

Good fences can make for good farming

by Ralph C. Martin

After being away from south/central Ontario for several decades, I've observed several changes since returning to this neck of the woods. A striking shift is the lack of fences throughout the countryside. Maybe a bit of internalized farm kid is required to notice and muse while driving on township roads.

Our ancestors poured considerable life energy into building stone fences and split-rail fences which were intended to work for a long time. They served very well.

Aboriginal folks must have been puzzled when grids of fences began dissecting the Ontario landscape. Rectangles were the dominant shape of fields, in rectangular farms, in rectangular concessions of townships. They must have asked themselves, "who are the new people of straight lines, who impose their singular pattern across natural landscape formations?"

Fences represent the containment of livestock on farm fields and the partial exclusion of wildlife. Most farms when originally settled, juggled multiple enterprises. Livestock consumed forages, substandard grain and household wastes. Their manure was recycled in fields. Some fences were intended to keep cattle out, for example, from orchards. However pigs could be strategically held in an orchard to clean up dropped apples, thus eliminating a source of pests.

Fence lines as perennial positioning systems also serve as reference habitat for soil scientists trying to determine how undisturbed soil in a particular landscape is different than soil which has been tilled and cropped within fields. This type of information often results in data which leads to recommendations for less tillage. Furthermore, data from fence lines, showing less erosion and higher soil organic matter than within fields, support the gospel according to Martin, which is, 'keep your soil covered.'

Today, livestock and crop production are diverging and often take place on different farms. Pigs and chickens are confined in special barns and cattle and sheep, if grazed, are mostly on farms in regions, with marginal land. Crop farmers have tended to specialize and in order to optimize economies of scale, their fields are larger. Old fence

lines have been removed to amalgamate fields for large equipment. Nevertheless, straight lines persist.

For many years, page wire fences, with their trademark rectangular net pattern, were the preferred fence type. They are easier to construct and many of them still remain, especially as line fences, although they don't have the staying power of the old stone and rail fences.

The most adaptable and least expensive fences are electric with zaps to enforce their placement as a barrier. My memorable recollection of such a fence is from a Sunday afternoon as a 12 year old boy. My cousin, Gord, and I were showing our townie friend, Ken, around the farm. He couldn't stop bragging about all the things he could do in Elmira that were beyond us on the farm. At this age, my instinct was to solve the boasting problem with a special pissing match. I asked Gord, "can you hit that lower wire on the fence?" We both aimed and missed. Ken chortled, "I can do it." He did. There was a howl and then the silence and humility we were seeking. Let me assure you, my dear readers, that no permanent harm was done and today Ken has children and grandchildren.

Electric fences are made with better materials now, last longer than in my youth and offer the flexibility that modern farmers need. I know of a pig farmer who sets up temporary electric fences on corn fields after the combine has taken all it can. Sows can glean kernels and cobs missed by the combine and initiate more rapid decomposition of corn stalks by chewing at them too.

Some crop farmers creatively establish living mulches between rows of corn and soybean. After the cash crop harvest, cattle are temporarily fenced to move in high stocking density groups from one small paddock to another to graze the mulch and cash crop leftovers. Electric fences have replaced the role of predators to keep cattle, a prey animal, naturally clustered and grazing as a herd in one area before moving to the next. Cattle also generously deposit fertilizer, while their hoof action breaks apart some of the corn or soybean residue.

Fences, in their various manifestations, tell stories of how we manage crops and livestock and ourselves. As we learn more about ourselves and refine our efforts to sustain food production, we can imagine what fences of the future will reveal.

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