On the cover of Farms, Farmers and Farming, the first 80 years of Agriculture on Salt Spring Island, written by Mort Stratton, the photograph on the cover is of a typical turn-of-the-century Salt Spring Island farm house — square and boxy, clad in white-painted siding. These were the early days of farming on Salt Spring, with oxen and draft horses, split-rail fences and ragtag kids in hand-me-down overalls with a chore-list much more daunting than downloading a few tunes onto their iPhones. In the background, the Burgoyne Valley stretches away towards Mount Maxwell, a sea of freshly cleared fields punctuated with boulders and stumps, the land wrested from the brooding rain forest with little more than raw muscle, sheer determination and dreams of a better life.

“That was my house,” Val Hughes tells me as we sit having coffee at Dagwood’s restaurant. “That was my home on the cover of the book.”
"I was living in Fulford Harbour with my mom and dad when I met Roger Hughes," Val continues. "The year was 1961 and I was 20 years old. We lived right behind Paterson's Store, which is now the Mercantile in Fulford Harbour. That's the house I moved to when we got married."

The Hughes family had been in England before coming to Canada and starting a dairy farm in the Fraser Valley near Langley. Roger’s parents had visited Salt Spring and were much impressed with the Burgoyne Valley. They moved here and bought what had been the Reid’s dairy farm, bringing some of their cows from their Langley dairy, adding to the herd on Salt Spring until they had around 80 cows, black-and-white Holsteins.

“They are very good milk producers,” Val says.

Val and Roger were married in 1961, and Val moved the two miles up the valley to the farm which was located right behind where the little white United church stands today. The old house is still there (now with porch and addition) beside a more recently built house nearby. Their old dairy barn is gone.

Val says, “My son went into the old house and had a look around. It has been renovated, but still holds lots of memories. It has lots of history. Mac Mouat is said to have been born there. I still have a bundle of the old newspapers from the 1930s that lined the walls of some of the rooms for insulation.”

Val’s father, Fred Hollings, had come to Salt Spring in 1941. He was a successful logging contractor. He had planned to stay a year but, like so many of us, he succumbed to the island’s charms and stayed. He did well and owned 600 to 700 acres on Mount Bruce, and another several hundred acres at the foot of Mount Erskine. The Mount Bruce land was to make him famous, but he had no way of knowing that when he bought it.

“Life on a dairy farm is hard,” says Val, “and ours was no exception. Aside from the rigorous twice-daily milking schedule, I remember nights we had to get up and chase the cows off Fulford-Ganges Road, or out of our garden. I’ll never forget my daughter, Paula, in her gumboots and PJs, in middle of the night, trying to repair the damage the
“THOSE DAYS WERE SO DIFFERENT. WHEN IT SNOWED, THE BIG KIDS WOULD PUSH THE SCHOOL BUS UP LEE’S HILL.”
— VAL HUGHES

cows had done to her little patch of garden.

“But for the kids, for the most part, it was a great life. Aside from our garden and the crops we grew to feed the cows, mainly hay and cow-corn for silage, we also grew corn for sale. The kids helped tend our farm-stand. We staggered the planting so we had fresh corn nearly all summer long for a dollar a dozen. Of that the kids got 10 cents a dozen. They learned how to deal with people and how to deal with money. The neighbourhood kids were never far away, building tree forts and roller-skating along Fulford-Ganges Road. Those days were so different. When it snowed, the big kids would push the school bus up Lee’s Hill. Can you imagine them doing that today?"

As well as 80 milking cows, the farm had a few hundred chickens.

“I remember being pregnant and every night washing dozens of eggs, along with all the dairy’s milk bottles,” says Val. “For a while, we had an old English farmhand. Every day he would get a glass of fresh warm milk and break a freshly laid egg into it and drink it right down. I still shudder when I think of it, and I still don’t like runny eggs. We also raised meat birds and kept pigs. I recall one chicken that weighed 12 pounds — as big as a young turkey! It was a good life. For a long time after I left the farm it would really upset me to go by and see it. Growing up, the kids never got bored and they all learned a really good work ethic.”

Living in the old farmhouse, as picturesque as it might sound, posed its own challenges.

“I raised our four kids there, and I’m surprised the house didn’t burn down like so many of Salt Spring’s other original buildings, including the Fulford Hall, Beaver Point Hall and the old Fulford inns. The chimney of the wood stove would glow cherry red in winter. It was right near a wall of well-aged wood. Fire scares me, but it didn’t seem to bother my husband. I’d get my dad to check it out. He was a volunteer fireman until age 75.”

The Hughes’ Burgoyne Dairy was one of several operating around that time. There was Luton’s dairy on Blackburn Road, Cunningham’s near Central, Shaw’s across from Fulford Hall, Heinekey’s in Vesuvius, Crawford’s on Beddis Road and Harkema’s at Fernwood. Some of these dairies were small, with only eight or 10 cows, so even with all this competition the Hughes delivered milk all over the island. They also had a good quota with Island Farms, and later acquired Cunningham Dairy’s quota to add to it.

To handle 80 milking cows, automation was essential. At first the automatic milking machines were emptied into buckets. Later on a piping system was installed that took the milk directly to the cooler.
“We grew 15 to 20 acres of corn for silage and put up thousands of bales of hay every year,” says Val.

“In winter, the cows mainly stayed in a loafing barn, in summer they stayed pastured out, which meant less work. We had a bunker-silo for grass and corn silage, with molasses added. Our 80-year-old neighbour would come over and drive the tractor over it to pack it down. We bought alfalfa in the Interior and in Washington State, and bought our own truck, then several more. Our sons got into trucking. As well as for our own use, we sold alfalfa that we brought to Salt Spring Island.”

Val says, “When we sold the farm, I didn’t know how I was going to survive. As a school girl I’d worked summers in the ferry, Cy Peck’s coffee bar (the ferry held 12 cars) and the Pender Queen coffee shop, with its 30 to 40 cars, so that’s what I went back to. I worked at Nan’s coffee bar in Fulford (new Rock Salt café), at the golf course and at Greenwoods for 25 years. Often that was sad, seeing so many of the island’s old-timers taking their last long ride.”

One of the old-timers that never let age slow him down was Val’s father, Fred Hollings. Aside from his successful logging business, in 1950 he had discovered a large deposit of high-quality rhodonite on his Mount Bruce property. A semi-precious stone much in demand by jewellers and craftspeople, rhodonite is second only to jade in commercial importance in B.C. Over the years he developed his discovery and thousands of rock hounds came to Salt Spring to acquire the mineral, so much so that, according to an old Driftwood article, one day enough rock hounds had gathered at Swartz Bay that BC Ferries made a special run to Fulford to accommodate them all. At the same time, Lynn Matthews’ gift shop in Ganges became the largest supplier of rhodonite in B.C.

Eventually, all the old dairy farms on Salt Spring Island closed, in part due to changing government regulations to do with pasteurization, changing packaging requirements and increasing herd health regulations.

“At the time these changes were coming,” says Val, “the residents started a petition saying they didn’t want them. My kids were raised on unpasteurized milk and they all have really good teeth. I was raised on unpasteurized milk from the Shaw Farm on Fulford-Ganges Road. In the winter, the milk would freeze in the bottles and the cream would come up — we’d eat it with a spoon.

“Nowadays people talk about sustainability in Salt Spring agriculture. We had it, and my family and I were part of it.”

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