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The Rise and Fall of Farming in a Marginal Area : The Gatineau Valley, Quebec

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THE RISE AND FALL OF FARMING IN A MARGINAL AREA : THE GATINEAU VALLEY, QUEBEC

Farming began on the southern margins of the Canadian Shield in the early nineteenth century and has had a varied history over the period of recorded settlement. In the early years farming complemented lumbering by providing locally-grown produce at reasonable prices. As time passed, the agricultural potential of the Shield came to be viewed increasingly optimistically and by the end of the nineteenth century government and private organizations were actively encouraging settlers to take up farms on the Shield. Throughout the twentieth century, however, farming in Shield areas has been declining and those farmers who now remain are struggling to make ends meet.

The Gatineau Valley in western Quebec is an appropriate area in which to study the evolution of Shield farming. In the Shield lands of southern Quebec river valleys form logical study units because early settlement was channelled into them ; to this day inter-valley movement is limited. In the case of the Gatineau, river valley and county coincide and census data are available for the Gatineau townships from the early nineteenth century onwards (figure 1).

The Gatineau Valley as a whole has low agricultural potential. Class 7 soils, which have no capability for arable culture or permanent pasture, dominate, especially in the eastern half of the county and coinciding with the rugged topography and higher relief of that area. [1] Elsewhere the soil capability for agriculture is variable although there is an irregular narrow strip of more favourable land (Classes 2 to 4) along the river, with pockets of similar soils elsewhere (figure 1).

Introduction of farming into the Gatineau valley

The first settler in the Gatineau area was Philemon Wright who, with a group of friends and their families, arrived in Hull Township from the United States in 1800. Wright and his group intended to farm. Like early settlers in many parts of the country, their first impression of the land was that once the trees were removed it would prove to be excellent for farming. In spite of encouraging yields from crops planted on freshly cleared soil, the unsuitability of the area soon became apparent. [2]

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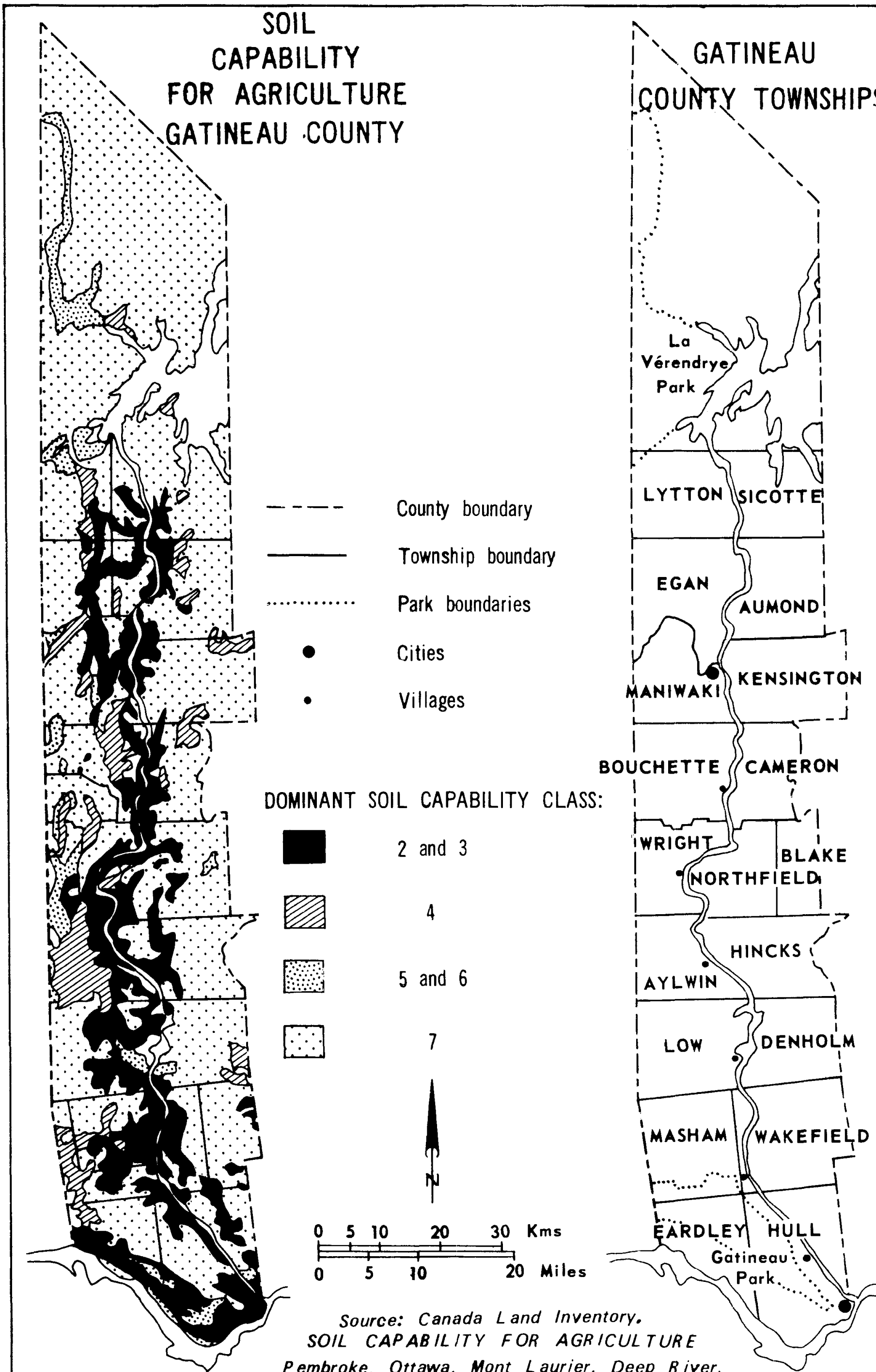
[1] CANADA, Canada Land Inventory. *Soil Capability for Agriculture,* maps no. 31F, 31G, 31J, and 31K, Ottawa, Information Canada.

[2] BRAULT, Lucien (1950) *Hull 1800-1950,* Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 129.

Figure 1


SOIL CAPABILITY FOR AGRICULTURE GATINEAU COUNTY
GATINEAU COUNTY TOWNSHIPS
County boundary
Township boundary
Park boundaries
Cities
Villages
DOMINANT SOIL CAPABILITY CLASS:
2 and 3
4
5 and 6
7
N
0 5 10 20 30 Kms
0 5 10 20 Miles
La Vérendrye Park
LYTTON
SICOTTE
EGAN
AUMOND
MANIWAKI
KENSINGTON
BOUCHETTE
CAMERON
WRIGHT
BLAKE
NORTHFIELD
HINCKS
AYLWIN
LOW
DENHOLM
MASHAM
WAKEFIELD
EARDLEY
HULL
Gatineau Park
Source: Canada Land Inventory, SOIL CAPABILITY FOR AGRICULTURE Pembroke, Ottawa, Mont Laurier, Deep River.

Under the system of land granting in force at the time, the leader of a number of associates could apply for a large block of land in the name of the group. It was under this arrangement that Wright applied for one quarter of Hull Township in 1800. Before title to the land was issued, the leader was responsible for surveying the block into lots, a duty that Wright performed in 1801. To his surprise he found that starting in the third range back from the Ottawa River « the country is very mountainous, rocky and broken and in general unfit for the purposes of agriculture. » [3]

Thus, within a short time of his arrival Wright had come to perceptive conclusions about the nature of the land for agriculture that later settlers and even governments failed to appreciate. It took more than another century before Wright's original conclusions about the nature of the land were generally accepted. Wright continued to farm although his main interest rapidly turned to the abundant timber resources of the area.

Wright and his family dominated the economic life of Hull and the Gatineau valley throughout the early decades of the nineteenth century. Although timber was their main concern, the family did not ignore the pursuit they originally intended to follow. By 1822 Wright and his sons had cleared 4,703 acres and were operating five farms. [4] Wheat was the major product although other crops, including hemp, were also grown. [5]

Faced with a marginal physical environment and lacking the resources of the Wrights, most of the other early settlers of Hull Township became subsistence farmers dependent largely on the growing of wheat. In 1842, when the first Census of Lower Canada was taken, wheat, along with oats and potatoes, were recorded as the major crops produced in the three settled Gatineau townships of Hull, Eardley, and Wakefield.

Agricultural operations were introduced into the middle and upper Gatineau valley by the lumber industry. In the 1830s lumbering spread rapidly throughout the full length of the valley. Depots were established at intervals up the river to serve as initial assembly points for crews heading into the bush and as distribution centres for supplies. Farms to produce feed and to provide summer homes for the draught animals used in the shanties were usually operated in connection with the depots. [6] The establishment of such farms reflected the transportation difficulties of the time and demonstrated the interdependence of agriculture and lumbering during their early years on the southern Shield.

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3 OTTAWA, Canada, Public Archives. Manuscript Group 24, *Wright Papers,* 125: 66,353.

4 BRAULT. *Op. cit.* 30-31.

5 CRAIGIE, Cynthia H. (1969) *The Influence of the Timber Trade and Philemon Wright on the Social and Economic Development of Hull Township, 1800-1850.* Unpublished M. A. Thesis, Ottawa Carleton University, 52.

6 HUGHSON, John W., and BOND, Courtney C. J. (1964) *Hurling Down the Pine,* Old Chelsea, Historical Society of the Gatineau, 80-82.

The Progress of Settlement

Settlement progressed in a slow but steady fashion northwards in the Gatineau valley. Irish settlers began arriving in the area in 1819 when a large contingent settled in Eardley Township. By 1825 Irish immigrants were moving into Wakefield Township and, following in the wake of the lumbering industry, they later continued into Low and Aylwin townships. The Irish were the early labourers in the Gatineau lumber camps and the pioneers of settlement in the Gatineau valley. [7] French settlers, relocating from the crowded St. Lawrence Lowlands, were later arrivals, coming in large numbers after about 1850. In the Gatineau the French tended to take up land to the north of the Irish so that as the century progressed distinct French and English-speaking communities became evident. [8]

During the latter years of the nineteenth and early years of the twentieth centuries, agricultural settlement of the Shield margins in Quebec was actively encouraged. In 1895 a colonization and repatriation society was founded in an attempt to discourage the emigration of French Canadians to the United States and to encourage the repatriation of those already there by promoting the colonization of unsettled areas in western Canada and in Quebec. [9] Official sentiment in Quebec backed the work of the Colonization Society. Farming was regarded by the church and government, if not always by the individual, as the way of life most suited to the French Canadian.

The Gatineau valley was part of the region referred to by the Society as the « North of Montreal », a vast area comprising the Shield lands between the St. Maurice River on the east and the Ottawa River on the west. In promotional literature distributed in 1905 this area was described as follows :

> Its resources from the triple point of view of agriculture, trade and commerce are immense and the future which awaits it is most brilliant . . . The farmer who understands how to turn the natural fertility of the soil to profit and the facility of selling its products, is sure, if not of becoming very rich, of at least amassing very quickly an honest competence. [10]

The Colonization Society was active until the First World War, by which time it had succeeded in settling thousands of unsuspecting families on the Canadian Shield. The aims of the Society were complemented by those of the Quebec government which, at the turn of the century, was promoting the Shield townships and selling crown land at thirty cents an acre in blocks of up to 200 acres. [11]

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[7] BLANCHARD, Raoul (1954) *L'ouest du Canada français*, 2 vols., Montréal, Librairie Beauchemin Limitée, 2: 69-75.

[8] *Ibid.*, 80-91.

[9] OTTAWA, Canada, Public Archives. Record Group 76. *Immigration Office Papers*, Vol. 95, File 11,680, part 1.

[10] *Ibid.* Vol. 96, File 11,680, part 3.

[11] QUEBEC, Department of Lands and Forests (1907) *The Settler's Guide : The Province of Quebec.*

The advance of settlement up the Gatineau valley is evident from the number of landowners reported for the different townships in successive census years. For example, Masham, Hincks, Bouchette, and Aumond townships are located at approximate twenty-five mile intervals from south to north ; in 1861 Masham had 246 landowners, Hincks had thirty-seven, Bouchette thirty-five, and Aumond six. By 1891 these totals had all risen with the rate of increase itself rising from south to north. [12]

Although the average farm size in the four townships varied in 1861 from eighty-four acres in Masham to 184 acres in Hincks, and in 1911 from 131 acres in Bouchette to 202 acres in Hincks, the pattern of land use in different parts of the valley was remarkably consistent at different points in time. In the three census years of 1861, 1891, and 1911, farm size differences throughout the valley were accounted for largely by varying amounts of woodland and wasteland, although there was a slight decrease in the amount of improved land per farm moving northwards. The principal crops produced were oats, hay, and potatoes along with small amounts of grains such as barley and wheat. In addition the average farmer maintained a few animals – normally two working animals (horses or oxen), two or three dairy cows, a few other cattle, two or three pigs and a variety of fowl.

Farming trends in the twentieth century

The twentieth century has witnessed dramatic changes in the practice of agriculture in the Gatineau valley. The effort to scrape an acceptable living from the soils of the Shield has become more difficult with the passage of time, partly because the aspirations of the inhabitants have risen with their increasing familiarity with urban ways but also because rising production costs and the increasing severity of competition from lowland farmers make it more and more difficult to eke a living out of most Shield land.

Outmigration from farm areas started about the turn of the century in the southern Gatineau valley and a little later in the more recently settled northern townships. For example, outmigration from Masham Township began in the late 1800s, with the total number of occupied farms declining from 309 in 1891 to 72 in 1971. In contrast, the number of occupied farms in Aumond rose to 119 in 1931, after which the total dropped sharply, reaching 25 in 1971. [13] On the other hand, average farm sizes in the four townships rose from 152 acres in 1861 to 348 acres in 1971. The most dramatic changes in both land unit sizes and the character of the farming operation have occurred in the post-Second World War period and may be analyzed by examining the patterns presented by the 1951 and 1971 census reports.

12 CANADA. *Census of the Canadas 1860-1861,* No. 12 ; Canada. *Census of Canada 1890-1891,* Vol. II, Table XVI ; and Canada. *Census of Canada 1911,* Vol. 4, Table II.

13 CANADA, Dominion Bureau of Statistics. *Census of Canada 1931,* Vol. 8, Table 37, and Canada, Statistics Canada. *1971 Census of Canada,* Vol. 4 part 2, Table 50.

The population of Gatineau County north of the Hull-Eardly township line remained unchanged from 1951 to 1971 but the proportion of the total classified as « farm population » dropped significantly. In 1951 the population of the area was 17,364 and almost half of that number (48.1%) was made up of farm households. However, in 1971 the population totaled 17,585 of which only 18.8 percent lived on farms.

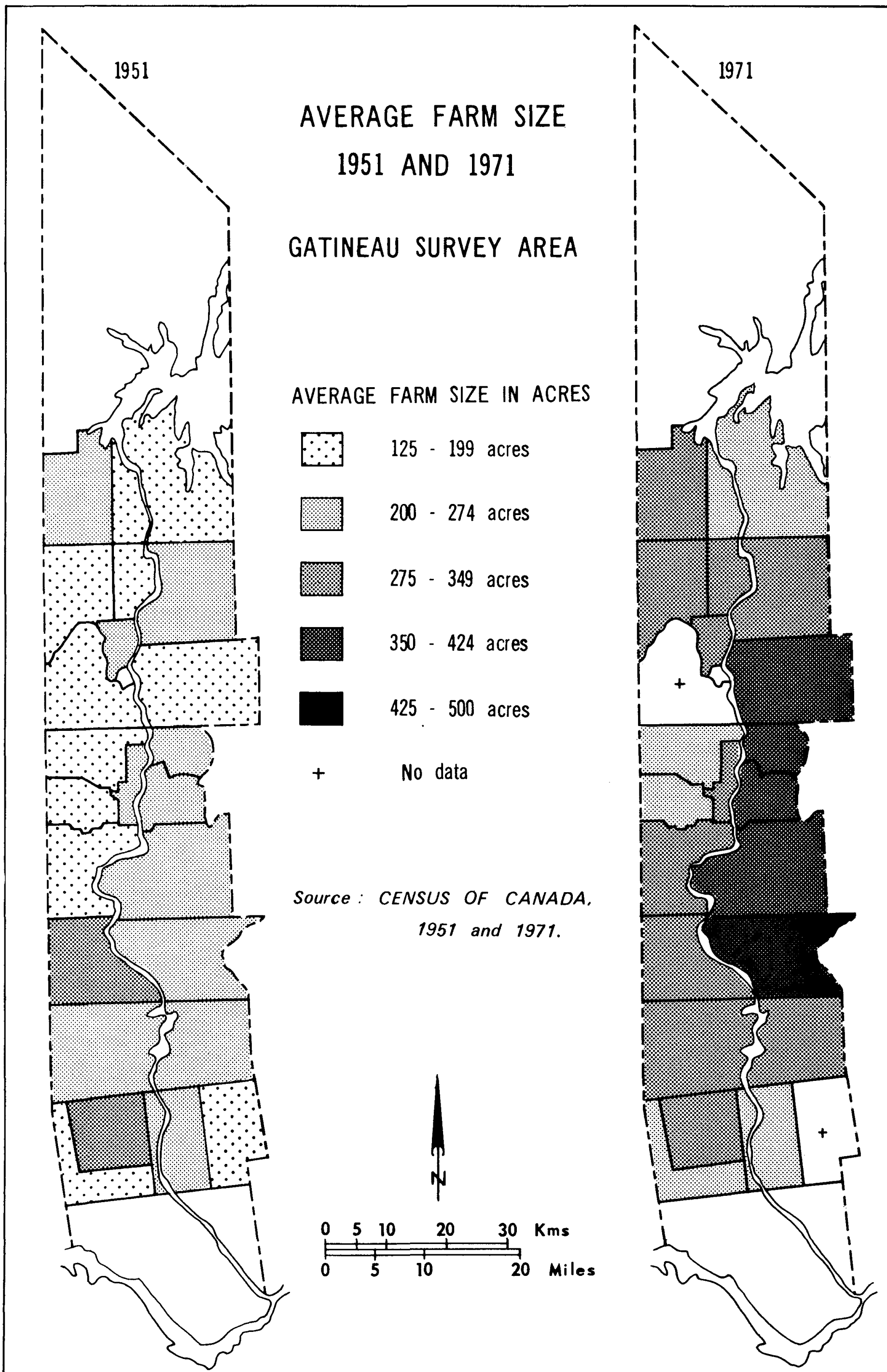
Since farm population includes all persons residing on census farms, a large number of households associated with small part-time operations are included as farm population. The 1971 definition of a census farm was any « agricultural holding of one acre or more with sales of agricultural products during the twelve month period prior to the census of $50 or more ». In 1951, however, a census farm was defined as a « holding on which agricultural operations are carried out and which is (a) three acres or more in size, or (b) from one to three acres in size and with agricultural production during the previous year valued at $250 or more. » Therefore, when compared with 1951, the 1971 census adds farms of from one to three acres in size selling produce valued between $50 and $249 but it drops from consideration farms over three acres in size with sales of less than $50. In a marginal agricultural area such as the Gatineau valley the loss likely exceeded the gain and, therefore, the amount of decline between 1951 and 1971 will be somewhat overstated in a comparison of the two census years.

The decline in the number of census farms between the two years has however, been substantial. In 1951, 1,682 farms were in existence throughout the area but by 1971 this total had dropped by 64 percent to 604 farms. At the same time the total area of farmland declined by almost 40 percent (322,194 acres to 197,253 acres) and average farm size rose from 192 acres to 327 acres. This suggests that the changed definition of a census farm has had little impact on the trends noted, for its effect would have been to lower the average farm size. However, average farm size rose for all census subdivisions although the rate of increase was variable (figure 2). By 1971 a distinct area of larger farms was taking form in the middle of the valley to the east of the Gatineau River, an area containing very little land in agricultural capability classes 2 to 4. Quantity, therefore, is tending to substitute for quality.

In spite of the decline in farm population and the substantial increase in average farm size, the land use composition of the average farm remained remarkably stable over the 1951 to 1971 period. The bulk of the farm area in both years was unimproved land, especially woodland : 64 percent of the farm area in 1951 ; 62 percent in 1971. Crop land, taking up 41 acres of the average farm in 1951 and 70 acres in 1971, accounted for 21 percent of the total area in both years. Hay and oats together accounted for over 85 percent of the crop land area at both dates. [14]

[14] CANADA, Dominion Bureau of Statistics. *Census of Canada 1951*, Vol. 6 part 1, Table 29 ; and Canada, Statistics Canada. *1971 Census of Canada*, Vol. 4 part 2, Table 50.

Figure 2


1951
1971
AVERAGE FARM SIZE
1951 AND 1971
GATINEAU SURVEY AREA
AVERAGE FARM SIZE IN ACRES
125 - 199 acres
200 - 274 acres
275 - 349 acres
350 - 424 acres
425 - 500 acres
+ No data
Source : CENSUS OF CANADA, 1951 and 1971.
N
0 5 10 20 30 Kms
0 5 10 20 Miles

The most notable change on the Gatineau valley farm over the past two decades has been the development of a beef cattle industry. In 1951 the average Gatineau farm had twelve head of cattle of which seven were milk cows. By 1971 the average herd had expanded to thirty-three head, of which only six were milk cows. The distribution of cattle on Gatineau valley farms showed a definite distance-related pattern relative to Ottawa-Hull (figure 3). Average total farm value in 1971 also declined with distance northwards, and the similarity of this pattern with the distribution of cattle suggests that cattle are a very important element in farm value in the Gatineau valley today.

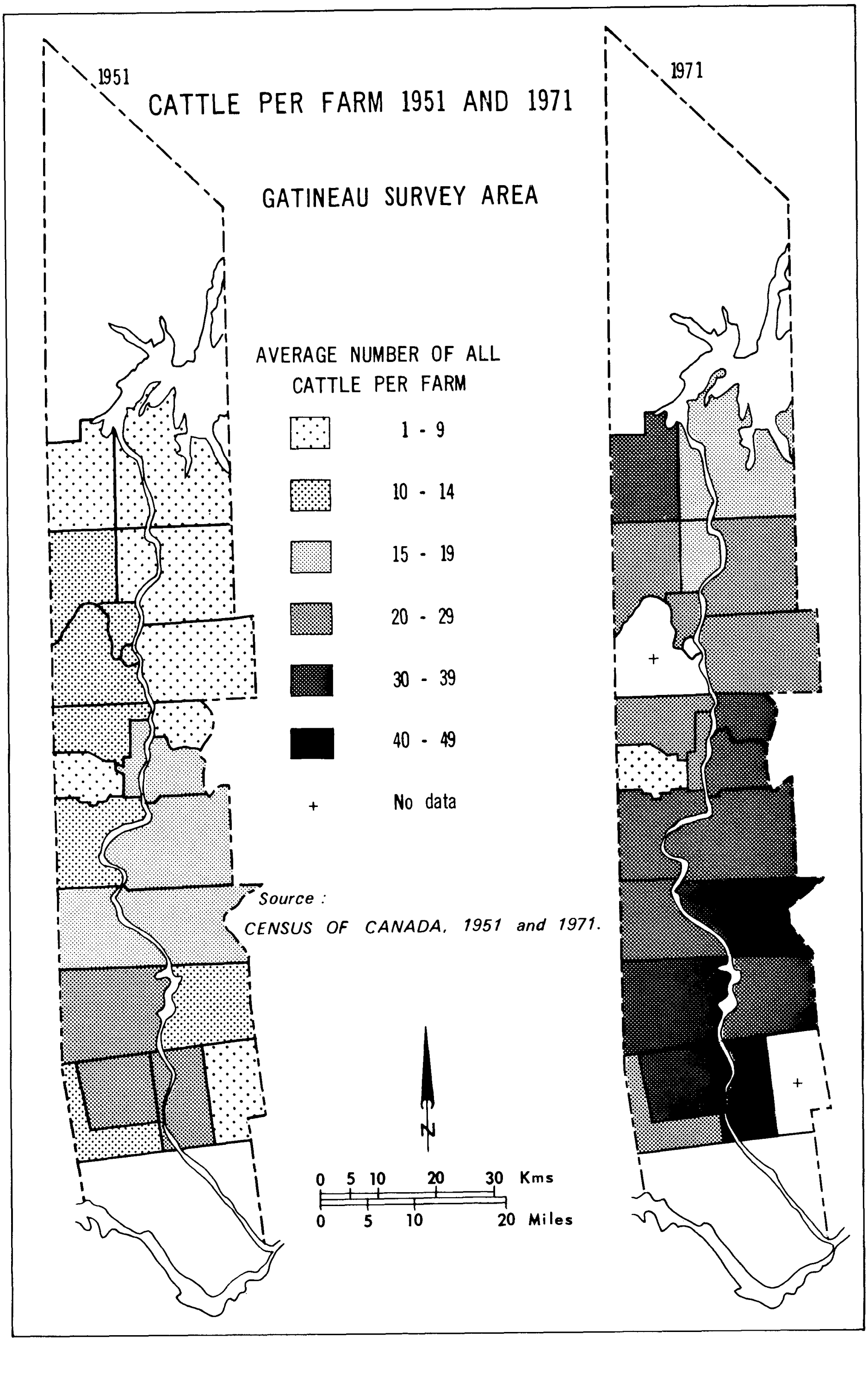
Nineteenth century Gatineau valley farming evolved in partnership with the lumber industry. The lumber camps were a market for surplus produce grown locally and gave the farmer the opportunity to supplement his income through winter bush work. As a result land use patterns developed without reference to the Ottawa-Hull urban centre and were relatively uniform throughout the length of the valley. However, since the Second World War farming has been transformed from a labour-intensive to a capital-intensive, highly competitive industry. The changes that have occurred in the Gatineau area reflect outside pressures which have made it increasingly difficult to achieve a satisfactory standard of living from farming in a marginal area. Accordingly, market-related phenomena such as herd size or farm value are now developing distance-related patterns in the Gatineau valley, suggesting that the disadvantagous position of farmers in the middle and northern sections of the area is increasing at a faster rate than for those in the south. One direct result of the emerging locational advantage of the southern valley is the higher volume of farm sales by farmers in the more southerly townships.

The emerging locational disadvantage of the northern sections of the valley is not evident to the farmers themselves, however. A recent survey of permanent rural residents of Gatineau County was conducted to gain information on the changing involvements of the valley's inhabitants in a range of rural land use activities. [15] Those respondents with farming experience were asked to describe what they felt were the biggest changes affecting farming in their area. The question was open-ended and was answered enthusiastically by respondents apparently anxious to air their frustrations or complaints. In all, 152 respondents expressed a total of 209 ideas which, upon examination, were grouped into fifteen categories. Content analysis was then applied to the responses.

The most frequently mentioned farming change was mechanization or modernization — 20.1 per cent of all themes. The item noted most often was that horses had been replaced by machines.

[15] A postal survey of the permanent rural residents of Gatineau Country north of the Hull-Eardley Township line was conducted in December 1973 and January 1974. A total of 482 questionnaires (33.0% of the full sample) were returned and processed.

Figure 3


1951
CATTLE PER FARM 1951 AND 1971
1971
GATINEAU SURVEY AREA
AVERAGE NUMBER OF ALL CATTLE PER FARM
1 - 9
10 - 14
15 - 19
20 - 29
30 - 39
40 - 49
+ No data
Source :
CENSUS OF CANADA, 1951 and 1971.
N
0 5 10 20 30 Kms
0 5 10 20 Miles

Farm abandonment, which accounted for 17.7 per cent of all themes, was the second most frequently noted change. Many respondents stressed that it was the smaller farms that were being abandoned or sold.

The theme that ranked third (12.9 per cent) was the problem of the rising costs of farming. The problem was noted in a number of ways. Some respondents stated simply that costs were rising ; others, that it was necessary to have an outside job in order to make ends meet ; others said that incomes were too low.

In fourth position, accounting for 11.0 percent of the themes, respondents noted the shift in emphasis from dairy to beef cattle.

When the comments of respondents residing at different distances from Ottawa-Hull were compared, no significant variation in themes was found. Thus, as far as the inhabitants of the Gatineau Valley themselves are concerned, the problems and changes affecting farming are seen to be relatively uniform throughout the valley.

Conclusion

Perception of the agricultural potential of the Gatineau Valley has gone full circle over the 175 years since the arrival of the first settlers in 1800. Philemon Wright, the founder of Hull, concluded within a few years of his arrival that most of the area was poorly suited to farming and he turned his attention to the harvesting of the pine forests. However, with the lumber industry's dependence on local produce, with the arrival of immigrants seeking land, and with the gradual removal of trees from many Shield areas, attitudes changed. By the end of the nineteenth century the Canadian Shield in Quebec was being presented to prospective settlers as a satisfactory farming area. Thousands seeking a new start accepted. Now, in the late twentieth century, however, many of the fields labouriously worked in years gone by stand idle and are reverting to bush.

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