

FIRST PERSON

BUYING INTO MY MENNONITE ROOTS



ILLUSTRATION BY DREW SHANNON

The language of land was one I'd never learned to speak, **Cameron Dueck** writes, but land-ownership appealed to the Mennonite in me

Dad's raspy 87-year-old voice was filled with relief that this last bit of business was taken care of. But I also heard uncertainty, a tinge of seller's regret, over the telephone.

"He's agreed to the price and it's a done deal," Dad said. "That's it. That was my last piece of farmland."

The swampy land that he broke and turned into grain fields. The fields where my siblings and I learned to put in an honest day's work, the cornerstone of our family farm on the Canadian Prairies. The land that had defined him as a Mennonite man, one chapter in our culture's long history of buying wilderness and turning it into productive farms. Selling his land meant he was exiting the cut-and-thrust of agri-business.

When Dad bought it, Section 10 was mostly old-growth tamarack and spruce and the ground was covered in luxuriant moss. The land was cheap because it was beyond the fringe of civilization, part of a new agricultural frontier in Manitoba's Interlake region. It was low-lying and prone to flooding.

Grainy black-and-white photos show him and my mother, fresh faced and smiling as they began carving a farm out of the forest in the early 1950s. One picture shows them resting in waist-deep snow while cutting down the forest to make room for crops. Then there's the photo of Dad standing in his first crop of barley, which grew as high as his chest but couldn't hide his beaming smile.

Sold. We knew it was coming – he tried for many years to convince my brothers and I to buy it. But none of us wanted this particular piece of land.

When my family gathers and the heavy Sunday lunch has been consumed, the men pile into pickup trucks and go for a drive down the rutted dirt roads circling Section 10. My brothers and I swap stories. My father chimes in when the remembered inches of rains and laments over child labour become too exaggerated. The stories are always about the struggle, the fight against nature. There were no easy gains made on Section 10. We wanted nothing more to do with land that required such hard labour. The land was important to our family history, but owning it would put nostalgia above smart investment, and none of us could afford such costly sentiments.

Yet, owning farmland is central to Mennonite identity. It spells security and stability and, most importantly, independence. For a Mennonite man, land means you don't owe anything to nobody. It means you're your own man.

Mennonites like to tell stories about how we have moved from country to country to escape religious persecution, to find freedom to live the old way. But truthfully, the moves are often about finding new land. Swampy land that needs draining can be had for cheap and all it takes is hard work to turn it profitable.

In 1874, my great-grandfather moved from Russia to Canada in the first wave of Mennonites to colonize the Prairies. He settled in the Red River

Valley. The Red regularly breaks free of its banks, overflowed with spring melt. In Rosenort, Man., the diked village where both of my parents grew up, the farmers hold their breath every spring, watching the river rise, rejoicing when it doesn't flood and resigned when it does.

Dad moved north to the boggy shores of Lake Winnipeg to break virgin peat land. For Dad, digging drainage ditches became as much a part of farming as planting and harvesting.

But no matter how many ditches we dug, the tractors and harvesters still became stuck. My earliest memories of farming are being mired axle-deep in the fragrant peat of Section 10, the tracks filled with seepage. My father put rice tires on the harvester – although there was no rice being grown – hoping to better churn his way across his swampy fields, to no avail. Instead, he slapped at the hordes of mosquitoes and once again hooked a logging chain to the harvester and instructed me to pull it taut with the tractor. Sometimes the tractor's spinning wheels would dig giant holes in the quagmire, pulling the machine deeper and deeper with every revolution.

I cursed and complained, an ornery teenager. "Why are we farming here? This is the worst place in the world to farm."

"It's good soil, we just need to drain it better. I'll put another drainage ditch through here and then next year it will be dry," he said. But it was never dry.

"I'm never gonna be a farmer," I told him, more than once, as we stood knee deep in bog, working to free the machinery.

Years later, long after I had already made my home in the city, I told my father I had some money I wanted to invest. His eyes lit up.

"Hey, there's some land for sale near here," he told me. "It may not go up in value as fast as those stock markets do, but it will always be there. They're not making more land."

The language of land – drainage, fences, good soil, stoney or not – was one I'd never learned to speak. But the idea of owning my own land appealed to the Mennonite in me. The advertised plot was a few miles from our family farm. It was cleared of trees, already tamed and well drained. No digging of ditches needed.

So I bought the land with a loan from the local credit union, where my family had banked for so long the manager still recognized my voice on the telephone. It was with great satisfaction that I took the "For Sale" sign off the gate and walked into the field for the first time. I eyed the slope toward the lake, pretending, for a moment, that I knew something about land. I had friends and family that owned thousands of acres so there was a tinge of city-boy sheepishness to my pride in owning this modest plot. I'd never be a farmer, but now I had a piece of my own land, like any other respectable Mennonite.

Solid, well-drained land – and it's not for sale.

Cameron Dueck grew up in Manitoba and now lives in Hong Kong.

All clichés apply at these strange Olympics

JOHN DOYLE

OPINION



TELEVISION

After a breakfast of pumpkin pie and oranges, the Brother and the lads got down to business. Olympic business. Eighteen days of curling. Twelve nights of speed skating. And what appears to be a hundred days of figure skating. Said it before and saying it again: Oh, my shattered nerves.

First, however, there was an outbreak of mild euphoria. Surfing the web, the Brother discovered that singer Sade is to release her first new music in years. Her ditty *Smooth Operator* is his personal anthem.

The lads, three shiftless louts and experts at dilly-dallying, named Gerrit, Gavin and Dave, wilted. "Say it ain't so," Dave said, with an expression of undiluted misery on his face. "I can't stand another rendition of *Smooth Operator*. I'd rather take up a sport. Horseshoe throwing is something I've always been tempted by."

The Brother looked miffed. "Every sport is a boulevard of broken dreams," he announced. "It is a timeworn ritual. That boulevard is littered with crushed hopes and broken spirits."

"Speaking of spirits," Gavin said, "is it too early for a tot of the schnapps?" A short discussion ensued, the gist of it being that, since it was late at night in Pyeongchang, and in order to be part of the Olympic Family, a round of schnapps was in order. I passed, pleading work and the reading of comments by trolls who detest my small efforts in this great newspaper. It's a bracing way to start the day. Like going to the gym.

Time passed. The cat, Rita, yawned on her warm perch on the radiator, known as Florida. Eventually, the TV was turned on. It was curling. (It's always curling, Rita was thinking, I'm sure.) Whether it was live, delayed or took place in a distant mountain rink yonks ago was unclear. Never mind.

The Brother and the lads look upon Norway's male curlers and their saucy, colourful Winter Olympic trousers with incandescent loathing. "They should have technical merit points deducted for wearing clown pants," the Brother declared, confusing figure skating with curling. We can all sympathize.

"Lindsey Vonn has a message for the haters," announced Gerrit, who was reading CNN on his phone. Intrigued, we all awaited the message.

"She sleeps well at night," Gavin pronounced.

"Lindsey Vonn is the most human of champions," said the Brother, who could have a career writing sports stuff for the online CNN.

The Canadian women's curling team's loss to Britain, and its elimination from the medal round, was now up for discussion on TV. "It's a crooked road, that boulevard of broken dreams," the Brother announced. He could also work for CBC Sports, I thought.

The women's bobsleigh was savoured over more schnapps. The sight of Kaillie Humphries and her brakeman, Phylcia George, winning bronze was a tonic. They were happy, touchingly passionate. "Emotional transparency," the Brother pronounced. "It's the Olympic spirit and the women do it best. Except for [Canadian skip] Rachel Homan, she was very gruff, there when she had to talk about the women's curling team being defeated. If she'd cried buckets nobody would have criticized her. It's a boulevard of broken ..."

Then Gerrit snapped, "Shut up!" before things went any further down the crooked road of sporting clichés.

"At least they weren't beaten by Russia," the Brother wanted it noted.

"You can't call it Russia," Dave said with an edge in his voice. "It's OAR!"

The question, "What does OAR mean?" left everyone flummoxed. The schnapps had kicked in.

The women's hockey gold-medal game was looming. To get the Brother and the lads out of the house and give me peace, I sent them around to The Done Right Inn. When I went to retrieve them, I found Dave staring at a horseshoe on the wall behind the bar. The Brother was asking a very tolerant bartender, "What does OAR mean?"

Her reply was, "Organized Avalanche Response." The Brother was flummoxed.

"Or it could be Operational Assessment and Readiness," she said thoughtfully.

Then I heard the Brother ask her to play *Smooth Operator* in the sound system, and I ordered them out.

First Person is a daily personal piece submitted by readers

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