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Being Neighbours: Cooperative Work and Rural Culture, 1830-1960

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Content

1. Abstract	3
2. Script	3
3. References and Credits	8
4. Further Reading	9

1. Abstract

Neighbourhood is assumed to be at the heart of rural life, yet we have little understanding of how it worked. It was the most immediate set of relationships beyond the family, smaller in size than community, and considered to be so ordinary as to be un-noteworthy.

This video enters the heart of neighbourhood through the study of cooperative work and is based on farm diaries accessible at the Rural Diary Archive (<https://ruraldiaries.lib.uoguelph.ca/home>). Canadian farm families relied on their neighbours' help to clear land, raise barns, and harvest crops, and returned the favour when asked. This was known as "neighbouring" and the event was called a "Bee," as they worked like bees in a hive, distributing energy, equipment, and skill around the neighbourhood and reinforcing bonds. Such arrangements have come to symbolize the good old days of neighbourliness, but they were neither natural nor simple. To ensure the satisfactory operation of neighbouring, households engaged in complicated labour exchanges governed by an unwritten code of behaviour. On occasion, they used gossip, storytelling, ostracism, even brute force, demonstrating that a cohesive, functioning neighbourhood involved negotiation, flexibility, surveillance, confrontation, and reconciliation. As a result, neighbourhood emerged as a powerful force in their lives.

2. Script

00:11

Scholars have studied diverse examples of cooperative work from the peat and seaweed harvesters in Scotland and Ireland, to maize and cotton farmers in Kenya, to families in Germany, Finland, Norway, and Sweden who cooperated to spin or supervise brewing and animals giving birth. Internationally this labour is associated with relatively equal, small scale, autonomous households, with farms large enough to require assistance at peak periods of production, and with a scarcity of landless labourers for hire.

00:55

My study in the southern part of the province of Ontario fits this description. In Ontario, where mixed farming predominated until the 1960s, neighbours worked together when a task was labour intensive, time sensitive, required combined strength or a wide range of expertise. They called this work a "Bee," as people worked like bees in a hive. Early settlers used cooperative work to establish farms out of the forest by clearing fields and raising buildings, and by the 1850s, they were starting to use new machinery as it became available. Bee workers sped up production by hauling produce to the threshing machine, and then, in later years, the hay press and buzz saw, and these were usually operated by custom operators. Cooperative work ranged from this "exchange labour" between small groups for routine seasonal tasks such as threshing to much larger "festive labour" groups that were called to raise a barn.

02:11

My study contributes to the international literature on cooperative work by situating it within the household economy and exploring the nature of the exchange. It also brings together the separate literatures on cooperative work and neighbourhood.

02:29

Cooperative work condensed and distributed energy, equipment, and skill around the neighbourhood, delineating its geography. And in the process, participants created a sense of belonging, a local resource, knowledge born out of working together, and a code of behaviour.

It's no wonder that the "Bee" was also referred to as "neighbouring."

02:58

A neighbourhood is a smaller unit than community. The small number of studies of neighbourhood usually focus on urban centers. I would argue that it was even more important in rural areas, but it was considered to be so ordinary – this idea of neighbouring – that an understanding of it has slipped away

with the oral culture of previous generations. Farm families relied on this form of labour for the basis of production and attended on average about ten bees every year. Even when cash became more prevalent in the twentieth century, farmers continued to exchange labour to reduce the cost, time, and uncertainty of having to hire labour just when others were competing for it too, especially during harvest time. They preferred to use their cash to purchase store goods, equipment, livestock, and land. And surrounded by other farm households in a similar position, they had easy access to help from people they knew and trusted.

04:13

I argue that though bees have come to symbolize the good old days of neighbourliness, peoples' cooperation was not natural or simple, because it involved families balancing their individual needs with responsibility to neighbours. As a result, neighbouring involved negotiation, flexibility, surveillance, confrontation, and reconciliation. Neighbourhood emerged as a powerful force in their lives.

04:46

Diary entries like these formed the basis of my analysis:

Elizabeth Simpson, June 4th, 1878:

(Voice Actor) "Minnie went to W H Hunters... they have raised two barns, and had a bee for hauling brick, also a bee to make a tufted quilt, there were a great number of people there about two hundred sat down to dinner, Salisbury had a team there and the other boys were at the raising."

Elizabeth Simpson, Friday the 8th of August 1879:

(Voice Actor) "Our folks purpose [sic] threshing tomorrow so we are busy preparing ... Made nineteen apple and cherry pies this afternoon.

Saturday, the 9th

(Voice Actor) "I do not know how I should have done if Minnie had not come to help me, she put the carpet down in the dining room, which looks nicer than ever, and hung the pictures. They threshed barley till teatime and fall wheat afterwards."

Thomas Niblock, 1850:

(Voice Actor) "If you suppose that neighbours help one another in these things for nothing, you are very much mistaken."

James Carpenter, 28 February 1881:

(Voice Actor) "John Carpenter helped me fore noon. Made him an axe handle and called it square."

06:14

Members of a bee network were constantly creating their neighbourhood from the inside, one that was dynamic and whose boundaries changed as people moved in and out, owing to age and transience. Men were far more involved in the bee network than women, though women had their own special, specific, female bees and organized mixed bees for youth. Diary analysis revealed who formed the core of these work groups and how membership was not haphazard or all inclusive.

06:49

Walter Hope's bee network is a good example of this. His network was limited to people who were close enough to transport horses and machinery. So, the network usually extended in a radius of anywhere from two to six kilometers. And his farm and his neighbours appear in the orange here (referring to map at 00:00). Physical distance also featured and limited the network. You can see here that there were rivers on either side of the road that created barriers for membership extending much beyond the road itself. There were barriers of human geography too. Hope preferred to work with his Protestant neighbours, here in orange, and did not extend his network northward to include Irish Catholics, featured here as the black dots. Most members had relatively equal-sized farms, so that it was easy to balance the exchange. Finally, the core of the bee network was defined by people with similar work ethics and commitment, who were known and who were reliable. This was to guard against free-riders – or free-loaders – who might ask others to help but give shoddy work in return.

08:15

Members of a bee network performed their work publicly, rotating to different farmsteads, woodlots,

and kitchens, discussing, and scrutinizing each other, and, as a result, they developed reputations, trust, and a changing participatory knowledge. They learned who was the strongest, who had the specialized knife or cauldron, who could be trusted to return borrowed items, and who might be careless or who would lose their temper in the heat of the moment.

They became structurally dependent on each other, as their neighbourhoods were more self-sufficient in labour, skills, and machinery than any individual household. They also developed an ideology of close association, the belief that more benefits accrued to one's life in a mutual relationship with neighbours than by remaining aloof. Few wanted to risk alienating their neighbours because that could be costly financially and socially.

09:26

For mutuality to work, they needed to have a shared understanding, a code of reciprocity, something more practical than the Bible's message of "Love thy Neighbour." The code was that if you wanted to benefit from cooperative labour, you needed to be willing to contribute labour cheerfully to others when called upon and respect their property and person.

09:55

The main criticism of exchange work involved returning the labour. It might be inconvenient when you were called upon or take you away from more important tasks on your own farm.

Diarists were very alert to this issue and used their diaries to record the exchanges. For example, William Beaty in 1849 wrote this in his diary, recording the labour that he gave to others: "Jock goes to George Toes Dung Bee", and for the labour he received from his neighbours, he wrote: "Thomas Davis sent his horses and son to Plow." So, he was recording the type of work done because logging, for example, was far more intense than a paring bee or a corn husking bee. He was identifying the person sent because people in the household offered different qualities of workmanship and could be spared to different degrees from the home farm. And he noted the time spent away which usually was a half or a full day. In short, he was aware of the opportunity costs.

11:12

Diaries show that household heads reduced the opportunity costs by sending a surrogate, usually that was a grown son so that the household head could continue with farm management tasks and trading in town. Benjamin Crawford did this. His sons began going to bees for their dad around the age of fourteen and they continued to do this until marriage, and they set up their own homes. So, we see (on the line graph 00:00) Augustus, George, and Charles going to bees and then when they marry, marked by the heart, Daniel takes their place until he marries. Families with grown sons were some of the biggest players in the bee network.

George Holmwood sent his son to – get this – 180 out of 200 bees over a thirty-three-year period from 1893 to 1926.

12:15

People also used substitute payments because rarely did a double-coincidence-of-want exist on mixed farms which made it hard to quickly "square" things in a simple manner – i.e., you came to my logging bee, so I'll go to yours. Instead, debts lingered, and they got settled over time in a loose way, tying people together over the years and drawing other family members into the exchange. James Cameron lived on Island and bee-ed with a diverse group of people, Protestants and Catholics of Irish, Scottish, and French-Canadian origin and Indigenous men who lived on a nearby reserve. Of the nineteen families he neighbored with, only the six here in the blue strip (referring to table at 13:15) were repaid with bee labour. The other thirteen families were repaid in ways that were more convenient for James Cameron and reflected his skills in the neighbourhood and what his helpers needed. So, the three Nicholsons who came to Cameron's husking bee were repaid later when Cameron lent his saw and gun and carted three loads of straw for them. In a loose sort of way, things evened out. Mr. Hamilton came to Cameron's sawing bee and in return Cameron sent his sister and niece to help dig Hamilton's potatoes. The voluntary and flexible nature of neighbouring is really key to understanding why it was successful and persisted on farms, as they became more market oriented and capitalized.

14:14

As a code of reciprocity governed the work, it also extended to the feast that followed. The feast was the first instalment in the payback system. It was the highlight of the day, the central element of the day, and it had ritual significance as people sat arranged in a democratic fashion, temporarily setting aside what hierarchies might exist.

14:43

Whether feeding fifteen threshers or two hundred assembled at a barn raising, hosts were expected to do their best and guests knew what their neighbours could afford. To provide a fitting feast, women combined thrift and hospitality, attempting to do their best but within their abilities and financial means and without overstepping neighbourhood standards. It was every woman's nightmare to run out of food, for generosity and abundance demonstrated gratitude to workers and neighbourliness. In fact, threshing crews were known to slow down or speed up their work in order to increase their chances of eating at a home where the food was known to be good. When a woman was a stingy hostess or deliberately tried to out-do other women in the neighbourhood, it promoted rivalry and bad feelings. It struck at the heart of neighbourliness, at notions of fair exchange and economy, and the willingness to work together.

15:54

Whether it was a lazy worker or bad food at a bee, men and women used gossiping and storytelling to regulate people's behaviour. They needed to be publicly cordial to each other while they were working together but they could express their opinions privately or in a humorous way to bring about conformity. When it came to food, exceptionally poor meals rapidly entered into the gossip mill and were sometimes retold for literally decades, as cautionary tales or to reinforce standards. One early twentieth-century story about a family from Toronto who moved to a farm and were stingy exists. Without understanding that beef roast was expected at the feast, they served boloney and the story ends in didactic fashion, noting that nobody ever came back to their farm to work. Another story from the same era recalled a woman in Mono Township who was prone to "putting on airs". She had bedecked her table with her finest linens and so the threshers wanted to teach her a lesson and when they sat down, they wiped their dirty hands on the linen. This story suitably ends with the "uppity" woman never "showing off" again.

17:24

When things went well, a bee created a strong sense of belonging. The barn raising, the largest bee, is a really fine example of this. Even though neighbours knew that the host family was the privileged one and would have the new barn, everything that day at the barn raising – the work and the festivities – downplayed individual gain and accentuated group cohesion. A bank-barn-building craze lasted from about the 1860s until World War I. Bank barns were expensive and by calling one hundred to two hundred men to raise the bents of the barn, you could reduce your labour costs substantially.

18:14

The raising was, indeed, a creative community act. It had a lot of visible power and drama that really served to pull people together and left a lasting memory. As the moment arrived to raise the bent, the men grew quiet. Then the framer yelled out "Yo Heave" and with sheer, combined strength, the bent was put in place. It was a thrilling sight and sound. In only a few hours, almost like magic, an imposing structure rose from the ground. This was festive labour. The host had a much weaker obligation to reciprocate than with a threshing, and hospitality and entertainment were the main forms of repayment.

19:10

Drama characterized the day and took a variety of forms. There was a profound sense of movement of people arriving, of throngs of men running along the beams, of crowds watching, and then the big rush to the table afterwards. With the bank barn's large, reinforced floor, barn dances were very popular right after the raising. Now these were not couple dances; they were "mixer" dances, dances where the dancers moved as part of a larger group and were always changing partners. Like the raising, this kind of dancing downplayed individual accomplishment and accentuated group coordination and cohesion.

20:03

Likewise, hundreds of photographs of the barn raising have survived and reflect the same sort of message. Owners are rarely given a separate identity. The individual family is, in fact, subordinated to the community in these images. This was a practical message as long as sharing labour was an integral aspect of the sustainability of individual households.

20:34

But there is a darker side to cooperative work and neighbourhood. A bee-gone-wrong could result in unwanted costs and conflict. Violence or careless behaviour were serious breaches in the code of reciprocity and required some kind of resolution. Most studies of dispute resolution focus on the courts and church, but neighbourhood itself could be a powerful force. The need to share resources and carry on with work put pressure on neighbours to find solutions and quickly restore their working relationships.

21:15

Accidents were most likely to occur at barn raisings where men could be injured or killed and threshing bees too were notorious for the death and maiming that they left in their wake, with victims being drawn into the blades of the cylinder. I have found one hundred threshing accidents and over half of them involved amputation or death. Accidents threw neighbourhoods into instant disarray. Workers were the first response team. They had to attend to the dead and bereaved. If negligence was suspected, then an inquest was called, and neighbours had to testify before outsiders. You can imagine that this was a situation fraught with ramifications for future relations. Not surprisingly, participants at the bee were tight-lipped and reluctant to assign blame. When Charles Danford was killed by a falling bent in 1876, evidence at the inquest revealed that the men had not kept aligned under the bent and it had shifted out of control. The jury cast suspicion on the man giving the orders. But witnesses refused to blame him. By denying or defusing blame, people could resume their working groups with less cost and breakdown of relations than proceeding through the courts. They focused instead on the victim. In some cases, they would support a widow and her children for years, holding bees to cut her firewood and harvest her crops. In this manner, the neighbourhood employed an informal type of restorative justice, which was really essentially about restoring reciprocity.

23:21

The same cannot be said about violence which clearly breached the code of neighbourly behaviour. In these tightly knit neighbourhoods, people needed to vent frustrations from time to time, and the bee provided a public venue where issues could come to a head in front of a valued audience. I have discovered many fights – and I've discovered seventeen cases of murder. At a bee, the opportunity to drink, boast, flirt, and compete, instilled high spirits, and created a very volatile atmosphere. Of course, avoiding a fight was the preferred route, but if a man was physically threatened, it was honourable for him to defend his reputation while he had an audience.

24:15

Violence had a rather ritualized pattern which suggests that, to a certain degree, it was tolerated and viewed as a socially useful way to vent pent up feelings and get on with work.

It wasn't unusual to find two adversaries who would fight for hours, while the other workers went about their work, taking it for granted that the men would eventually tire or settle. If violence resulted in serious bodily harm, then workers did as much as they could to contain collateral damage. They cared for the victims. They called the constables and the coroner.

Above all, they wanted to avoid the destructive cycle of vengeance whereby fear and suspicion could make working together nearly impossible in the future. Simple, swift reparations were desirable and sometimes a money payment was the answer. During a fight started by raftsmen at the Ferguson's wool-pulling bee, Mrs. Ferguson fled into the bush and then died of exposure.

Rather than going to court, Mr. Ferguson accepted money from the raftsmen. This was a way to avoid expenses and time away from his farm had he engaged in the court process, and it put an end to the affair.

25:49

Sometimes dysfunctional neighbourhoods existed where the distrust between people was so deeply ingrained that they were unable to “make things right” without resorting to retributive justice. The Donnelly family of Lucan were really the worst kind of neighbours you could have. They used fear, threats, and violence to influence people. The first really serious incident occurred in 1857 when James Donnelly murdered his enemy Patrick Farrell at a logging bee. The ensuing court case split the community into factions and fostered a cycle of vengeance for over twenty years, as enemies burnt barns and slit horses’ necks. Yet every year neighbours needed these strong-bodied Donnelly boys to help thresh, and they feared the consequences of excluding them. Then in 1879 the Donnellys sabotaged threshing bee equipment at three farms. That was the last straw, and they were expelled from the neighbouring network. None of their neighbours would work with them anymore. A vigilante committee was formed, and in the early hours of the 4th of January 1880, twenty men with blackened faces entered the Donnelly home and killed them. The community believed justice had been served and no one came forward at the trial to say otherwise, such was the power of neighbourhood.

27:32

Now, this was an extreme case. Most of the time, neighbours worked together very effectively in their bee networks. In trying to balance their own needs with obligations to neighbours, they created networks that were informal, flexible, diffuse, voluntary, and they abided by the norms and constraints that they had created themselves. These are the reasons cooperative labour remained popular until the 1960s and is fondly remembered. Neighbourhood was a powerful force in their lives.

3. References and Credits

3.1 Filmography

Being Neighbours: Cooperative Work and Rural Culture – Book Launch, January 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_ehToBpm-s

3.2 Images

The images used in this video essay are accessible via the following institutions:

- Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph
- Wellington County Museum and Archives
- Library and Archives Canada
- Region of Waterloo Museums & Archives
- University of Waterloo Library
- Harrow Early Immigrant Research Society (H.E.I.R.S.)
- Enterprise Information Management Services Division, Office of the City Clerk, City of Vaughan
- Elgin County Archives
- Markham Museum
- Stratford-Perth Archives
- Wallaceburg and District Museum
- Marjorie Clark

3.3 Written Sources

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Queen's University Press, Montreal and Kingston 2022. The film is based on this book which provides more detail and a full list of sources.

Many of the original diaries below are transcribed and searchable at the Rural Diary Archive, <https://ruraldiaries.lib.uoguelph.ca/home>.

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3.4 Acknowledgements

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4. Further Reading

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