

## "Farming" in old Gander

Robert G Pelley, 04-February-2019  
(bobsganderhistory.com)

Old Gander had a wonderful building with a "Normand" roof, on what was commonly called the Royal Air Force side. At a first glance it appeared to be a wonderful barn, just right for a farm. Wrong on both counts - it was not a barn at all and there was precious little farming.

The building known to most people in Old Gander as the "Barn" was in fact the quarters of whoever might be the officer commanding the RAF during the war.



(seen from the south "hangar" side)

Seen from the north, it was a fairly substantial residence, with even a fireplace and barn-door garage, much nicer the "Canadian" homes built on Chestnut Street on the RCAF/Canadian side.



After Second World War and the departure of the RAF, it was used by the civilian head of Gander Airport and, at some point in the early-mid 1950s, became the residence of the chief of the weather office (whose services operated out of hangar 21).

Though the building was not a barn, it was very close to Gander's first attempts at something that looked liked agriculture. One of the earliest attempts took place between the Barn and the living quarters next to the hangars. Some of the residents gave a try at raising chicken.



This was not a success for a number of reasons. For one, a proper coop had not been built. Chickens and snow didn't get along either. A bigger problem apparently was that it was a big-ticket item for the local rats.

The next "agricultural development" was the early attempt at hog raising, slightly closer to the Barn, across the road from the lower arrowhead seen above. As Joey Smallwood explained in his book "I choose Canada", the RAF boss, Group-Captain Anderson thought it shameful that all the scraps from the British, American and Canadian mess-halls were going to waste instead of producing pork. He put on his pilot's gear, flew a Canso

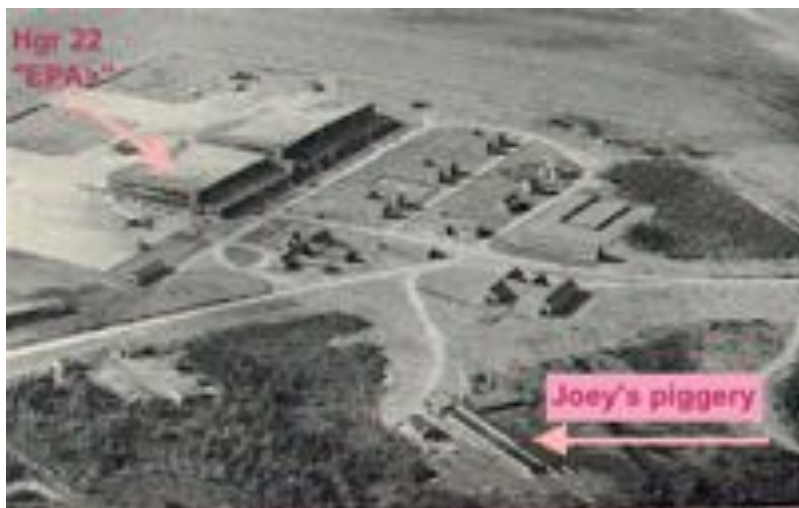
bomber to Charlottetown, PEI, and came back with 25 to 30 weanling pigs.

He hired a local chap who knew little about grunting hogs. To get some advice, he contacted Joey who had successful pig farm out on Kenmount road, just outside St.John's. The conversation eventually came around to the idea of a proper hog-raising venture near the RAF operations area, with the profits being split between the RAF welfare fund and Joey and/or his backers. No discussion had been made with the Newfoundland government, as it should have - but maybe that omission was on purpose!

Under the contract, the R.A.F. had to be supplied with pork, but Joey made other contracts as well, having enough pork to sell to Bowaters, the Royal Stores, Goodyears, Government House and others.

With financing from Ches Crosbie of St,John's, Joey supplied the initial pigs. There are as well in the RAF Daily Log a number of entries about pigs being flown in, though I have found no indication if they came from Joey's farm in St.John's via Torbay or from the mainland.

The RAF built a large piggery building measuring 40 feet wide and 300 feet long at a cost of around 30,000\$, to be paid back from profits. It had two very big boilers, each with a jet of live steam. Truckloads of swill were boiled up daily.



Joey soon realized that while supplying pork was fine, it would be even better if he could provide hams, sausages and the like. He took it upon himself to go to Guelph, on the mainland, to learn from an expert how it was done. A smoke-house was soon built with the finest equipment. Government House in St.John's notably took 2-3 dozen sausages every week.

The RAF also supplied a duplex apartment for Joey and his brother Reginald, who took over the day-to-day operation.

Joey also told a story about going with his family to a Sunday service at the RCAF church. The visiting minister talked about the "prodigal son" who lived a life of depravation, going so low as having to feed pigs. The minister couldn't figure out why such a sad story got so much laughter, snickers and smiles.

One of three small tar-paper houses near the airport (probably the closest one to the piggery) along the Road to Deadmans Pond was identified as the "Smallwood house", in this photo, hand-coloured by the late Fred Smeaton.



After the war, the activities became curtailed but not terminated. It was continued by Cyrus Taylor Oates. Mr Oates had been a cook with the Newfoundland Forest Unit in Scotland and on his return after the war, got a job as cook at the airport. Because of a family connection, he took over the operation. The main client was apparently the Co-op Store for which Reg Smallwood was a longtime manager.

It would appear that this operation went on to around 1953-54, according to his daughter Louise, at which point there were only a dozen or so pigs left. Mr Oates had in the meantime gradually transitioned to a tavern on the "American side" near the rink in hangar 12.

In the following photo from Louise, taken at the front door of the house near the piggery, we see seated Louise Oates, Marilyn Knee and, in the doorway, Rosie Toytman.



The next photo shows the Oates home on the road toward Deadmans Pond. The door seen in the previous photo was on the left hand end.



The next photo shows Cyrus and Olive Oates near the south end of their house, with, in the background, the old steam plant that heated the RAF side and, after the war, the passenger terminal and transient hotels.



The next photo shows what is left of Joey's piggery.



But the RAF didn't have a monopoly on "professional" piggeries in Gander, as the RCAF had an equivalent operation.

The RCAF daily dairy of 01 December 1943 says that "During the latter part of November, 160 Yorkshire pigs arrived on the station via Air Transport from Prince Edward Island. Pigs were purchased with the cooperation of the Dominion Department of Agriculture. Their ages ranged from eight to sixteen weeks and from 25 to 85 pounds."

The RCAF "Gander" magazine from that period says that "they were met by Sergeant R. H. Trueman, who is in charge of The Piggery, and transported immediately to their new quarters which are located at the end of Foss Street some little distance from the Womans Division's quarters."(NB Bldg 110)

The magazine goes on to say "With a staff of four civilians and the occasional air-man suffering for his misdemeanours, Sergeant Trueman looks after his charges and sees that their home is kept in good order and that they are well fed. The porkers' home consists of one large room (...), 101 feet long by 37 feet wide having eight partitions (pens to you). The building is wooden with cement flooring and was completed December 1, by No. 8 Construction Maintenance Unit. There is also on "L" off the main building, 29 feet wide by 38 feet long, and it is here

that the porkers' food is prepared and incidentally where they are prepared for food. The building is kept as clean as circumstances permit and it receives a thorough hosing out every morning."

These pigs were kept inside even during summer. Because they did not get much in the way of sunlight, they were given something that any student from (very) Old Gander will remember - cod liver oil!

The main difference between the "Trueman" and the "Smallwood" pigs is that the RCAF had grain added to their diet. Up to a weight of 175 lbs, they were fed on a mix of about 75% boiled swill, 20% grain and the rest a mixture of minerals and the famous cod liver oil. Two to three weeks before slaughtering, they were feed only ground grain - a mixture 80% barley, with oats and wheat at 10% each.

When the pigs were cleaned and slaughtered, they were turned over to the Royal Canadian Army Service Corps. There was some discussion as to whether the meat should belong to the RCAF and be distributed as welcome extras from time to time or whether they should sold to the RSASC and added to regular rations: It is not clear what difference this would make, nor how it ended. But one thing would have been sure - namely that in either case, the RCASC had high inspection standards. It was difficult to bring in inspectors from the outside, so it was in fact the Station Medical Officer who carried out these inspections.

This quality control also affected the RAF pigs, as the Canadians complained that Joey's pigs were getting off scot-free. Joey got around this by having the RCAF Medical Officer inspect his pigs as well.

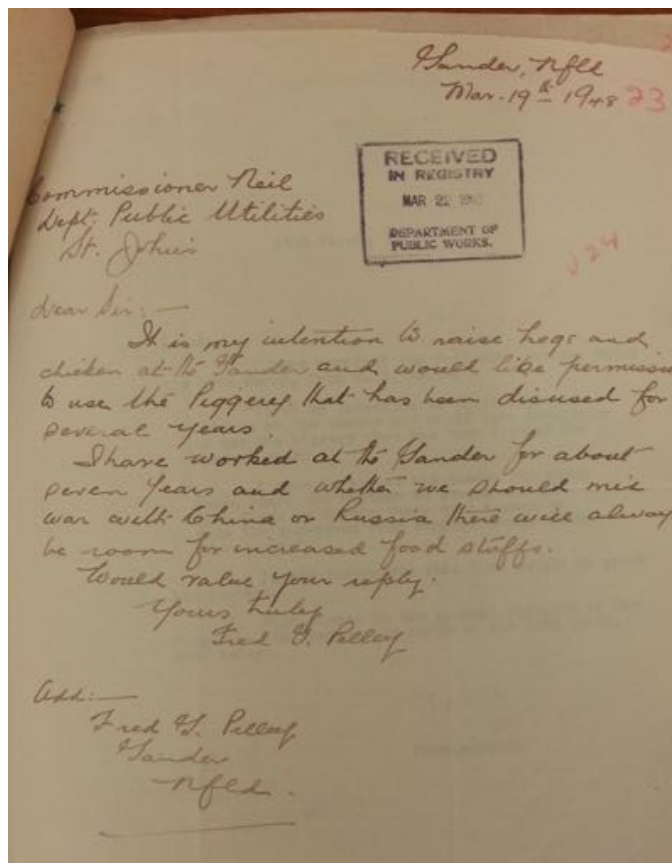
This RCAF piggery was in any case in good hands. The Piggery came, generally speaking, under Flying Officer J. Bourne who was in charge of the Station Services Offices. But it was operated and looked after by Sergeant Trueman, specially enlisted for the job. Sgt Trueman was brought up on a farm and after receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree at Mount Allison



University took a post-graduate course in agriculture at Cornell University.

This RCAF piggery was taken over after the war by Arthur Tulk, but it could well have been by someone else. In March of 1948, (in the early stages of the Cold War when Russia threatened Europe and the Communist Party had just taken over China), Fred G Pelley, a Gander resident, wrote to Commissioner Neil of the Public Utilities Department in St. John's, saying the following:

" It is my intention to raise pigs and chicken at the Gander and would like to use the Piggery that has been disused for several years. I have worked at the Gander for about seven years and whether we go to war with China or Russia, there will always be room for increased food supply."



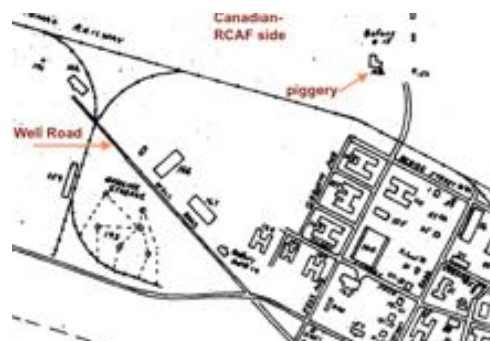
His request was refused, though it was not clear which piggery he was referring to. In the ensuing correspondence, the Civilian Aviation Division in Gander also mentioned a request around the same time from a Smallwood relative to take over the RAF piggery, which might account for the refusal. A request was to be made to health authorities to see if this might not affect the Deadmans Pond water supply.

(This same Civil Aviation Division letter also stated that Joey had an outstanding account of 54\$! )

In ant case, it was Mr Tulk who took over the RCAF piggery. When the pigs were slaughtered, they were transported on hooks to a large vat of boiling water. This immersion made it easier to remove hair from the carcass. It has been said, but unconfirmed, that the cleaned carcasses were then sent to Goodyear's grocery for quartering, refrigerated storage and sale to the public. This would be logical as the other piggery sent its products basically to the Co-op.

In the 1950s, there was a movement to develop farming west of the new town of Gander. The Tulk piggery was moved for a short time out the Gander-Glenwood highway, near Twin Ponds, before closing down.

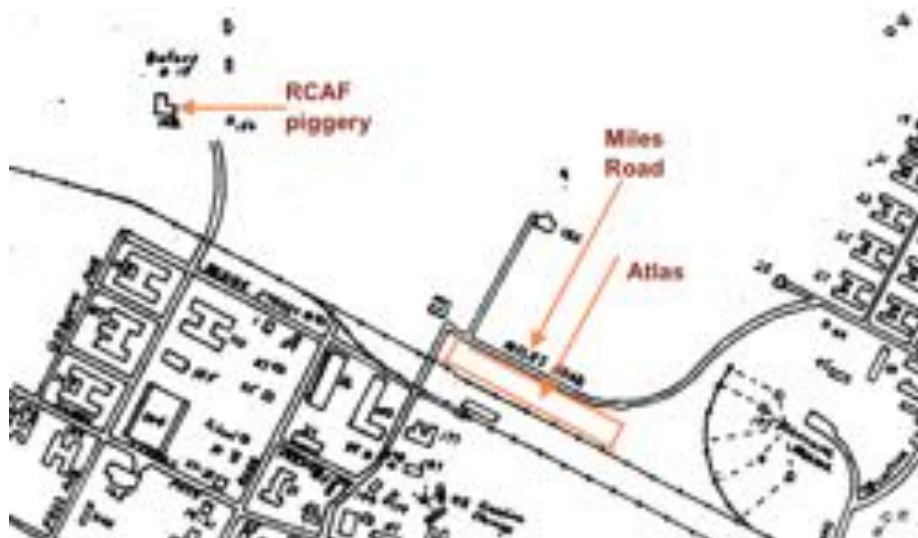
There were other pigs raised by local families, especially when they lived closer to the outskirts of the old airport. A good example would be the family of Garfield Dart. Their first home was located on Well Road, very close the western edge of Gander, just south of the railway tracks. They kept two pigs until they moved to better residential accommodation.



After pigs, the "poultry industry" was the next important agricultural endeavour. This was a problem even during the war. At the end of 1943, the RCAF got a lot of complaints about food, and particularly about breakfast, because it was based on pancakes or "eggs" made of egg powder. It was not even certain whether macaroni and cheese or turkey would be served for Christmas Dinner. The turkeys purchased in Montreal had been condemned, but on 21 December, the day was saved by the arrival of approximately 3,000 lbs. of turkey from Canada Packers in St. John's.

Many civilian families in Gander, especially if they weren't in the central residential area, kept chicken for personal use. A good example would be Howard and Emma Barnes who lived during the war at the Transmitter site, about a kilometer east of the airfield. One of their first priorities was a chicken coop and a fairly large family garden.

But raising chicken was also done on a grander scale at the end of the war, when the Burt family set up business, slightly east of RCAF piggery. During war, Atlas Construction Company had a group of offices, quarters and workshops between Miles Road near the "Army side" and the railway tracks. As of autumn 1944, these buildings were being vacated by Atlas. The hennery occupied one of the Atlas buildings.



Some years ago, this subject was looked at in a website discussion group called "Fayes Pages". The following paragraphs give the main points of the story as explained by Clyde Burt.

"As an eleven or twelve year old I had, as they say, a love/hate relationship with that place. Post World War II, my family owned and operated it for several years. My step-father, who was a carpenter with the R.C.A.F. during the war and with the Department of Transport afterwards, renovated one wing of the building to accommodate several hundred laying hens.

"Wire for the yard in which the hens roamed (free ranging chickens!) was procured from one of the WWII anti-aircraft sites, of which there were several around the airport. (Large quantities of chicken wire, interlaced with strips of camouflage material were used to cover and thus, hide, strategic parts of these sites.) We prepared the wire by stripping the material from it (one of my above-mentioned hate relationships!) and then rolled the wire into bundles and trucked it home to use for the yard.

"The hens were bought from a poultry farmer on Prince Edward Island, and arrived to us by train as crates of tiny, yellow chicks. The sight of dozens of little beaks poking out between the laths which covered the boxes was a sight to behold. Little did I realize how much exercise they would provide for me in just a few weeks!

"The eggs were collected, washed, graded, packaged and delivered to customers all around the airport. I was involved in all aspects of the operation at one time or another, depending on what needed to be done at any particular time, but my full time job was delivering all those eggs. I used my bike for this. With baskets fitted to the handlebars and rear mudguard, I could carry several dozen eggs on each trip. My delivery route took me from the "Barn" on the Ferry Command side, through the Canadian Side, to the American Side. If only I had a dollar for each egg delivered!"

It was common for families in "Old Gander" to have a garden, though quite often in some little plot just off from the residential

buildings. For example, my own mother had a small potato garden in the woods between the "Army side" and the railway tracks, just east of the Atlas site.

The American side of "Old Gander" was a special case. In those days it had a number of aircraft collected from wartime crashes in the area. It was also the site of a number of small gardens. This was a wonderful playground for young kids who could pretend they were shot down over enemy territory, parachuted to the ground and had to live off the land as they tried to escape. It always made a good cover story when they raided the local vegetable gardens and got caught!

On a grander scale, the Warren family had a "real" farm for a number of years out the Gander-Glenwood highway, near Twin Ponds. This story has already been told separately on this website. <sup>(Note 1)</sup>

But a lot of what was needed to feed the people of Gander was already provided by nature itself.

Berries of many kinds were available close by. The most available were perhaps partridge berries and blue berries - but the 'nec plus ultra' were the "bakeapples". Someone unfamiliar with them might think it has something to do with the apples that hang on trees. They are rather a small ground-lying berry, roughly the size of a raspberry.



It has been said that the name bakeapple comes from the French "baie qu'appelle..." - "berry that calls...". Hardly likely, as more correctly it would be "baie qui s'appelle..." - "a berry that calls itself...". In Europe it would be "cloudberry", while First Nations used the term "chiquoutai".

One of the best known "farm implements" used by Ganderites, a civilianized caliber .303 Lee-Enfield rifle, is shown below. Being war-surplus, inexpensive, accurate and able to bring down a moose, it was highly popular.



Good fishing was possible close by - and even better if one had access to a float-equipped airplane.....



Joey Smallwood, G/C Anderson, Commander's assistant John Murphy

We will leave the last word in this article with the first woman to live in Gander, Coral Brandt. She was the wife of C Mornington Brandt, a radio operator who lived out at the previously mentioned Transmitter site east of the runways.

Mrs Brandt was interviewed in an unidentified press clipping that appears to be from the "Gander Traveller" from the early 1950s. She started by saying that she often went with her husband to fish for salmon or trout, or to hunt for caribou, moose, ptarmigan and other wild game which is plentiful near the base. Below is rest of the interview.

She says that one of the greatest problems for the housewives is to plan menus, for fresh milk, vegetables and fruit are luxuries to be imported. "Newfoundland has few cattle herds and fruit and vegetables grow only in a few places on the rock island ~ not enough to supply the islanders themselves, whose principal diet is fish. meat and potatoes.

Almost all the food must be brought from the mainland by boat and shipped to the base over the island's lone narrow-gauge railroad. Sometimes the schedules are uncertain.

Food is a major item in the budget, for the costs run something like this: Steak. 70 cents a pound; tomatoes 65 cents a pound; lettuce, 45 cents a head; cauliflower, 50 cents ahead; celery, 50 cents a bunch; oranges, 60 cents a dozen, and apples (small) 10 cents each.

"Sometimes," she said, "I get so hungry for strawberries and fresh cream that I can't think of anything else."

With real farming or not, even the poorest in Gander still lived, as they say, "high on the hog"!

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**Note 1 : The Twin Ponds story**

<http://bobsganderhistory.com/twinponds.pdf>

**Note 2 : Main sources**

- Book "I choose Canada" by JR Smallwood
- Notes and photos from Louise Oates
- RCAF magazine "Gander" 1943-44
- "Faye's Page" by Faye Raynard
- Darrell Hillier - RAF notes
- various photos and notes compiled over the years from unnoted sources