

TURKEY FAIR

1879 - 1958

The *Perth Courier* front page headline of November 22, 1958 announced “*No Turkey Fair: Century Old Custom Abolished in Perth*”. The annual poultry market was actually ending two decades short of a full century, but the event had been such an important part of the seasonal cycle for so long that, in its absence, the run-up to Christmas would henceforth seem incomplete for the citizens of Perth and much of Lanark County.



Production of poultry in quantity, for export to Canadian cities and beyond, began on the township farms surrounding Perth over the decade following completion of the Brockville and Ottawa Railway in 1859 and the transport possibilities it presented. By the autumn of 1870, J. G. McRostie of Ogdensburg, New York, advertised in local newspapers that he was travelling across the district “*purchasing all kinds of good poultry for the Boston market*”.¹ In 1873 McRostie appointed a local agent, James Bothwell “*of the well-known Balderson store*”², to purchase fowl on his behalf. Bothwell’s advertisements and hand-bills set out guidance for farmers preparing of fowl for export.

They must be shut up where than can get nothing to eat for 18 hours, or until the crop is empty, before killing. Kill by bleeding in the neck; clean without scalding; before the bodies are cold, take the entrails out by cutting as small a hole as possible. Take nothing else out; cut off the head, wipe the blood clean from the neck, leave the feet on. Deliver as soon as you can after dressing and be careful not to let them freeze.

Bothwell further advertised that he would “*be at Hicks’ Hotel from 20th Nov. till the 9th Dec.; and at the Market House*³, Perth, on Wednesday 10th Dec. and Saturday 13th Dec., two Free Market days, with the cash”.

In the mid 19th century, every autumn, as temperatures dropped low enough to prevent spoilage and the Christmas season approached, wholesale buyers, local, national, and foreign, travelled the back-roads of Lanark County, and attended regular public market days in towns and villages across the district, assembling consignments of chickens, ducks, geese and above all turkeys to meet holiday season demand at Montreal and Toronto, and as far away as Boston and New York or Winnipeg, and Vancouver.

¹ *Perth Courier*, December 9, 1870.

² James Bothwell (1829-1887). Bothwell was also a blacksmith and carriage maker and sold agricultural implements.

³ The market sheds behind Town Hall.

THE PERTH

POULTRY FAIR!

—WILL BE HELD ON—

Friday & Saturday,

—THE—

9th & 10th December,

—WHEN—

**DENESHA,
WRIGHT,
DEWEY,**

And several other American and Canadian Buyers will be on hand.

—

A larger attendance of Buyers than usual is expected this year.

Sellers will please bear in mind that it will be greatly to their interest to bring in their Poultry well fattened, in good condition, and carefully and neatly dressed, in accordance with the usual instructions.

**ARTHUR
MEIGHEN &
BROTHERS.**

PERTH, December 16, 1898.

American buyers like McRostie competed with Perth merchants who also bought large amounts of poultry through the 1860s and 1870s. In 1876 Shaw, Matheson & McMaster⁴ offered to purchase “25 tons of good well-fatted turkeys and geese”, and in 1878 A. R. McIntyre & Co.⁵ advertised for “Turkeys, Geese & Ducks” delivered to their store at Middleville. McIntyre also solicited 2,000 partridge and 3,000 pounds of chickens⁶, boasting that “Our purchases last season were over 23,000 pounds and we hope to do better this season”.

At the end of the decade, when development of refrigerated steamships made it possible to ship poultry to the British Isles for the Christmas trade, demand for eastern Ontario poultry grew enormously.

*... a large export trade in turkeys has sprung up to Great Britain. One firm in Toronto bought 57,000 turkeys, and a Montreal house 67,000, all alive, for shipment to Britain, they being killed and plucked in those cities before shipping.*⁷

This explosion in demand tested the capacity of buyers to assemble large cost-effective consignments in a timely fashion. In an effort to meet that challenge more efficiently, a dedicated Perth Poultry Fair was born in December 1879 when the firm of Meighan & Bros. Ltd. took out newspaper advertisements informing their,

... customers and the public generally, that they have made arrangements with American buyers to hold a Poultry Fair in Perth, for two days ... Tuesday and Wednesday 9th and 10th December, when W. A. Denesha, N. R. Putman & Co. of Boston, and J. G. McRostie of Ogdensburg, as well as several other buyers, will be present. Look out for Dealers at Meighens' Corner.

‘Meighen & Bros. Ltd.’ was a mercantile enterprise founded in 1848 by Arthur Meighen (1826-1874) and expanded in partnership with his brothers William (1834-1917) and Robert (1837-1911) in 1867. The business operated from a retail store and warehouse occupying all three floors of the stone building on the

⁴ The merchant store of James Shaw & Sons amalgamated with that of Roderick Matheson in 1863, shortly after James Shaw’s son Henry, married Roderick Matheson’s daughter Flora Madeline. See *Liberal in Opinion, Broad in his Views* elsewhere on this website. John McMaster was a junior partner in the enterprise and would later open his own general merchandise store at Perth.

⁵ Alexander Robert McIntyre (1843-1909) operated a store at Middleville and was Reeve of Lanark Township.

⁶ McIntyre also wanted venison saddles.

⁷ Perth *Courier*, December 16, 1898.

northwest corner of Gore and Foster Streets⁸. As in the case of other local firms like 'Shaw, Matheson & McMaster', 'A. R. McIntyre & Co.', 'Wilson & Noonan', etc., for more than two decades Meighen Bros. had been significant buyers of individual lots of farm produce, including poultry, but staging a 'Poultry Fair' was a new approach.

When Meighen Bros. founded the Perth Poultry Fair, they were following the lead of nearby Smiths Falls where a successful poultry fair had been held annually from about the time of the coming of the railroad in 1859.⁹ Going into competition with the well established fair at Smiths Falls, and further facilitating direct trading between local poultry producers and large scale well capitalized buyers from Ottawa, Montreal, New York, and Boston, might have seemed likely to undermine the Meighen's own procurement and export operations, but the brothers knew their customers well.

From the earliest days of bartering eggs at the local general store, to the emergence of domestic and export markets for meat birds, raising poultry was primarily the business of farm women. The sleighs, wagons and buggies, and later trucks and cars, laden with freshly dressed fowl, may have been driven to Poultry Fair by husbands, but when parked along the curb around 'Meighen's Corner', it was the wives who haggled and made the sales.



Meighen Bros. Store, corner of Foster and Gore Streets

The turkey crop of this country is largely woman grown, for women have the patience and the capacity for detail which men lack.¹⁰

Friday will be a very busy day, being the one appointed for the turkey fair. Generally, that day is a very important one for the ladies of the surrounding country and they may be seen with their loads of poultry trying to secure the best possible returns for their labors in that line during the summer.¹¹

⁸ Currently occupied by Fashion Envy, Balderson Kids, and Perth Fashion Mill at street level and residential apartments on the second and third floors.

⁹ Although in his *History of Agriculture in Ontario 1613-1880*, Robert Leslie Jones (1946) dates the first Smiths Falls Poultry Fair to 1856.

¹⁰ *Perth Courier*, December 16, 1921.

¹¹ *Perth Courier*, December 10, 1897.

Whether a Perth merchant or Boston trader purchased her entire consignment, or a queue of local shoppers bought her birds one at a time, all paid in cash or by cheque drawn on a Perth bank. Women who had nurtured their chickens, ducks, geese, and turkeys since early spring had, simultaneously, been compiling a lengthy shopping list. Moreover, with Perth Poultry Fair always held during the week of December 15th, Christmas was fast approaching. When sales were complete and a satisfying weighty jingle filled her purse, the front door of the Meighen store was only a few steps away. For Meighen Bros. Ltd., any negative impact upon their wholesale poultry trade was more than compensated for in boosted merchandise retail sales, where risks were lower and profit margins greater.



The Meighen Bros. Ltd. gamble of 1879 proved so successful and profitable that the town's merchants soon banded together, through the Board of Trade and later the Merchant's Committee of the Chamber of Commerce, to promote the event jointly, ensuring that a poultry fair was held in the streets of Perth every year for the next 79 years.

The high prices ... were the drawing magnet to farmers 30 miles away, and the great opportunities the Perth merchants offer the housewife to replenish the family wardrobe and the kitchen larder were equally a strong inducement to come to Perth.¹²

The fair meant good business for the merchants and banks. Trading was good at all the stores, and paper was redeemed at the monetary concerns. In some of these, change, especially coppers, ran scarce.¹³

¹² Perth Courier, December 20, 1912.

¹³ Perth Courier, December 15, 1911.

The new Perth Poultry Fair attracted those farmers located at too great a distance for travel to Smiths Falls, as well as a good number who had once travelled there but found Perth more convenient. As the Perth fair became an institution, attracting an ever larger attendance by farmers and their cash-flush wives from ever greater distances, it set off a fierce competition with the older fair. In 1897 the *Perth Courier* lamented that reports published by the *Smiths Falls Record News* were designed, “*by spite or jealousy, to keep them [farmers and buyers] from here*”. Under the headline “*Un-Neighbourly*” the *Courier* charged that the *Smiths Falls* newspaper’s reporting was designed “*to belittle our poultry fair shows*” and demonstrated

... neither generosity nor truthfulness. It says that only about 10 tons of dressed poultry was sold here, whereas the figure was nearer 35 tons. Also, that prices ranged from 7 to 8 cents. This is also wrong. The price was 8 to 9 cents, with special lots going to 10 cents”.¹⁴

Taking the offensive on another occasion, the *Courier* insisted it would “*not hesitate to say that the Perth fair in all respects carried off the palm from any other in the country, whether the quantity bought is considered, the quality of the stock, or the prices paid.*”



Smiths Falls Poultry Fair c1888
(Photo courtesy of ?????)

A description of Poultry Fair day at Perth in 1887 could, on a greater or lesser scale, have represented other fairs established through the 1880s and 1890s at Lanark, McDonald’s Corners, Middleville, Carleton Place, Almonte, Arnprior, Pakenham, Maberly, Westport, Merrickville, or Lyndhurst.¹⁵

On Tuesday and Wednesday our streets were thronged with more than the usual crowd of buyers and sellers of poultry, and around the Foster Street block, where the throng of people and vehicles was thickest, the gathered multitudes became a blockade.

¹⁴ *Perth Courier*, December 17, 1897.

¹⁵ Although poultry is no longer bought and sold, the village of Lyndhurst near Brockville still stages an annual ‘Turkey Fair’.

A good part of both days, a long row of wagons backed against the sidewalk was surrounded by men and women bargaining on behalf of the geese or turkeys displayed therein – the sellers eagerly striving with woman’s wit or men’s slower reasoning to get the best price they could for their product; the buyers, on the other hand, explaining the low price in the Boston market, and trying of course to keep the price down to a safe figure for themselves.

Meanwhile parcels of poultry of all sizes were constantly changing hands and taken to the store-rooms, until early in the afternoon of Wednesday, when the supply was exhausted, and the wearied buyers got a rest from their labors, or at least a change, and the process of packing saw the beginning of the end.

Sellers of course came from all the country round, and there were buyers in plenty ... The two principal local buyers were Messrs. A. Meighen & Bros., who bought no less than 22 tons, and Messrs. Wilson, Noonan & Co., who purchased 10 tons. Besides these, there were 15 outside buyers, who shared the balance of 31 tons among them. All told, nearly 64 tons of turkeys and geese changed hands in the two days.¹⁶

Supplement to the "Perth Courier."

POULTRY!

POULTRY!

REMEMBER THAT

THE POULTRY FAIR

Previously announced by us, will be held IN PERTH, on

TUESDAY

—AND—

WEDNESDAY

9th and 10th December,

—WHEN—

DENESEA, N. B. PUTMAN & Co., of Boston,
and J. G. McROSTIE, of Ogdensburg,
As well as several other buyers, will be present.

Look out for Dealers at Meighens' Corner.

A. MEIGHEN & BROS.,

PERTH, ONT.

Assuming an average dressed weight for those turkeys and geese at about 15 lbs. (6.8 kg.) each, in excess of 8,500 birds were sold over those two days in 1887.

Farm wives who were thrifty in preparing fowl for the annual fair, could profit beyond the value of their birds alone. Buyers also advertised their interest in,

*Turkey Feathers, Tails and Wing. Highest Price Paid. Send for circular at once. The National Feather Duster Co., 44 and 45 State Street, Chicago.*¹⁷

*Austin & James, The Bargain House, Quill feathers bought at 12 centers per pound.*¹⁸

The gathering of so many farm families in one place at one time, presented a wide range of buy-and-sell opportunities. Estate and other auctions were often scheduled to coincide with Turkey Fair, and merchants staged special promotions and product demonstrations.

¹⁶ Perth Courier, December 16, 1887.

¹⁷ Perth Courier, February 11, 1881.

¹⁸ Perth Courier, December 15, 1893.

*Mr. Harry Smith of Montreal will be in Perth on Turkey Fair days, December 13th and 14th, for the purpose of buying horses, the big kind preferred.*¹⁹

*Highest Prices – We are prepared to pay the highest market prices for poultry, hides and sheep pelts. Farmers will do well to see us on Turkey Fair day before selling elsewhere. – Noonan Bros.*²⁰

*You Are Invited to Attend – the De Laval Cream Separator demonstration [and] Conner Washing Machine demonstration - Turkey Fair days ... at N. B. Nicoll's Hardware.*²¹

Even the tax man was drawn like a moth to the flame of such an influx of liquid cash. A 1938 advertisement announced that, "*John Irvin will be at Conlon Bros. Store on Turkey Fair Days, December 14 and 15 to collect taxes for the Township of Burgess*".²²

In the decades straddling the turn of the 20th century, poultry fair saw the streets of Perth jammed with farm rigs, hotels fully booked by out-of-town buyers and local stores open for extended hours. In 1896 the Perth *Courier* reported that,

... never before was there so many teams in Perth at a poultry fair ... Gore Street was lined by farmers' teams from North Street down as far as G. E. Armstrong's store, while wagons backed up against the sidewalk stretched all along Foster Street from Gore to Wilson, and up Wilson as far as Mr. George Thornton's. Opposite the Barrie meat shop the vehicles reached almost across the street, and nearly blocked traffic.

The buyers on hand were all outsiders: Foster, of Ogdensburg, NY.; Hawthorn & Spalding, Burlington, VT; Ames of Sherbrooke, Quebec, who alone bought for the Canadian market; Lowes of Fitchburg, Mass; Denesha, of Morrisburg, NY. These parties bought over 50 tons of stuff, and to this can be added the various totals bought by local dealers for their customers.

*The total amount of money paid by outsiders for stuff bought at the fair was about \$8,000. Next year some steps will be taken to protect the sellers from tricks of certain buyers who wanted their poultry cheap. No local buyers were in the field this year.*²³

Special Reductions
and **WONDERFUL VALUES**
DURING TURKEY FAIR DAYS
—IN—
Dry Goods
and
Groceries
—AT—
G. A. BATEMAN'S
Cheap Cash Store.
We will clear out the remainder of our stock of
Fur Coats, Caps, Storm Collars, etc.
At Wholesale Prices.
Grey Goat, Matassana, and Buffalo Robes
Cut away down.
CALL AND EXAMINE OUR GOODS.

¹⁹ Perth *Courier*, December 8, 1922.

²⁰ Perth *Courier*, November 27, 1903.

²¹ Perth *Courier*, December 7, 1923.

²² Perth *Courier*, December 2, 1938.

²³ Perth *Courier*, December 18, 1896.

The success of a fair, however, depended very much upon weather conditions. If the days were crisp and cold, thus best suited to preserving dressed fowl, and if the roads were frozen and snow covered, thus providing good sleighing, the fair was an almost guaranteed success. On the other hand, mild weather, and muddy roads, or bitter cold and snowstorms, usually meant a poor turnout of both buyers and sellers; 1897 was such a year.

The first day of turkey fair was warm and unpromising as to frost, and the tendency was to low prices on account of the prevailing weather. Eight or 10 buyers, principally from the United States, were here, but there was no boom in prices from competition like in days gone by. The second day saw a downpour of rain the whole time and made it the sorriest fair seen in Perth ever before.

All told, about 35 tons of poultry were bought, some of which went to Montreal, some to Boston, and a share stayed in town for local consumption. Had the weather been cold, prices would have been somewhat higher, and a larger supply of poultry would have been brought in, especially from the rear townships, where so much of the product had come from before.²⁴

In most years, however, the face-to-face bargaining of Perth's Poultry Fair produced satisfaction for buyers in terms of volume and for sellers in terms of prices paid.

In 1883 "*Mrs. Andrew Doyle of Drummond sold 236 pounds of turkey at 16 cents a pound*".²⁵

In 1888, "*David Ferguson, 1st Concession, Drummond, sold 38 turkeys at 14.5 cents a pounds and 10 besides at \$3 each for breeding purposes next year*".²⁶

In 1891 "*Mrs. Charles Mackie, Fallbrook, brought in 614 pounds of poultry, mostly turkeys, and got the top prices for both*".²⁷

In 1920 "*The largest turkey brought to Perth on the last day of Turkey Fair weighed 25 pounds. It is reported the party bought a quarter of beef with the money*".²⁸

In 1941 "*The weightiest turkey sold, and said by those who saw it to resemble a young pig in bulk, was a tom from the farm of Miss Winnie Ritchie in Bathurst. This bird weighted 33 pounds; it was bought by Perth District Cooperative Services and sold by them almost immediately to a man who, it was said, proposed to hold a raffle with the 33-pounder as first prize*".²⁹



²⁴ Perth Courier, December 17, 1897.

²⁵ Perth Courier, December 28, 1883.

²⁶ Perth Courier, December 28, 1888.

²⁷ Perth Courier, December 25, 1891.

²⁸ Perth Courier, December 17, 1920.

²⁹ Perth Courier, December 18, 1941.

A growing market inspired innovation. In 1881 township farmers began raising the 'Bronze' breed of turkey³⁰, "*introduced from the West ... the fowls being much larger than the ordinary breed*".³¹ By the end of that decade the most progressive farmers were installing their own egg incubators and chick brooders, and over the first decades of the 20th century poultry production on Canadian farms grew rapidly.

*Total poultry population 1925 was 17,778,581, an increase over 1924 of almost 1,000,000. In round figures these are 480,000 turkeys, 55,000 geese, and 558,000 ducks ... (therefore 16,185,581 chickens). The increasing interest in poultry on the farm is probably due to the fact that poultry has been profitable, both from egg production and meat production point of view; and, moreover, the use of incubators and coal burning brooders has made it possible for many farmers to carry several hundred hens, where they formerly carried about 75 or 100.*³²

The prevailing tariff on American imports was a matter of perennial interest and almost constant complaint for the farmers and merchants of Perth and district. Under the 'Reciprocity Treaty of 1854, Canadian agriculture products had enjoyed duty-free status at the border, but in 1866 the United States imposed steep import duties on most Canadian exports including poultry. In 1913 tariffs were eliminated on most farm products, and for the next eight years the Perth Poultry Fair boomed as Canadian fowl enjoyed duty-free entry into the seemingly insatiable markets at Boston and New York.



Bronze Turkey

When domestic farm prices collapsed in the United States in 1921, however, the American government brought in the 'Emergency Tariff Act' reimposing substantial duties on Canadian agricultural imports. A decade later, the situation worsened when the U.S. 'Tariff Act of 1930' set tariffs at record levels, dealing a devastating blow to the Canadian economy in general and precipitating competitive rounds of protectionism worldwide, and greatly contributing to the depth of the Great Depression.

It is only a few weeks since the people of this section were furnished with the most palpable evidence of the loss occasioned by the Canadian Farmer by the present hinderance to trade with our American neighbors. In the shipment of fowl to Boston from this location, after the 'turkey far', some \$4,000 in duty had to be paid.

*The Canadian buyers had to hand this amount over to the AMERICAN Customs Officers and then sell the shipment in competition with American producers, the consequence being that the Canadian farmers find themselves handicapped to the extent of 10% in raising fowl for the American market.*³³

³⁰ The turkey had its origins in North America and, though there are many variations throughout the world, all are descended from the turkey of this continent.

³¹ Perth *Courier*, December 23, 1881.

³² *Scientific Agriculture*, May 1927

³³ Perth *Courier*, January 13, 1888.

... buyers were loud in their praises of the quality of Mrs. [Charles] Mackie's poultry on account of their fine condition and uniform color and declared that they should like to pay her five cents more for such turkeys were it not for the duty".³⁴

There were a number of outside buyers here, and among them were some from the States. These, however, were precluded from buying because of the high price and the duty of five cents per pound.³⁵

In 1935 the new Roosevelt administration negotiated an agreement with Canada that slashed tariffs by 20 to 50 per cent and in 1938 the 'Reciprocal Tariff Act' reduced them further. In the 1940s, through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (now the World Trade Organization) Canada negotiated further improvements in access to the American Market, but by that time other factors were undermining the Poultry Fair model.

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|--|---|
| <p>OUR CUSTOMERS, And all other buyers coming to the</p> <p>TURKEY FAIR</p> <p>Should not miss the IMMENSE BARGAINS to be offered in all kinds of Heavy Winter Goods at</p> <p>J. T. HENDERSON'S</p> <p>If you want ROBES, this is where you get the choice, and the lowest price.</p> <p>If you want FURS, just look at our stock and you will want no others.</p> <p>If you want a FUR COAT or Overcoat, we can suit you.</p> <p>If you want BLANKETS, FLANNELS, DRESS GOODS, HOSIERY, GLOVES, FURNISHINGS, etc., don't go home from the Turkey Fair without looking at our well assorted winter stock, or you will regret it.</p> <p>Our Holiday Groceries Are arriving daily, and will be found the best and freshest in all lines.</p> <p>Our TEAS need no comment whatever.</p> <p>J. T. HENDERSON.</p> | <p>Special Reductions and WONDERFUL VALUES DURING TURKEY FAIR DAYS</p> <p>—H—</p> <p>Dry Goods and Groceries</p> <p>—AT—</p> <p>G. A. BATEMAN'S Cheap Cash Store.</p> <p>We will clear out the remainder of our stock of Fur Coats, Caps, Storm Collars, etc. At Wholesale Prices.</p> <p>Grey Seal, Matassana, and Buffalo Robes Cut away down.</p> <p>CALL AND EXAMINE OUR GOODS.</p> |
|--|---|

The ups-and-downs of American trade policy only added to the many uncertainties already faced by farmers. Poultry are particularly susceptible to diseases such as coliform infections, mycoplasmosis, fowl cholera, fowl typhoid, botulism, etc. and, in an age before modern pharmaceuticals, a season's investment in time and money could be wiped out overnight. In the run-up to the December 1901 poultry fair, the *Courier's* correspondent in McDonalds Corners reported that,

... our good sleighing is all gone, leaving the roads in bad shape for the Turkey Fairs. A fatal disease has attacked many of the turkeys hereabouts, and many are already dead.³⁶

If the poultry flocks did not succumb to some fatal infection, predators could do the same job in a moment.

*The foxes in the rear townships are very destructive on poultry, and especially turkeys. One farmer from Dalhousie informed us the other day that he lost about 30 half-grown turkeys this season – in fact he was cleaned out. We have heard of other cases where the loss from this destructive animal was equally heavy.*³⁷

*Mr. David Ferguson, 1st Concession Drummond ... lost about 50 young turkeys this year through foxes.*³⁸

Despite the challenges, over a run of nearly 80 years farmers attending the Perth Poultry Fair sold an annual average of about 65 tons of fowl, mostly turkeys, but also geese, ducks, and chickens, to Canadian and American traders.

³⁴ Perth *Courier*, December 25, 1891.

³⁵ Perth *Courier*, December 15, 1911.

³⁶ Perth *Courier*, December 13, 1901.

³⁷ Perth *Courier*, December 23, 1881.

³⁸ Perth *Courier*, December 21, 1888.

Total poultry production in the surrounding townships was considerably greater than the tonnage marketed each December on the streets of Perth. The organized fair had its advantages and attractions, but some buyers, both domestic and foreign, continued to patrol the concession roads looking for a bargain, and producers still sold at the farm gate, mitigating their risk.

*A large number of outside buyers – from the United States and from various parts of Canada – attended the Perth poultry fair on Tuesday and Wednesday. About 30 tons were purchased altogether. The decrease in the quantity is owing to large amounts being bought-up for the Northwest some days before the fair, and this injured the fair here, and did no good to the farmers, who get considerably less for their stuff than those who waited for the fair, where there was good competition in buying. It pays the farmer to wait for the fair.*³⁹

*Buyers contracting for poultry at various centers in the county, and who have been scouring the country in search of the stuff before the dates of the fairs, have greatly lessened the interest in these noted gatherings and in the quantities bought at them. Messrs. Thomas Smith and M. Foy have picked up about 20 tons in this way between Perth and the country around Lanark, for shipment to Winnipeg and elsewhere; and other buyers in centers have also secured large quantities of poultry, before the fair days: so that although the quantities of stuff have not perhaps lessened, the show of it at the fair has materially declined.*⁴⁰

In the early years of the 20th century increased demand from the rapid development of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories boosted prices at Perth, but by the 1920s that impact was reversed.

*... the influx of western turkey by rail train loads has been the cause of the slump in turkey prices. Twenty carloads reached Toronto alone, which means that the Toronto market has 40,000 birds that did not come from the Ontario farmer.*⁴¹

*The reason for the lowest turkey prices in years are two in number; viz., the supply generally is greater than the past years, and there are heavier shipments to the east from Western Canada.*⁴²

*1,000,000 pounds of turkey will be exported from Canada to the British isles in 1936 ... most of which will be from the prairie provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.*⁴³

³⁹ Perth *Courier*, December 13, 1895.

⁴⁰ Perth *Courier*, December 16, 1898.

⁴¹ Perth *Courier*, January 4, 1924.

⁴² Perth *Courier*, December 13, 1929.

⁴³ Perth *Courier*, November 27, 1936.



Live Poultry Rail Car
(Photo Courtesy of Randy McCrory)

American tariffs, western competition, poultry disease, and hungry foxes, were not all that local poultry growers had to contend with. Sometimes loss was inflicted up-close-and-personal.

One farmer is reported to have had a 22 pound turkey valued at over \$9.00 stolen from him. It was said that the proposed purchaser, a lady, took the monster gobbler into a store to weigh it but failed to return with the bird.⁴⁴

The death of Perth's 'Turkey Fair', and all those like it across eastern Ontario, was not, however, the result of international trade policy, predators, or cheeky thieves. It was undermined by the technological advances achieved in agriculture over the first half of the 20th century and the resulting demise of the traditional 'mixed farm' and the poultry it had produced for the annual fair. Those family farms were replaced by specialized, often monocrop, agroindustry, including large poultry farms. The intensive rearing of poultry was not only more cost effective for producers, it provided a means of one-stop shopping for packing houses equipped with modern refrigerated trucks and warehouses.

As one farmer explained in 1958, "*In the old days, dealers used to show up and buy fowl by the carload. Today the buyers deal with the large turkey and chicken farms. If they show up at the Turkey Fairs, they usually want to cut prices below those we can get from the townsfolk.⁴⁵*" A farm wife raising a few dozen free range turkeys and geese could not compete with a factory farm turning out 1,000 birds or more two or three times per year. For that matter, few such farm wives still existed by the time the Perth Poultry Fair was ended in 1958.

⁴⁴ Perth Courier, December 18, 1925.

⁴⁵ Ottawa Citizen, 1958, interview with Harold Bobier of Munster.



Modern Turkey Barn
(Photo Courtesy of Tyson Foods Inc.)

The Perth Poultry Fair had long outlived its originators. Meighen Bros. went out of business in 1930 and responsibility for organizing the annual event had, over the years, been taken up by the Board of Trade, the Merchant's Committee, the Retail Merchants Association and, finally, the Chamber of Commerce. As the *Perth Courier* explained, it was Chamber's decision that the market should be discontinued after 79 years.

The present day market conditions and lack of buyers in recent years was the principal reason for cancelling the annual event. There was a time when 100 tons of poultry was marketed on Poultry Fair days [but] the turkey market has changed in the past few years. Outside buyers go through the country in the later summer and buy up the turkeys from farmers and they are picked up later in the year and prepared for market. This means a considerable saving in labor for turkey growers who [formerly] spent days preparing their fowl for market. Today turkeys are purchased by the large packing houses.

We are going to miss the usual custom of seeing citizens treading home with a 15 or 20 lb. turkey under their arms or across their backs.

Does Poultry Pay?

We turkeys sacrifice our lives,
To buy new clothes for farmers' wives.
We keep the little kiddies warm,
And pay the taxes on the farm,
As well as many other things,
Paid by the money poultry brings.

While all we get is into town,
Our heads once up now hanging down,
Laid out in heaps or numbered rows,
Where no one seems to heed our woes.
They come around and pinch our skin
And talk about the shape we're in.

The buyers and the seller too,
Have seemingly no more to do,
Than argue over prices there,
Because it is the Poultry Fair.

How can these men forget the day,
In springtime not so far away,
When we were only turkey's eggs,
Unheeded under mother's legs;
A poor and badly huddled batch,
Awaiting for the day to hatch.

And then as (poults) from mother torn,
We blessed the day that we were born;
No longer in an egg to sleep,
But out around the fields to peep.

So, through the summer with its grain,
We felt our weight and stature gain,
Until a change came in the fall,
We could not make it out at all.

The food we got in grain and mash,
Would cost a pretty bit of cash.
The secret of it came one day,
"Feed turkeys well, take my advice,
If you would get the highest price".

And then the fatal day arose,
On pegs we hung up by our toes,
And oh, a villain with a knife,
Proceeded on to take our life.

Into our mouth he pushed the blade,
He was a master at his trade,
For sooner than a word was said,
He counted one more turkey dead.

So here we are dressed up for sale,
Who cares about our sorry tale,
To feed and fatten is our fate,
And get into a market state.

Oh, let the stores with business hum,
The band comes out and beats the drum,
The crowds of people on the street,
On Gore and Foster often meet.

One thing we turkeys wish they knew,
This roaming pleasure seeking crew,
Were it not so we suffered death,
These people all would hold their breath,
For pockets now so full of tin,
No single penny would be in.⁴⁶

- Ron W. Shaw (2022)

⁴⁶ Perth *Courier*, December 13, 1940, author unknown.