

A Brief History of Agriculture on Haida Gwaii

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Elizabeth Condrotte

The culture of an era as well as its environment shapes its food choices and therefore its agriculture. So it is with the history of agriculture on Haida Gwaii. There are two major cultural eras on Haida Gwaii: Haida culture prior to 1900 and the combined Haida, immigrant culture that has formed over the last century.

This history will focus mostly on the agriculture of the 20th Century as agriculture was not a large component of pre-colonial life and because the most information is to be found in the records of the colonists. It is divided into 15 year eras to show that while geography and climate did not change dramatically, the culture changed and agriculture changed with it.

1. The Early Years: Pre- 1900

Food preference and availability for the early Haida were satisfied by a hunter-gatherer culture without the nomadic lifestyle of other hunter-gatherer cultures. The sea and shore provided enough and varied foods that could also be preserved through the winter to support large villages and a culture rich in artistic expression.

There was however some cultivation of potatoes and a form of chewing tobacco prior to colonization but both the time and place of origin of these crops is not clear. However their function was not only to be consumed by the Haidas but also to be traded. The tobacco was traded with neighboring tribes and the potato also traded with European vessels and mainland traders. Missionaries discouraged continued tobacco production due to its narcotic properties and substituted their own smoking tobacco which could not be grown. They did however encourage potato growing and with their own gardens as well as those at the trading post in Masset, they introduced the Haida to other vegetable crops. The gardens flourished into the 1900s but the Haida themselves did not. Only a remnant remained of their population and most of them had moved to Old Masset in the north and Skidegate in the south.

2. The Optimistic Years: 1900- 1915

The decimation of most of the indigenous inhabitants of Haida Gwaii left the land open to non-Haida settlement. There was already a population of miners who had begun their prospecting in the 1800's. Further mining claims were approved as well as timber licenses over much of the islands. Tales of rich gold, coal and other mineral deposits as well as immense forests, fed into the pre-existing culture of "rushes" that had already begun in the Yukon and the Caribou. Added to this was a rush to North America by disenchanting Europeans who were looking for a new life. Speculators who were eager to cash in on the European and even other North American immigrants encouraged them to

come to the islands with highly exaggerated advertisements extolling the wonderful agricultural possibilities. Townsites were located to service canneries, mills or mines while farms, and ranches sprang up in every available and sometimes highly unlikely location. As soon as the land had been surveyed in 1909, most of the area from Masset to Rose Spit, the east coast of Graham Island, the area surrounding Sandspit, most of Masset Inlet and even Mayer Lake was pre-empted or purchased. The massive fire that swept the north east portion of Graham Island at the end of the century had made the land particularly attractive for farming due to the ease of clearing burned stumps rather than trees and the layer of fertile ash those burned trees had left behind. The settlers, predominately young men, began clearing and building. Because transportation was primarily by boat or beach and the few overland trails were cut through bush and muskeg, it is difficult to imagine the hardship of these early pioneers who brought not only their tools and possessions, but also their livestock: horses, cattle, sheep, pigs, and poultry. Some animals were landed on the docks in Masset or Skidegate and some were sent overboard to swim ashore.

This earliest era of agriculture was also the most successful. There were fifty-four recorded settlers by 1915 as well as an unrecorded number of squatters. All of them were growing vegetables in their home gardens with seeds they had brought with them or saved, while a few were growing small acreages and marketing their produce in the settlements and camps. There was also a market for produce, eggs and meat in Prince Rupert. The Haidas were raising cattle and root vegetables near Masset for market producing an income of nearly 2000 dollars in 1915 as recorded by the Indian Agent. Many other cattle were grazed on larger areas of wild grassland along the east coast of Graham Island with ranches at the Oeanda and Tlell and mixed farms all along the beach from Cape Ball to Skidegate. The Graham Island East Coast Farmers Institute was established in 1912 with 41 members while Graham Island and Graham Island-Tow Hill followed close behind with 58 and 32 members respectively. The Institutes were instrumental in establishing an experimental farm at Lawn Hill and encouraged its members to attend the first Prince Rupert Agricultural Exhibition in 1913 after their own very successful exhibition at Lawn Hill. The provincial government even supported agriculture by establishing a District Horticulturalist in Prince Rupert who worked closely with the new experimental farm.

All this success was due to the limited sources and transportation to provide food from outside necessitating self-sufficiency, the local and Prince Rupert markets for excess production, and enough labor to make up for the lack of modern farming methods. All this was to change as 1914 marked not only the end of the beginning but the beginning of the end of successful agriculture on Haida Gwaii.

3.The Establishment Years: 1916-1930

The conditions that caused such dissatisfaction to the Europeans who went in search of a new life in Canada precipitated the Great War of 1914-1918 which would ironically draw the settlers back as soldiers. Many single men and a few who had families abandoned their homesteads. Some just walked away leaving everything behind. The war also depleted the agricultural labor force by creating a small boom in the forest industry which provided Sitka spruce for airplanes. The boom came to an end in 1919 and because

so many of those who had taken this employment left, some of the townsites such as Graham Center and Sewell were abandoned. It wasn't just the war that caused the decrease in population. For many it was just a good excuse to give up a lost cause. The availability of good land proved to be a hoax to lure them to the islands as so much of it was already claimed by mining and timber interests. Consequently they had settled on marginal land and found the work daunting. Even those who had better land found the investment draining and simply didn't make the financial success of their homestead that they had hoped for. The government even abandoned agriculture on the islands, closing down the district office in Prince Rupert and then the experimental farm by 1918.

Those who stayed after 1919 in spite of the decline in markets gave up some ambition and idealism and made farming their chosen lifestyle. A few new settlers even came to take up some of the land that was being left behind. Such a purchase was made by the Richardson brothers who bought the 320 acre ranch on the Tlell River, lock, stock and barrel from Jake and Neil Walsh in 1919. They, as did every other farmer and rancher on the islands, supplemented their farm income with whatever outside work they could find. Eric Richardson, for example, became a fishery overseer and held that position for fourteen years. Many were able to find government jobs building roads and bridges to connect their farms to the settlements. By 1928 Skidegate and Port Clements were connected by vehicle traffic over a gravel road to Tlell and a plank road the rest of the way. A plank road supplemented the beach which connected Masset to Tow Hill. Port Clements and Masset were connected only by boat but a telephone line did join them along the inlet and then went south to Meyer Lake, east to Cape Ball and south again to Skidegate and Queen Charlotte City. These connections alleviated the isolation the settlers had been experiencing and a sense of community developed.

Even though the experimental farm had closed it left a legacy of valuable information and realistic expectations of what could be grown and how to grow it. In 1926 the BC Department of Agriculture reported on the advances made since 1918 and noted that in spite of the limited areas under cultivation, yields were encouraging with crops of grains, grasses and potatoes yielding well. Although vegetables, small fruits and fruit trees flourished they were only grown in home gardens. Carl Kumis had planted 1.5 acres of cranberries near the Sangan River that year (1926). He had crossed wild with tame cranberries and they grew well providing a good business for a few years but human pickers were hard to come by while the geese and deer were not. Transportation to and from the outside made exporting products a risky proposition and imports very expensive. Even the department recommended reliance on local resources and community cooperation for larger ventures such as procuring local lime. Agriculture was also a major part of the school curriculum with the government offering prizes for the best school garden. Masset won the prize in 1920 and spent the money on seeds and a watering can.

4. The Hard Years and the Good Years: 1931-1945

The advent of the thirties brought the depression to the islands as it did everywhere else but it was not the same crash as it was for the outside world. After 1919 there were no more booms so there was no bust and life carried on with some added inconvenience brought about by conditions in the outside world. All in all the islands were not a bad place to be during these years. A few folks even returned after finding no work outside.

There was a downturn in employment opportunities on the islands but there were still a few canneries and sawmills so the remaining townsites continued on. Farmers therefore had the opportunity to sell produce, eggs, and beef to the fish boats and the settlement residents. There was still a logging industry in a few isolated camps and some farmers found a market there. The Cumshewa camp for example bought beef from the Mathers Farm near Sandspit in the late 30's which was delivered by boat.

Ernie Perlstrom didn't even bother to farm his land but made a few dollars trapping on it. His next venture was gold recovery from the black sand on the beach at Cape Fife. There were four of these operations started in 1935 on the east coast which gave the miners a small revenue to support their farms.

By 1937 only six settlers remained on North Beach out of the dozens who had come there in the early 1900's. The two Carey Brothers raised vegetables, chickens, rabbits, goats and a team of horses. They sold their produce in Masset until they died. Farther east along the beach were the four homesteads of Alfie Charles, Jim Pearson, Harry Crook and Charlie Spence. They were all bachelors and subsistence farmers and when they left, their land was deserted.

There were many reports in the 1930's of wild cattle which had been left behind by settlers just for the taking. The Farmers Institute tried to dispel that myth in 1934 with a press release advising that the cattle had not been abandoned but sold and their new owners were keeping them on the available open ranges of the former ranches.

The depression was not that depressing. Everyone scraped by and motor vehicles and telephones brought the communities and settlers together to help each other and gather for social events. The Second World War (1939-1945) ended the depression everywhere else but didn't cause a great rush of men or women leaving the islands to join the war effort although a respectable number did go. Nor did it cause a boom as had the First World War. What did happen was an influx of military personnel at Alliford Bay in response to a perceived threat from Japan and a modern airport facility was built in Sandspit.

5. The Pessimistic Years: 1946-1960

Although the end of the war did not bring a boom, it did see economic growth and prosperity in the outside world. Growth was much slower on the island but while the forest, fishing and mining industries began to grow, agriculture continued to decline. In 1949 Ernie Perlstrom and his uncle, John Hagemann bought Caesar Ver Heyden's land and cattle at the Oeanda from the government agent in Prince Rupert after Caesar died with no heirs. They slaughtered and butchered 40,000 pounds of beef for which they received \$5000.00. Ernie left the islands and gave his share of the land and remaining cattle to his uncle who took only a couple each year for his own use from then on.

By 1952 the Field Crops Commissioner noted that there was very little farming on the islands and that many former farms were abandoned. There were seven actual farming families: the Evans and the Dunroes on either side of the Kumdis Divide, the Geigeriches at Cape Ball and Clay Hill, the Beitushes, the Richardsons and the Andrews in Tlell and the Mathers in Sandspit although there were others with much smaller operations who were still growing produce and a some livestock. By the end of 1952 one of the more successful farms, the Evans farm, was sold to Macmillan Bloedel's logging company and

the family moved to Richmond. The Commissioner also noted the dismal prospect of successful agriculture due to the cool climate, and the cost of land clearing, drainage and soil amendments, but the biggest problem was the lack of markets. The local population had shrunk to about 2500 people and the cost of transportation to the outside markets was prohibitive. Community stores were stocking their shelves with canned and dried foods from the mainland and unless people grew their own food, their diets were changing. The islands had not really caught up to the modern world in many ways. Although there was an airport, access by water was infrequent and somewhat unreliable. Highways connecting communities were not paved or even completed and graveled until 1958. The villages had electricity if they ran their own generators but the rural areas did not.

6. The New Beginning Years:1961-1975

The economic boom finally reached the islands. By 1969 there were new logging communities with families and a school at Moresby Camp (later moved to Sewell Inlet) and at Rennell Sound. There were similar mining communities at Tasu and Jedway. A large logging community grew in Juskatla which caused a rapid expansion in Port Clements while Queen Charlotte City and Sandspit also experienced similar growth. This did not create any growth in the farming community however and in fact spurred further decline. Modern supermarkets appeared in Sandspit and Queen Charlotte City and a Co-op store served Masset. Other local stores hurried to compete. None sold local produce and direct farm sales had ended with two exceptions. The Mathers had a dairy in Sandspit *which had been operating since the mid forties. It was closed in 1970 and the land converted into a golf course. The Mathers operated a freight business which delivered their milk products as well as other freight to all island communities.* The Richardsons still sold beef in Tlell. Eggs and produce could be purchased if one knew from whom, but most islanders were now getting all their food from the store. It was more convenient. Work in the forest or fishing industries was preferable to farm work for no profit. By 1970 most farms were maintained as rural residences or sold for non-farm purposes while others were simply abandoned. A few were kept by off-island owners for sentimental or speculative reasons such as the former Prettyjohn market garden on the Inside Road behind Lawn Hill.

However there were still some optimists in the outside world who believed in the agricultural potential of the islands and were also attracted by the island lifestyle. The Leach family bought a former homestead at Clay Hill and had a relatively successful market garden underway by 1960. That was the year Jim Abbott took out a 320 acre agricultural lease straddling the highway northwest of the Tlell River Bridge. Doug Leach started publishing the Observer newspaper on his property in 1969 while Jim started a sawmill on his but they both continued their agricultural efforts. Doug even ran a weekly column of gardening advice while Jim purchased a herd of cattle from North Beach and pastured them along the beach from the Tlell to Cape Ball as well as taking advantage of the open range along the highway. North of Port Clements, Dick Ward started a pig farm but that closed down in the early 70's.

Out on the mainland the sixties saw the advent of the "hippie" movement in which young people disillusioned with the commercial culture of the older generation, sought a simpler

lifestyle. Part of this philosophy manifested itself in a “back to the land” movement. Several of these young people including draft dodgers from the States and city kids from every province, heard about and migrated to the isolation and simple lifestyle on the Queen Charlottes. They spread over the islands looking for abandoned homesteads or crown land which they could buy if they had money, or squat on if they didn’t. Some pooled their resources and bought land which they shared though seldom communally. They all grew gardens, lived very simply, mostly off the grid, in cabins or shacks they built with found materials and imagination. They started a food co-op to import staples unavailable in local stores. The locals sometimes welcomed, usually tolerated but also treated with contempt a group of people espousing a pioneer lifestyle they had worked hard to escape.

In 1970 the District Agriculturalist’s report was as pessimistic as was the Field Crop Commissioner’s eighteen years earlier. He noted that no farmer could make a living without an outside income.

7. The Settling In Years: 1976-1990 .

In 1976, the Farmers Institute reported on the limited agriculture on the island with only cattle ranching and potatoes grown for sale. There was a local market for beef and up to 90 animals were butchered from a population of approximately 140. Numerous private gardens were producing well. The high cost of importing food should have ensured a place for agriculture on the island but what was lacking was encouragement and cooperation from the government. This was reiterated by Bill Davies the potato producer who reported on the high cost of production during his short attempt at commercial potato farming from 1974-1976. Two acres produced 32,000 pounds in one year but could not compete with government subsidized growers outside.

What the government did do for the islands was to close the open range. Livestock were first banned in Naikoon Park which was established in the mid seventies over the whole northeastern portion of Graham Island from Tlell to North Beach including Meyer Lake and much previously homesteaded land. The next closure included free range on crown land along the highway. For Adolf Bitterlich this ended his venture to raise purebred Haflinger horses and all twenty were shipped off the islands. For Jim Abbott as well, the end of open range was the end of his cattle business but his family continued to farm for themselves as did all the new settlers, who by now had also established themselves in the local economy as professionals, fishers, tradespersons or small business owners.

Everyone involved in growing food was hobby farming or home gardening. Even the most viable agricultural family, the Richardsons, added a veterinary clinic and feed store to supplement their income from the ranch.

Private land was at a premium and was being sold in Tlell and North Beach to logging companies, logged, subdivided and resold in many cases for retirement or vacation property. *The von Gerlof property in Tlell was an example of this trend. However, before illness forced him to sell his Tlell River Lodge and Farm, the baron von Gerlof came very close to starting a deer farm. His connections found markets for venison in Vancouver and other major centers and probably helped secure one of the last agriculture leases that were issued in the mid eighties. He had negotiated an agreement in principle to use*

as his breeding stock the introduced species of Blacktail deer that had been brought to the islands just after the turn of the century. However this last ambitious farming venture died with him. In general though, farming was being discouraged by many factors, not the least of which was the growing scarcity of farmland. By 1990, at the request of the Haida, no more crown land could be alienated. Pressure to further subdivide larger private holdings was resisted at the community level.

The Farmers Institute continued to be very active during this period despite its small membership, seldom more than thirty individuals, of both established families and “newcomers”. They kept agriculture in the minds of island residents with the Fall Fair and 4H and for themselves held workshops, lobbied the government on behalf of its members, assisted in bulk purchase of agricultural products and purchased some equipment for community use.

Perhaps the most valuable legacy from the Farmers Institute of this era was the sponsoring of a study of food production on the Charlottes which was written by David Phillips and Jane Kinegal. It was published by Friends of the Library in Masset in 1986 under the title Growing Food on the Queen Charlotte Islands and contains information on what can be grown and how to grow it from the practicing growers’ point of view. When the BC ferries established regular service for the islands in the early eighties, it increased islander’s access to imported food with which local food could not compete. Local markets for agricultural products almost disappeared with the economic downturn in the mid eighties. Outlying logging and mining communities were abandoned and many families left in search of work elsewhere. Commercial food production was almost nonexistent.

Many of the hippy immigrants of the 70’s however had settled in and made the islands their permanent home as most of them chose not to depend on resource industry employment. They started raising families and their social and environmental values began to have an impact on island culture.

8. The Changing Years: 1991- 2005

Environmental values were also having an impact on the world outside and they caused serious social divisions in all communities whose economy was resource based including the Charlottes. Gradually however a paradigm shift in favor of the environment was taking place on the islands. Assisted by the growing Haida population whose numbers by now were moving to equal the non-Haida population, South Moresby’s old growth forest was protected in Gwaii Haanas, a new national park.

A greater environmental awareness was also taking place world-wide concerning pollution and global warming and island residents for the most part, but not without some controversy, supported protecting the environment. The fishing industry was the first to feel the effects of diminishing resources. It also became evident that the forest was not sustainable either and the down turn in that industry added to that of the fishing industry reduced the work force by several hundred families and caused their subsequent exodus from local communities and loss of business for local stores.

The Farmers Institute brought Alisa Smith and J. B. MacKinnon to the Fall Fair. In 1997 the couple had published The 100-Mile Diet: A Year of Local Eating. At the time they

spoke to the largely converted crowd at the fair, no-one had any faith that this book would cause a world-wide shift in thinking about food, but it did.

The awareness of pollution and global warming was leading many people to serious concerns over their food supply and they began questioning the effects that chemical additives and food processing were having on their own health as well as the environment. This concern was shared by island residents and led to the opening of organic food stores in Queen Charlotte and Tlell. It also led to other island stores adding a few organic foods to their regular inventory

Starting in 1994, Willing Workers on Organic Farms (WOOFers) were introduced to the islands by Lynda Dixon and Laird Bateham of Maude Island Farms. Because farmers were still working off the farm to support it, many of them followed suit and welcomed “woofer” help which allowed them to produce more. The customer base slowly grew with people’s increasing awareness of the health benefits of locally produced, unprocessed and organic food.

There was a growing demand for not only organic produce but for fresher produce than was imported from distant producers. The summer visit of Joes Fruit Truck with BC fruit and some produce which he had begun in the 90s, inspired “Island Joe”, Dr. George Pattison, to start his tomato greenhouse business in 1998. The tomatoes were sold first at the Queen Charlotte Farmers Market and later in local stores. The Farmers Market, which had been started by Maude Island Farms in 1994, became a weekly event in the summer. By 1998 other producers like Pat Fricker of Port Clements had become regular vendors. It was at this time that Maude Island Farms began to use a direct marketing approach, popular in other areas, which was to supply a pre-paid box of produce a week to customers around the islands. Maude Island Farms was an inspiration for local producers to provide food for local consumption. They have also inspired apprentices in the “Stewards of Irreplaceable Land” program and were the first (and only) farm to become organically certified in 2000. Other market gardeners such as Bill Mackay in Tlell began to find a greater market for their organic vegetables and eggs which became a feature in their organic food store. The Lavoie Family Farm, situated on Betty Lavoie’s grandparent’s homestead in Sewall, also produced eggs and produce which they sold from a truck or bus in the island communities. They also sold young poultry and livestock to the hobby farmers.

Nevertheless, these ventures were not profitable in a business sense due to the high cost of production leading to the necessarily high cost of locally produced food. Even organic foods in stores were more costly than non-organic. This discouraged a widespread change in eating habits. Consumers were still purchasing much if not all of their food from the non-organic aisles in the store and convenience food was still more convenient. *Still, the seeds have been sown and the profitability may be harvested in more than economics but rather in the health of islanders who are not only producers but the consumers of local produce as we move into the future.*

9. The Present and Future Years: 2006-2015

Although there is increased awareness and desire for food self sufficiency, sustainability and sovereignty, as evidenced by the combined number of almost 200 members of the old

Farmers Institute and the new Island Foods there are many obstacles to reaching any of those goals. The reality of food production on the island has not immediately shown much progress in spite of FI/IF optimism. The obstacles that impeded production in the past have not been removed and indeed, some have been added.

The climate provides a longer growing season but fewer hours of direct sunlight. If there is more sun, it means less rain and water shortages ensue. There is a limited number of produce choices that are consistently successful and grains are consistently unsuccessful (there are of course exceptions to both success and failure). The rain tends to leach nutrients from the soil which must be replaced. Minimal frost encourages weeds and insect pests, many of which were introduced and thrive in this climate. The deer are still damaging crops that aren't protected by sturdy (costly) fencing. Introduced raccoons are equally problematic for poultry. Animal food is also difficult to provide year around within the limits of most private holdings. Demand for organic as well as fresh produce and animal products, necessitates environmentally friendly soil amendments, herbicides, pesticides and animal feed. Food production is therefore labor intensive and expensive. Mechanization may reduce labor but increases the carbon footprint and may not be sustainable as it relies of course, on imported fuel. Land availability is still subject to the limitations imposed by the past. If available land is not already under cultivation it is covered by forest (which does grow exceedingly well under our climate conditions). The cost of bringing such land into production (after purchase) is roughly \$10,000 per acre. Under current economic expectations such investments cannot be recovered let alone made profitable. The call for government assistance and intervention in the past is even more relevant today.

Food self sufficiency, sustainability, and sovereignty will also require a culture change to come into being. For some, their philosophy supports this change but it is currently almost impossible to live according to the philosophy without some painful sacrifices. The majority of the population would now prefer fresh organic food but the most painful sacrifice is the cost and of course there are the foods they are used to which just can't be produced here.

Slowly however, society is influencing its governments to act on the desire to eat more healthy foods and here on Haida Gwaii, government grants are being given to support more consumption of fresh local and provincial produce. In Tlell that has taken the form of the establishment of a small produce storage facility.

The Misty Isles Economic Development Society has commissioned this history in 2010. At the time of writing some promising steps toward the goal of local food production are in evidence. Local businesses are pioneering ways to preserve and process local foods. Island Meat and Sausage Company in Port Clements and Haida Gwaii Culinary Cooperative in Queen Charlotte are two such examples. They are currently working on marketing strategies to make their businesses profitable.

An interesting phenomenon has grown from the Lavoie Family Farm whose lifestyle and beliefs allowed them to be almost fully self-sufficient. They became Mennonites and their presence has encouraged other Mennonite families to settle on land north of Port Clements some of which was once the old pioneer Dunroe farm. Because of their culture, Mennonites have a reputation for their agricultural success. If that is the case here, their surplus products may be of benefit to and an example for other island residents.

Island Foods and Farmers Institute held a potluck fall supper of locally grown, raised or gathered food in the fall of 2010. The guest speaker was Cathleen Kneen, world-renowned advocate of local food production and critic of industrial farms, who encouraged the members in their endeavors. Her talk was a reminder of an adage from the past that indeed “the times they are a-changing”. Will we be ready?

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