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"COLONIST"

LOC: FARMERS
MARKETS

FRESH FROM THE FARM

FARMERS MARKETS OF THE COWICHAN VALLEY

RUBBER BOOTS AND BIRKENSTOCKS, fancy hikers and high heels, all manner of footwear is evident today at the New Duncan Farmers' Market. Children in bright coats tap their feet to the country music or clutch mothers' hands, people are admiring a bright array of begonias bursting from handmade planters.

"I love being outdoors, looking at all the people in the community, and seeing all the products and colors," says Kary-I Littlechild as she samples emu jerky being sold at one of the stalls. "It really draws you in doesn't it?"

Summer is arriving in the Cowichan Valley, people have shed their slickers and risen out of their winter cocoons. On the weekend, after packing up the family

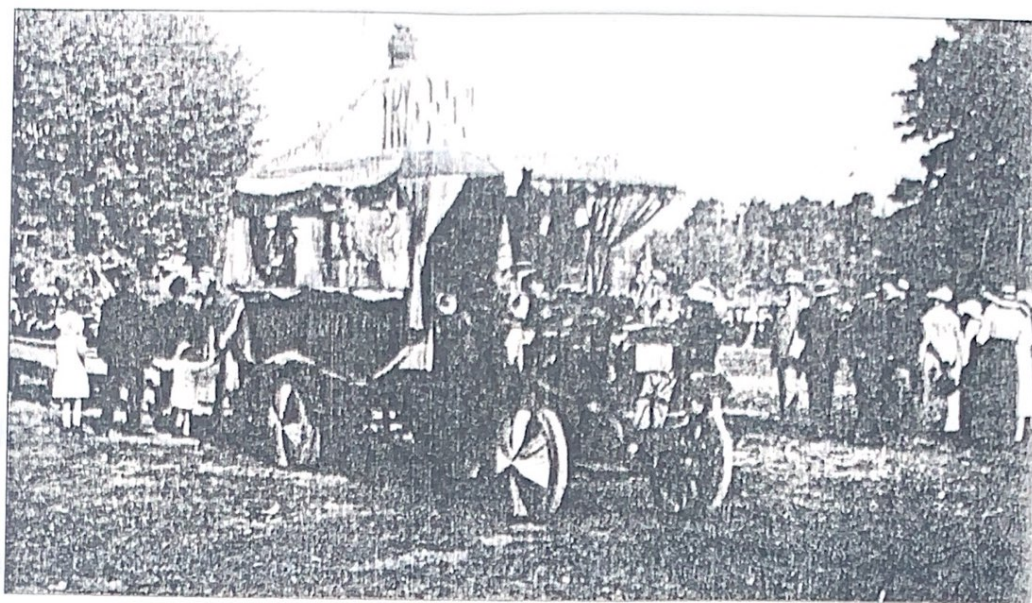
By Lynda Hills

or just the dog, visiting a farm market is a soothing interlude. A farm market also offers a look into a rural culture as well as providing more of a personal touch than a supermarket. "Not a faceless shelf," says Tom Provencal who comes frequently to the New Duncan Farmers' Market.



Rain doesn't stop the regulars from checking out the market stalls on a Duncan weekend.

LYNDA HILLS PHOTO



"Here you can talk to farmers and come into contact with the people who grow your food."

For some people, savings are important, others enjoy the feeling created by farm markets. Outdoor markets have an ambience and a sense of community that is sometimes lacking in a fast paced world.

Farm market produce is subject to the same regulations as produce sold in supermarkets, according to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. "The implication for farm markets is that the route is more direct, straight from the grower to the market," says Bill Slater, manager of the consumer products program. "In a supermarket, no one would know the in-depth history of the produce."

Slater notes that there is no difference in terms of what farm markets sell as far as advertising, quality and grades. "Claims such as free range, organic and fresh are all claims that have to be backed up," he says.

Farm markets are spread throughout the Cowichan Valley. One of the oldest sites for a market of this type is in downtown Duncan. This site, used for almost 85 years, is now home to the New Duncan Farmers' Market.

Run by the Cowichan Valley Smallholders Society, this market gives the opportunity for people who have small farms of five or 10 acres to sell their wares. "The needs of a small farm are different," says manager Sue Wells, as she stands next to some bird condominiums swinging in the wind. "Small nurseries, farms or green houses may have multiple crops, organic and sometimes specialized products. They need a place to market their crop on a smaller scale."

Produce at this farm market is local and is often picked that day, changing according to the season. Treasures found at the market might include native plants, bedding out plants, hand sewn clothes, jewelry, bread and eggs, garden furni-

ture and wildflowers. In the right season you can observe a demonstration hive brought by a local beekeeper. It all depends on who will bring their wares to market on that day.

WELLS feels that people get an added richness when they come to a farm market, as well as the experience of meeting another kind of person. "You can talk to the farmer and find out how the tomato you are buying was grown, get a recipe or a special story," she says. "When you go home that memory stays with you and the character of the person comes to your table."

Farmers' markets have existed for centuries. Throughout Europe every town had a market place where people could also meet friends and neighbors, she says. It's all part of a human tradition.

Zoe Bradshaw sits atop her father David's shoulders and surveys the scene. "We like the ambience here," says David. "It's nice to see what humans make, not machines." Bradshaw also feels a farm market has a lot of culture. Gary Mason visiting from Chilliwack with his family agrees with him. "At a farm market you can see vendors and handcrafters selling their wares personally."

Merna Jean Moffat has been coming to the New Duncan Farmers' Market for about five years. "You can find things here that you can't find in a nursery, it's an interesting place," says Moffat. "It's very entrepreneurial, people making a living with their own ideas." Moffat notes that the plants she has bought here grow better because they are locally grown.

Debra Smith agrees with the fresh feeling of farm markets. "Even though the fruits and vegetables may not be organic, it just feels as if they are better for you," she says. Smith enjoys the bright colors and outdoors atmosphere. "It fits in with my commitment to eat better and healthier."

The main event on Cowichan Valley farmers' calendars is, of course, the fall fair which has been running since at least 1868. In the photo at left, the Cowichan Merchants' department store truck is decorated for the fair in 1915 or 1916.

— Cowichan Historical Society photo,
No. 991.03.1.1

Some farm markets have grown into year round permanent establishments, and still try to reinforce the outdoor, country feeling. Surrounded by bins of red, yellow and green peppers, Dave Boyd talks about the family business, Russell Farms, that has been on the corner of Mount Sicker Road and the Trans Canada Highway for 35 years. Started by Lawrence and Kate Stewart, the market used to be at the back of the Red Rooster Cafe. Last year, Lawrence's nephew Dave Boyd and partner Theresa Shelley expanded the market to what it is now. Formerly a small produce stand, it now includes a deli and bread section, and a small cafe as well as the produce section. In the summer time, you can see up to 20 people wearing broad-brimmed straw sun hats in nearby fields as they pick produce for the market.

Boyd considers Russell's to be an old-style market with a homier atmosphere. "People strive for fresh fruit and produce," he says. "It seems to be the trend now." In the growing season, 60 per cent of produce sold is grown by Russell Farms. Additional produce is bought from local suppliers when possible. "There are special growers all around the valley that sell to us," he says. "People want and ask for local produce."

COUNTRY music, wicker and Chinese fans, wreaths and the enticing smell of apples are also a part of The Old Farm Market. Trevor Patterson is a member of this family-run farm market started by his mother-in-law, as a summer business and now operated year-round. The antiques hanging from the rafters and sitting on top of displays were collected by his father-in-law Mike Langtry. Mike died in the fall, but his family still tries to give people in the Cowichan Valley atmosphere, friendly staff and fresh products.

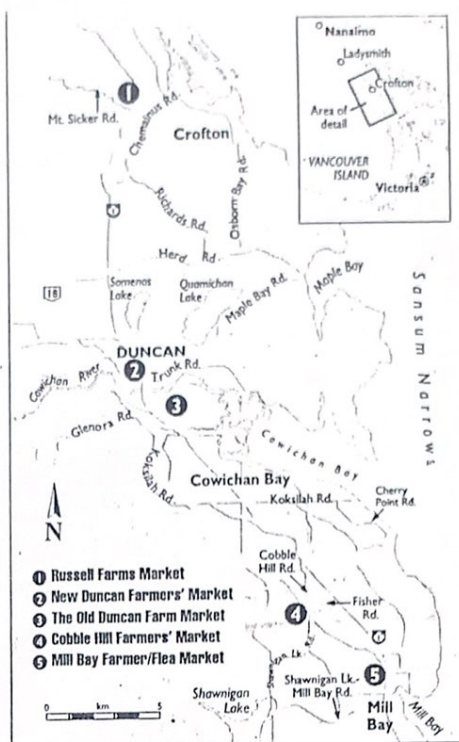
"In the summer, about 80 per cent of our produce is locally grown," says Patterson. "In the winter, it's just not as available." Patterson notes that people are looking for a more enjoyable experience when they shop for themselves and their families. "Our deli counter is popular because you can see all the fresh things right in front of you," he says. "It's the personal touch that people look for."

Farm markets give a huge range of pleasure. Everyone comes for their own reasons, but all agree that they are finding a way back to a simplicity that has disappeared from their lives.

Farm markets provide healthy food choices, a break from routine and contribute to community spirit. A chance to greet friends, getting good value for your money and a few moments to enjoy the local arts are also part of this holistic experience.

As Kary-I leaves the market with daughter Tammy, she excitedly holds up a package with a small pine tree inside. "They're giving them away free," she says. Everyday? "Oh no," says Littlechild. "Just today, you never know what you'll find. I can't wait to plant it."

Lynda Hills lives in Duncan and shops regularly at the farm markets herself.



Home-made produce offers a taste of something different.