

Harvest Moon Society celebrates sixth year at Clearwater

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Co-operator staff

CLEARWATER

Back in 2002, only a few dozen people came out to Clearwater to spend a day huddled out of the rain attending what they now jokingly refer to as a "glorified picnic."

Few had heard of the Harvest Moon Society (HMS) hosting it. Most had never been to Clearwater.

That wasn't the case this past weekend, as more than 1,000 came out, this time under clear skies, to listen to music, attend workshops, learn to polka and bake bread — and discover the growing connection between one rural community and urban Manitobans.

"This has formed alliances between rural and urban we'd never have dreamed of."

— ROBERT GUILFORD,
CLEARWATER-AREA FARMER

The Harvest Moon Society is a non-profit organization created between Clearwater-area farmers and staff at University of Manitoba (UM), after a discussion around the desperate need to get young people fired up about farming and living rurally again. Discussions like that sometimes lead just to more discussions and more meetings, but Harvest Moon Society had another idea. They'd organize an outdoor festival, and attract a crowd that would want to keep coming back for more.

"The festival was born to create the energy that brings people together," says Ian Mauro, now a PhD candidate in the university's environmental geography program and one of the society's founding members. "The original intent was to have people from both urban and rural backgrounds come together to celebrate healthy land and healthy communities. It's now our motto for the organization."

The three-day festival, featuring music from the province's thriving roots music scene, is just one of many activities in which HMS is now involved.

The group has ongoing consultations with farmers and residents, and is now seeing a number of efforts coalesce into action plans, including development of a local food marketing group.

Clearwater's school, closed in 2001 due to lack of enrolment,

is now a busy learning centre, where HMS educational programs are held. The first two-week Living Rural Communities and Environments course was held in 2004, and now attracts several hundred university students per year. The course takes them on visits to farms, and through other explorations of the relationship between agriculture, rural culture, and the environment.

Local high schools have also begun to use the resources of Clearwater school. The school grounds has a new outdoor adobe oven. An interpretive trail around Clearwater has been created.

The HMS has also fostered a variety of research in the area through a partnership with the University of Manitoba's Environmental Conservation Laboratory.

It's all a far cry from "a crazy festival for a bunch of rowdies" local residents imagined might be coming when this was first getting off the ground in 2002, says area farmer Robert Guilford. Guilford and his spouse Celia sit on the society's board of directors and were instrumental in creating the HMS.

"Everybody was a little apprehensive about what we were going to get out of it, who was going to come... people weren't sure about it," says Guilford. Those fears have long subsided.

The HMS this year won Environmental Group of the Year awarded by the Manitoba Eco-Network.

"This has formed alliances between rural and urban we'd never have dreamed of," said Guilford. "That's a huge inspiration for people."

The HMS hopes to start renovations at the school to accommodate larger groups, with plans to build a summer kitchen and dorm rooms. Other projects include creating gardens, both ornamental and edible, plus a number of community economic development ventures including a processing centre for flax and hemp seeds and small flour mill.

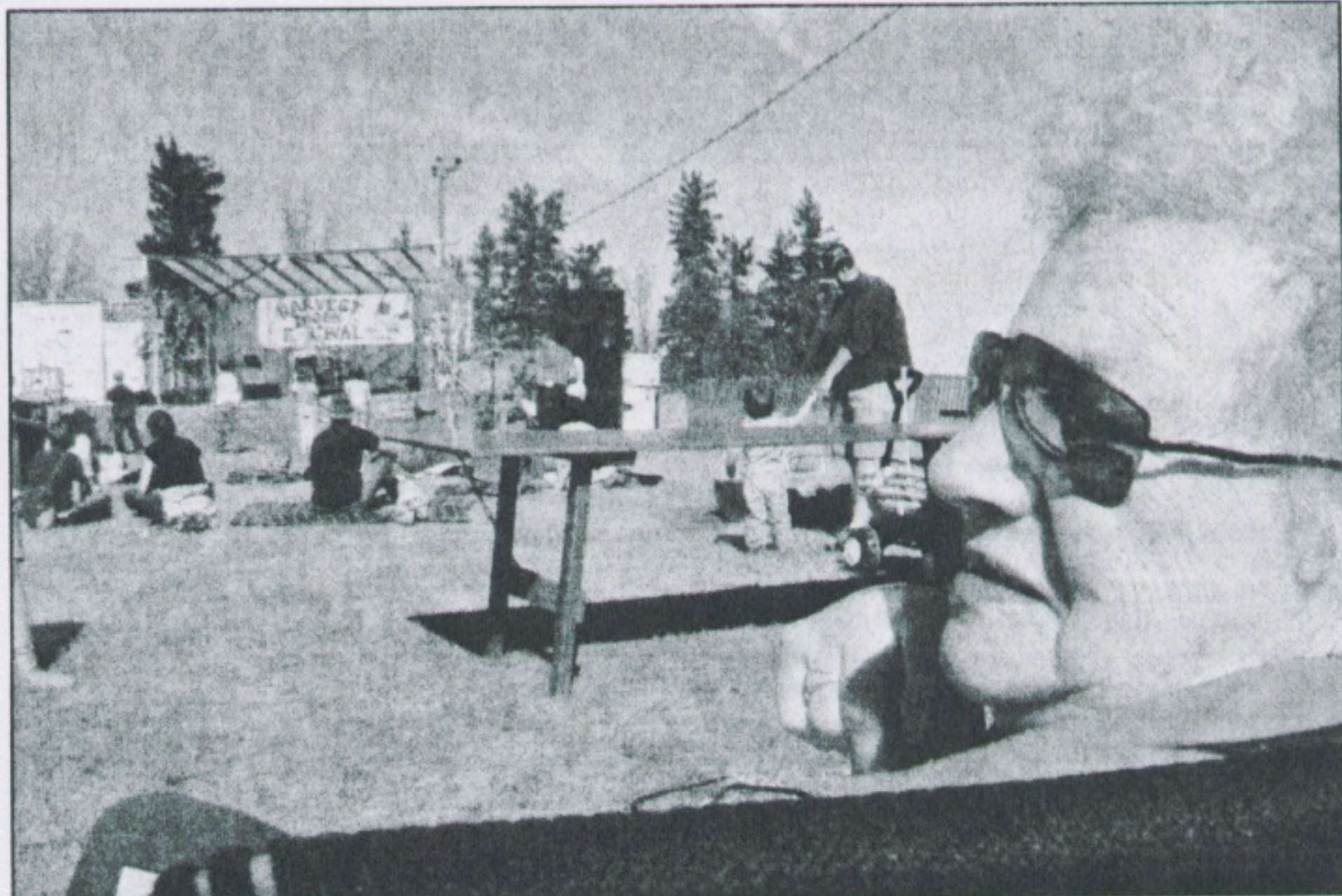
Guilford noted that there have actually been a couple of land sales in the area resulting from HMS activities. They're creating "a place people want to come to," said Guilford.

Mauro, who is moving to Clearwater himself this year to begin work on his thesis for his PhD, said in no way did this happen "because a bunch of urban kids came here to help save the town."

"This community drew us in and started to teach us," he said. "There was a really talented group of people around here wanting to collaborate on a project. We didn't even know what it was. It's sort of created itself."

For more information about the Harvest Moon Society go to: www.harvestmoonsociety.org

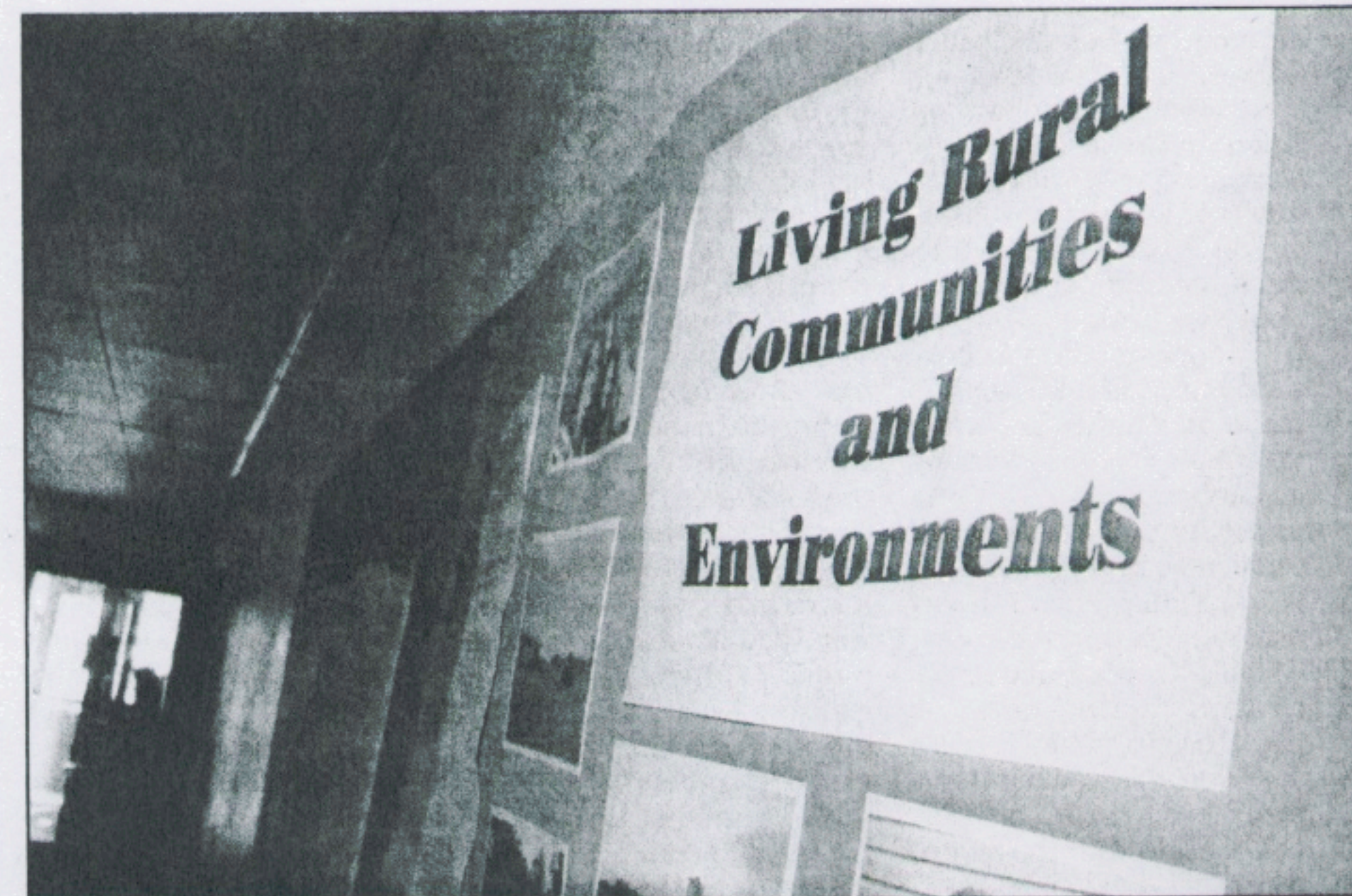
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GOOD FOR OUR TOWN: Longtime Clearwater resident Alice McLaren was enjoying the sun and the music at the Harvest Moon Society's sixth annual music festival last weekend. This has brought so much vitality to their community, says McLaren.



HILLSIDE VIEW: The hillside just east of picturesque Clearwater was dotted with festival-goers listening to a variety of made-in-Manitoba roots music.



NEW ROLE: Clearwater school now offers two-week courses that attract several hundred students per year.

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