in a number of cases, multiple men with the same name resided within the geographic area of the ring. When “filling in the blanks” of non-shareholders, such men were omitted from the calculations to ensure the data was not skewed. The main geographic area of the ring is outlined in black on the map in Figure 4.



**Figure 3:** Map of Blenheim Township, showing the farms of shareholders in 1920.

E. Richardson was not included on this map, as he owned only 1.2 acres.

Source: The Canadian County Atlas Digital Project, "Township of Blenheim," <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/countyatlas>. Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library. Shading done by author.

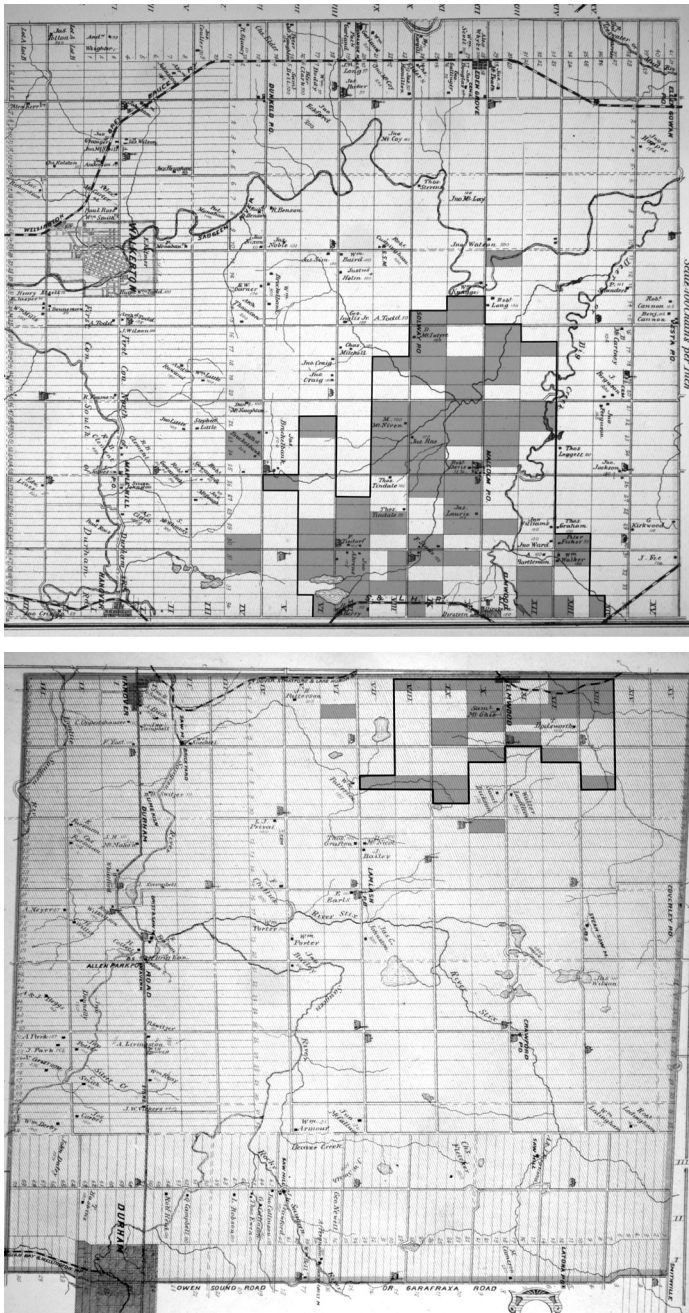
argument that shareholders were typically middle-aged farmers with families that were both large enough and old enough to consume the weekly shares.<sup>99</sup> This hypothesis is further reinforced by the fact that approximately one-third to one-half of non-shareholders identified for each year may have participated in the ring at another time.<sup>100</sup> Shareholders entered and exited the ring depending on their families' sizes, ages, and requirements for meat.

Other central figures in the local agrarian and rural community had some limited involvement in the organizations. A few Brant and Bentinck shareholders continued participating once they had retired to local villages or transitioned to other types of employment. James Anderson and John Black, for example, remained shareholders when they moved into Elmwood, and Andrew Milne remained a shareholder after he became a postmaster.<sup>101</sup> Perhaps more noteworthy

<sup>99</sup> There were two exceptions when the calculations were rounded to the nearest whole number: the average age of shareholders and non-shareholders was the same in 1900, as was the average household size of shareholders and non-shareholders in 1910. It is hypothesized that the slightly smaller farm sizes of non-shareholders can be connected to their slightly younger ages; often, when shareholders were tracked through the assessment rolls, it became apparent that they acquired more land over time. See Table 1 for a comparison between the shareholders and non-shareholders residing within the geographic area of the ring.

<sup>100</sup> The lists of non-shareholders were compared to the butcher's ledger for the whole period of analysis (1898 to 1945). If the first initial and last name of one of these men was found in the butcher's ledger, he was noted as potentially being a shareholder in another year.

<sup>101</sup> See BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Minutes, October 20, 1939, and [1941 Annual Meeting]; BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Ledger, 1899, 1901-1906, 1909-1910, 1940-1945, pp. 116-119,



**Figure 4:** Map of Brant and Bentinck Townships, showing the farms of shareholders in 1920. The thick black line shows the main geographic area of the Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring. *Source:* The Canadian County Atlas Digital Project, "Township of Brant" and "Township of Bentinck," <http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/countyatlas>. Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library. Shading done by author.

is the apparent, albeit relatively short-term, participation of two merchants and two ministers.<sup>102</sup> Finally, in the case of the Blenheim ring, E. Richardson, a blacksmith, was involved in the ring for essentially the entire 14-year period covered by the minutes. Richardson was even elected to the position of recruiter to help fill empty shares.<sup>103</sup> Blacksmiths were, of course, important members of the local community, as they repaired agricultural machinery and made horseshoes. Thus, while shareholders were not exclusively engaged in farming, “outsiders” who participated had a history of membership within the agrarian community or made significant contributions to it, in terms of material and spiritual services.

To better understand how much meat shareholders received, the average weekly amount of meat consumed by each person in shareholding families was calculated for the Brant and Bentinck ring. On average, for the years 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1940, each person in full shareholding households consumed three to six pounds of beef per week, while those in part shareholding households consumed two to four pounds of beef per week.<sup>104</sup> While it is difficult to find Canadian statistics on

**Table 1:** Shareholders and Non-Shareholders in Brant and Bentinck, 1900-1940

Year	Age of Shareholders	Age of Non-Shareholders	Average Household Size of Shareholders	Average Household Size of Non-Shareholders	Average Farm Size of Shareholders	Average Farm Size of Non-Shareholders	Percentage of Non-Shareholders Who May Have Participated in Other Years
1900	43	43	6	4	109	104	46.15
1910	44	43	5	5	118	94	31.82
1920	46	44	5	4	139	107	43.86
1940	51	49	5	4	140	122	50.00

*Source:* Census of Canada and BHC, Brant Assessment Rolls. The owners of two lots could not be found in the 1920 Brant Assessment Roll. No vital statistics were recorded for 10 of the non-shareholders. In a number of cases, these individuals were also listed as non-residents, which would be a significant factor for their lack of participation. In a number of cases, ages or household sizes were not recorded in the Assessment Rolls.

122-133, 138-141, and 274-285; BHC, Township of Brant Assessment Roll, James Anderson, 1006, 1900, p. 45; GRMA, Township of Bentinck Assessment Roll, James Anderson, 530, 1900; GRMA, Township of Bentinck Assessment Roll, John Black, 557, 1900; BRMA, Township of Bentinck Assessment Roll, John Black, 972, 1910, p. 62; GRMA, Township of Bentinck Land Abstracts, Book 3, p. 41; BHC, Township of Brant Assessment Roll, Andrew Milne, 498 and 572, 1940, pp. 43 and 50.

<sup>102</sup> See BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Ledger, 1900, 1910, and 1917-1921, pp. 118-119, 140-141, 158-163, 170-171, 176-177, and 180-181; BHC, Township of Brant Assessment Roll, Daniel and Neil Sullivan, 8, 1900, p. 44; BHC, Township of Brant Assessment Roll, Rev. Alex Leslie, 969, 1910, p. 62; BHC, Township of Brant Assessment Roll, Rev. Ernest Denief, 535, 1920, p. 28; BHC, Township of Brant Assessment Roll, Ernest Pries, 785, 1920, p. 41.

<sup>103</sup> Richardson was listed as a shareholder for every year except the 1922 season. The minutes from December 21, 1921, however, do not include the names of part shareholders. See PM, The Beef Ring and Woman's Foreign Mission, December 21, 1921, January 3, 1928, and December 10, 1928.

<sup>104</sup> The butcher recorded the amount of meat each shareholder received over the course of the season. The household size of each shareholder was found in the Brant and Bentinck assessment rolls. This average could not be calculated for the 1930 season, given the lack of dates in the butcher's ledger for this period.

annual per capita meat consumption in the early twentieth century, a 1920 article in the *Farmer's Advocate* estimated this figure to be approximately 137 pounds; part shareholders in the Brant and Bentinck ring received at least 23 per cent of this yearly total from seasonal participation in beef rings, while full shareholders received at least 35 per cent.<sup>105</sup> This information demonstrates that fresh beef was at least a seasonal staple in the diet of shareholding families, thus challenging the suggestion in the historiography that farm families did not have easy access to beef.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, according to a 1923 article in the *Farmer's Advocate*, some families allegedly left beef rings because they “became so tired of the steady beef diet which is necessary when the full share is consumed fresh weekly.”<sup>107</sup>

Participants in beef rings blended co-operative relations, built upon pre-existing community networks and a co-operative ethos, with market-oriented values to create organizations that often lasted for generations within the local community. As such, beef rings had similarities to the work bees discussed by Catharine Wilson, in which farm families engaged in reciprocal labour to increase their own prosperity.<sup>108</sup> Beef rings allowed shareholders to transcend technological limitations and gain access to fresh beef in the summer, demonstrating that specifically rural consumption practices existed into mid-twentieth-century Ontario.

Beef rings appear to have declined in rural Ontario in the 1950s or early 1960s.<sup>109</sup> Local histories attribute their decline to the availability of cold storage and, later, on-farm refrigeration facilities.<sup>110</sup> The decline in this rural institution, however, was not simply a result of technological innovation, as cold storage facilities were available in local towns by the late 1930s, a decade or two before the beef rings disappeared.<sup>111</sup> Arguably, transitions in agricultural production also played a role, as following World War II Ontario farms increasingly shifted away from mixed farming and towards specialization.<sup>112</sup> Presumably, participation in a beef ring was not attractive to those families who specialized in another type

<sup>105</sup> Horowitz estimates that American urban residents consumed approximately 136.1 to 201.6 pounds per year in 1909 and 107.5 to 166.1 pounds per year in 1942. See Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table*, pp. 11-17.

<sup>106</sup> Horowitz, for example, suggests that beef was an “inconvenient” meat for farm families, since it could not be easily preserved. See Horowitz, *Putting Meat on the American Table*, p. 18.

<sup>107</sup> Similarly, A. A. Werner explained that “[g]etting too much meat seems to be the cause of most dissatisfaction.” See “Preserving the Summer Beef,” p. 1003; Werner, “Fresh Beef at Cost,” p. 718.

<sup>108</sup> Wilson, “Reciprocal Work Bees and the Meaning of Neighbourhood.”

<sup>109</sup> See Lambton Heritage Museum, <http://www.lclmg.org/lclmg/?TabId=113>; BCMCC, Brant and Bentinck Beef Ring Minutes, October 4, 1957, September 26, 1958, April 27, 1959, September 18, 1959, and September 30, 1960.

<sup>110</sup> See, for example, Hubbert, *Split Rail Country*, p. 23; Alma Women's Institute, ed., “The Beef Ring,” *Tweedsmuir History*, p. 292, <http://www.wellington.ca/en/discover/tweedsmuirhistory.asp>; *Greenbank: The Heart of Reach Township – The Beef Ring*, [http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/histoires\\_de\\_chez\\_nous-community\\_memories/pm\\_v2.php?id=story\\_line&lg=English&fl=0&ex=412&sl=3085&pos=1](http://www.museevirtuel-virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/histoires_de_chez_nous-community_memories/pm_v2.php?id=story_line&lg=English&fl=0&ex=412&sl=3085&pos=1); Pickering Museum Village, *Beef Ring Barn*, <http://www.picnet.org/pmv/beefringbarn.htm>; Robinson, ed., *Historically Bound*, p. 507.

<sup>111</sup> See, for example, NDHS, Fred Perkins Diaries, 2001.006, March 30, 1937, November 20, 1937, March 12, 1938, November 11, 1939, June 14, 1940, and December 14, 1940; Robinson, ed., *Historically Bound*, p. 507.

<sup>112</sup> Monda Halpern, *And on that farm he had a wife: Ontario Farm Women and Feminism, 1900-1970* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), p. 110.

of agricultural production and accordingly would have had to purchase a heifer or steer. The availability of refrigeration and the increased specialization of agricultural production together contributed to the decline of a rural institution that had existed for approximately 80 years.