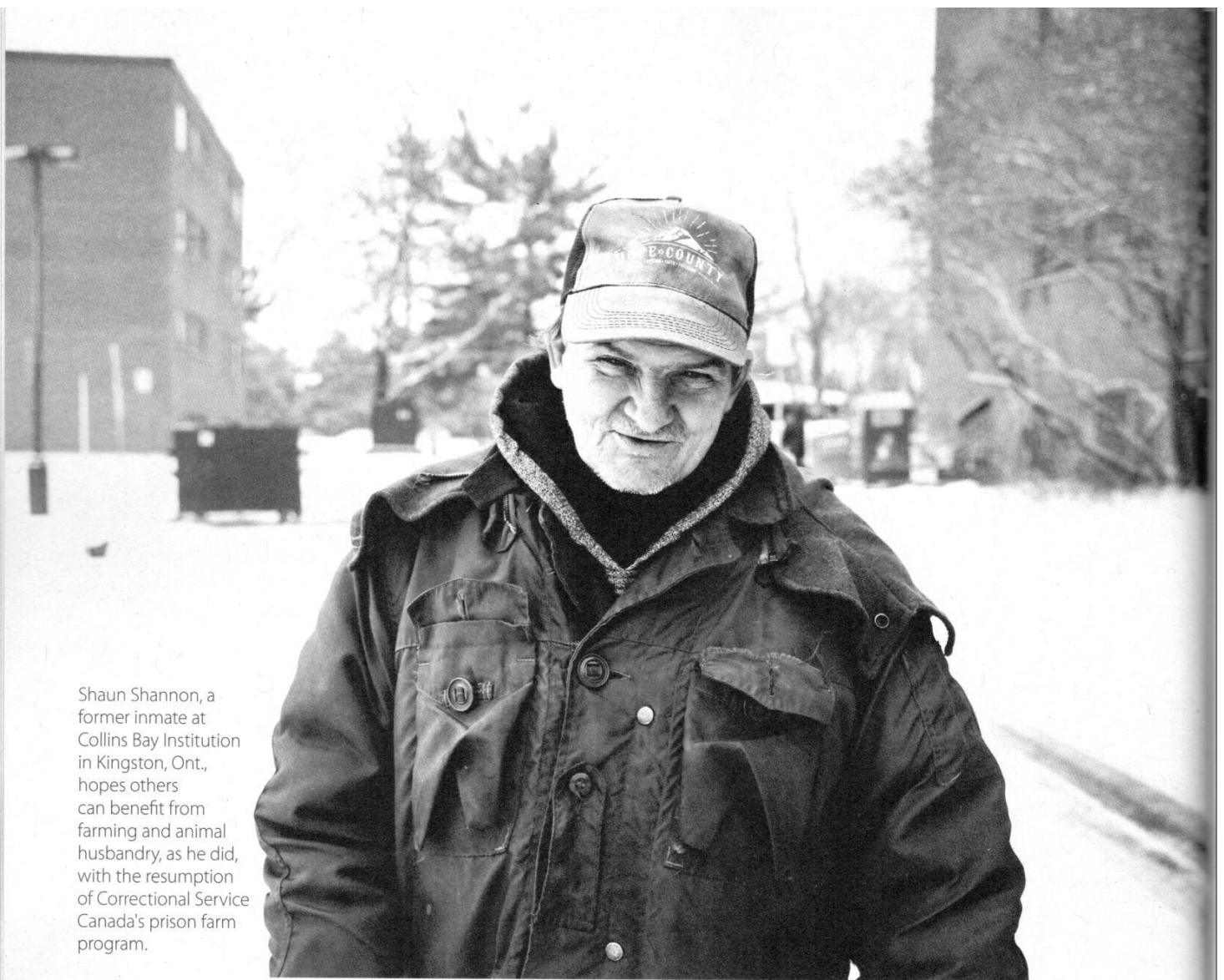




COW CORRECTIONS

The cows are coming home to Correctional Service Canada institutions in Kingston.

WORDS BY CHARLES ENMAN | PHOTOS BY MATTHEW LITEPLO



Shaun Shannon, a former inmate at Collins Bay Institution in Kingston, Ont., hopes others can benefit from farming and animal husbandry, as he did, with the resumption of Correctional Service Canada's prison farm program.

Shaun Shannon, by his own admission used to be “an angry and bad person.” And society wouldn’t have argued with him — he spent seven years in the Collins Bay Institution in Kingston, Ont.

Today, at 55, he’s a changed man, happy, involved with his family, and an eager volunteer with several organizations.

For Shannon, it’s no mystery what force worked his redemption. Near the end of his time in prison, his life was dedicated to working with the cows in the dairy herd at the prison.

“Those animals taught me empathy,” he says. “I learned there were things other than myself in this world. I found my humanity.”

Many prisoners were helped on the six prison farms Corrections Canada used to run on institutions across Canada. And there was significant agreement among those who study prisons that

the program was well based in theory and effective in practice. Sadly, eight years ago, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper closed all the prison farms, claiming they weren’t rehabilitating anyone and were losing money.

As Vic Toews, then minister of public security said, “Less than one per cent [of inmates working on the farms] learned any skills that were relevant to any particular trade — and that simply is not cost effective. And as important as rehabilitation is, the most important thing is public safety — that’s paramount.”

For Shannon, that was all subterfuge. The decision to close the farms, he says, was “the stupidest one ever made. I knew the program worked, but Harper thought things were too easy on the farms, that we weren’t punished enough. But I thought the goal was rehabilitation.”

Some of that is changing now. The Trudeau government is re-

opening the two prison farms that used to operate in Kingston — and operations should be in full swing by the summer. The cows, and much else, will be coming home again.

The fight for a change of policy

This reversal flowed from years of public protest, petitioning of Parliament, appeals to all forms of media by people who felt instinctively, Toews notwithstanding, that the skills learned in sustaining farm operations had to be transferable to many jobs — and, perhaps more important, that the responsibility and empathy sprouted by taking care of sentient beings lay at the very heart of rehabilitation.

Kingston became the epicentre of the protests. The Kingston farms, over decades, had become part of the city's psyche, the city had a vibrant political culture and any struggle there would unfold near the centre of the Canadian media universe.

There were demonstrations in Kingston and on Parliament Hill. Some demonstrators were thrown in jail. Parliamentary committees debated the issue. Former prison workers spoke out in defence of the discarded program. And, of course, there was a steady stream of newspaper articles and television coverage that brought public awareness to the issue.

If any single person became the human face of the protest, it would have to be Jeff Peters, a Kingston-area beef farmer who is part of the National Farmers Union, a small organization that works to protect farmland from development and keep family farms intact.

"When the government said inmates working those farms couldn't learn any skills meaningful for today's society, that was a tough pill to swallow," Peters says in an interview. "I know — any farmer knows — that farm experience is often treasured by potential employers. On a farm, you work hard and often have to think outside the box. So that claim was an insult that couldn't be ignored."

In his long involvement with the struggle, Peters was arrested three times. "But that was no big deal for a farmer," he recalls. "The cause was important and the arrests gave me time to sit back and reflect. And of course, I knew I would be released — and there are some countries where you don't know if that will be your last view of the sun."

Two tumultuous days

Of the many demonstrations made against shuttering the farms, the most dramatic occurred over two days in August of 2010. Hundreds of protestors congregated in front of the Frontenac Prison Farm in the heart of Kingston, determined to block access to trucks that had come to carry cattle away for auction. Black-clad policemen arrested 24 people, the youngest, a 14-year-old girl, and the oldest, an 85-year-old grandmother.

A group of filmmakers at Queens University made a documentary over those two days of tumult. Titled *Till the Cows Come Home*, it captures the drama of a citizen's movement that reminded some of the 1960s civil rights movement in the United States.

Some protestors lay limp in front of the trucks, waiting for police to carry them to the waiting paddy wagons.

Others carried signs reading "Save Our Prison Farms," "Prison Farms Belong to All Canadians," "Farm Skills = Life Skills."

Earlier, writer Margaret Atwood had spoken at a church in nearby Sydenham. "It's beautiful to see that the democratic spirit is alive in this country," Atwood told a crowd. "This has to go out into other communities and it has to be made apparent that people understand this issue and will vote accordingly."

For Clarke Mackey, the producer of the documentary, Atwood's presence was the first hint of how broad public feeling actually was. "I thought, 'Whoa, this is something new.' And then I noticed how broad the movement was — how many different types of people from hard-core anarchists to farmers to nuns were involved. We haven't seen anything quite like it since."

In the film, Sister Pauline Lally of the Sisters of Providence of St. Vincent de Paul recounted the Gandhian advice she had given the protestors: "If you plan to sit down in front of the trucks, please do it out of a non-violent stance. Take any hatred or rancor that is in your heart... there can be anger, but not hatred."

For all the emotion on display, the fight, that day, was lost. The cattle were soon at auction.

Some were saved, though. A small group to which Peters belonged, the Pen Farm Herd Co-op, raised enough money to buy 23 animals in hopes they could one day rejoin a reconstituted prison herd.

A cow called Elvis

During his time in prison, Shannon's day would revolve around the cows for which he cared.

He would go out to the barns in the wee hours and be milking by 5:30 a.m. That took two and a half hours. He would then let the cows out and clean their pens. In late afternoon, there would be a second milking. With other duties, he wouldn't leave the barn before 9 p.m.

He had a favourite among the cows. "I called her Elvis," he recalls. "I'd spend time with her — pet her and talk to her." He laughs. "She was a good listener."

The farms were producing milk and eggs for other Quebec and Ontario prisons, not to mention for people served by local food banks. That comforted Shannon.

Trudeau's election pledge

Once the farms were closed, protests continued, but it was hard to see how they could find traction. That changed during the run-up to the 2015 federal election.

Liberal leader Justin Trudeau, in a letter to a supporter of the farms, indicated that a Liberal government would be willing to reinstate them. But this provided only faint hope, since the Liberal Party was running third in the polls. "But they ended up winning a majority, didn't they?" Peters now recalls. "And we made pretty good headway with that letter."

The government soon realized there was strong public support for the farms. In the summer of 2016, Corrections Canada had an online discussion of the issue — and 6,000 Canadians chimed in, nearly all in support.

There were discouraging moments. For a time, the government was talking of having only goats, to provide milk for a baby formula plant to be built in the area. Peters and others wondered if the absence of cows would compromise the rehabilitative potential; goats, after all, are not the soulful equivalent of cows. But the government changed its mind once the Dairy Farmers of Ontario granted enough milk quota to ensure some milk production could be marketed.

Several dozen cows will now return in the summer, many from the 23 that the Pen Farm Herd Co-op purchased nearly a decade ago.

Plans afoot for re-opening

There were two prison farms in Kingston — at the Frontenac Institution in the centre of the city and at the Joyceville Institution approximately 20 kilometres northeast of the city proper.

With its 900 acres of land, the Frontenac Institution was the largest urban farm in Canada, producing dairy products, eggs and fruit and vegetables. Joyceville had an operating abattoir that at one point employed 10 inmates.

The Frontenac farm, the last one to be shuttered, was the only one that operated at a profit, perhaps because of its production of high-value eggs and milk.

Overall, the Harper government said that the six prison farms were running an annual deficit of \$4 million. Did this justify their closure? That would depend on their rehabilitative value, which, as Toews indicated, the government found to be minimal. But some opposition MPs objected that no cost-benefit study had been done.

The new dairy operations will be at the Joyceville institution, where barns are currently being built. At the Frontenac farm, within the city proper, plans are to grow soybeans, wheat and other crops. There will also be a large greenhouse for bedding plants and a place to pasture cows between pregnancy cycles.

Mark Holland, the Liberal's former public safety critic and current chief government whip, describes himself as "ecstatic" at the restoration of the prison farm program.

"The decision to close them was ideological," he says. "The government of the day thought working on the farms was simply too pleasant an experience for the incarcerated."

Though correctional officials would never have spoken out against government policy, Holland says, "they were passionate about the farm program's success and advocated for it strongly."

And denying that farm work can provide skills transferable to other jobs was always nonsense, he adds. "When I spoke with employers who hired prison farm workers, they always said the program provided remarkable benefits in terms of their preparation for other kinds of work."


Home again

There will be a party next summer when the prison farms re-open, and Shaun Shannon is sure to be present, just as he was at so many of the protests.

"I'm overjoyed that the cows are coming back," he says. It will be a complete reversal of the deep sadness prisoners felt when the cattle were taken away. Many prisoners had tears in their eyes, he recalls. "They were so disheartened — it was quite a thing to see."

He's sure many prisoners will experience the same benefit he did from working with the animals.

"It worked a miracle. I've been out for 21 years, and I have a great life. Couldn't be better. I have connection to my family, I have cats, I do volunteer work. It's a different life.

"And I don't think I'd even be alive if it hadn't been for that farm program." 

As far as we know, **Charles Enman** has never been incarcerated.