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**Matador**  
The Co-operative Farming Tradition

GEORGE MELNYK

Occasional Paper Series

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CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF CO-OPERATIVES



UNIVERSITY OF  
SASKATCHEWAN

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**The Co-operative Farming Tradition**

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Centre for the Study of Co-operatives

101 Diefenbaker Place

University of Saskatchewan

Saskatoon SK S7N 5B8

Phone: (306) 966-8509 / Fax: (306) 966-8517

E-mail: [coop.studies@usask.ca](mailto:coop.studies@usask.ca) / Website: <http://www.usaskstudies.coop>

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George Melnyk



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## Introduction

Nestled in the gently rolling country of southwest Saskatchewan is a special place — a small circle of houses and outlying farm buildings. This is the Matador Farm Pool, successor to the Matador Co-operative Farm, one of the original settlements of Saskatchewan's postwar co-operative community movement and its last survivor.

Matador has a patriarch. He is a compact, athletically built man in his seventies, who currently enjoys organic gardening and the solar-heated green house with hot tub which he has built onto his 1950s stucco bungalow. His name is Lorne Dietrick and he has been here since the beginning — 1946. I first met him in the mid-1980s, when I was writing *The Search for Community*, my first book on co-operatives.<sup>1</sup> He was retired, a grandfather, and, as I found out, the guardian of the Matador story and the co-operative farming tradition that began at the end of World War Two.

The co-operative tradition arose in Western Canada at the end of the nineteenth century and became an integral part of the European farm settlement of the West. It was in the newly created farm economy that the co-operative tradition took root. Co-operative forms of ownership became the basic antidote to the profiteering of grain merchants and the railways and the main tool for the economic advancement of individual farmers and their families. The movement culminated in the late 1920s with the formation of wheat pools to market prairie grain.<sup>2</sup>

This tradition of rural co-operation was basically the Rochdale tradition, which can be viewed as *liberal democratic*, i.e., a form of co-operative organization that accepts the

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<sup>1</sup> G. Melnyk, *The Search for Community: From Utopia to a Co-operative Society* (Montreal, Black Rose Books, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> An excellent introduction to the Western Canadian co-operative movement is provided by Ian MacPherson, *The Co-operative Movement on the Prairies 1900-1955*, Booklet 33 (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1979).

existence of the capitalist marketplace, that respects private property and that provides a unifunctional service for its members.<sup>3</sup>

The liberal democratic co-operative tradition is neither communalist nor an advocate of intentional co-operative communities, which create a co-operative lifestyle for their members and link a variety of co-operative institutions under one organizational roof. Yet this liberal democratic tradition, because of its popularity, was viewed as the right environment for the growth of an intentional co-operative community called *co-operative farms*. The power of this liberal democratic co-operative tradition was so well-established in Saskatchewan that it provided the name for a new national political party — the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) — that first took power in that province in 1944. When the CCF became the government of Saskatchewan, it decided to take a bold leap forward in co-operative ideology. It fostered the establishment of co-operative farm communities, which were to be harbingers of a new socialist lifestyle more radical than had ever been seen before in Saskatchewan. The impulse for co-op farm communities came from this new ideology rather than from a simple expansion of the established co-operative liberal democratic tradition.

### **The History of a Movement**

The first effort at co-operative farming in Saskatchewan began at a place called Round Hill in 1943. The Round Hill Agricultural Production Co-operative Association was a machinery co-operative in which a group of farmers invested money to purchase machinery jointly to use on a rotation basis. In March 1945, the Sturgis Farm Co-operative Association was incorporated with nine members and 3,000 acres. It was the first of the full co-op farms rather than simply a machinery sharing co-op. The members were established farmers who pooled their land, livestock and equipment. It was the beginning of the unique

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<sup>3</sup> See Melnyk, *Search for Community*, pp. 15-32, for a more extensive explanation of the term *liberal democratic*.

co-op farm experiment that was being launched under the auspices of the democratic socialist vision of the newly elected CCF.

Co-operative farms were agricultural settlements whose land and assets were owned and worked co-operatively. The liberal democratic tradition in farming meant family ownership of farms as private property with the pooling of purchasing and marketing functions through farmer-owned co-operatives. In some cases, established farm lands were pooled by farmers attracted by the idea, while in other cases it was virgin land that was pioneered by returning war veterans who built new communities where none had existed. The co-op farm was basically a rejection of private property and single-family farming and the liberal democratic tradition. It was a socialist initiative not a liberal democratic one.

The government called a series of meetings at which it offered assistance to those who were willing to farm co-operatively. Assistance came in the form of free crown lands, operational loans, and technical assistance. Eventually three different government departments were involved — the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Reconstruction and Rehabilitation, and the Department of Co-operation and Co-operative Development.

In his memoirs Lorne Dietrick, who was one of the founders of the Matador Co-operative Farm and its first president, describes how he got involved in the movement:

In the winter of 1945 the Government made available the first tract of provincially-owned land for veterans' co-op farms. This was the old Matador ranch in southwestern Saskatchewan. The future members of the Matador co-operative farm came together at a conference held in Regina April 6-9, 1946.... Fifty veterans attended. We were told that each veteran was entitled to 480 acres in southern Saskatchewan and 320 acres in the north....<sup>4</sup>

Lorne, who had served in the Navy during the war, was a young man of 30. The other founding members were also demobilized veterans, mostly young, single men. The CCF viewed the creation of co-op farms as a way of providing for the resettlement of these

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<sup>4</sup> L. Dietrick, "Matador: The Memoirs of a Co-operative Farmer," unpublished manuscript, pp. 24-35.

Saskatchewan veterans, who were willing to try the new and radical route of co-operative farming.

The Matador group of veterans immediately began the process of creating a community at Matador and turning dry ranchland into productive farmland. A 1949 pamphlet published by the Saskatchewan Government has photos of these early days: a line of men planting a row of saplings; a quonset hut being pulled on-site by a tractor; the first farm homes standing in a semi-circle on the bald prairie.<sup>5</sup> The men had been granted 10,000 acres of grass prairie, but the *Veteran's Land Act* did not allow the federal grant of \$2,320 per veteran to be pooled co-operatively. So the provincial government made up for the lack of federal grants with its own money repayable at three percent interest. The veterans had a 33-year lease on the property with an option to purchase after 10 years and rent payable at 1/7 the value of the crop. With about \$40,000 in capital and the goodwill and support of the provincial government, the 17 men of Matador began their pioneering work.

Lorne describes how things got going:

...[T]he experimental farm at Swift Current made available a bunk house and a cook car for use on the Matador.... The next day we picked up the bunkhouse and headed for Matador....

Our membership was made up of single and married people. We decided that the married couples should have a home and a lot for their own use. The single men would live in a dormitory.... The first year we were able to build the houses for the married couples and the dorm....<sup>6</sup>

By 1948 the federal government had relented and provided the veterans their grants. The provincial government was repaid, but the federal government insisted that each co-op farm be limited to 10 members, so Matador had to split in two. The veteran's grants were important because they provided the only capital the members had.

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Wright, *Co-operative Farming in Saskatchewan* (Regina: Government of Saskatchewan Bureau of Publications, 1949).

<sup>6</sup> Dietrick, "Memoirs," p. 40.

Matador was a well-known part of an explosion of co-op farms from 1945 to 1952. By 1946 there were five co-op farms incorporated.<sup>7</sup> By 1950 twenty co-op farms with a total of 210 members were set up. The total number of co-op farms peaked at 32 in 1952. In these early years the average membership of a co-op farm was 11 members. Added to this number were spouses and children that resulted in a total of 30 to 50 persons living on a co-op farm. Matador had 63 residents.<sup>8</sup>

By 1952, after eight years of government encouragement, the co-op farm population stood at less than 1,000, out of a total farm population of 400,000.<sup>9</sup> The CCF government had been re-elected twice since 1944 and it had to appeal to a broad base of the electorate, an electorate for whom the heady co-op farm idea of 1944 no longer had much relevance or interest.<sup>10</sup> The number of registered co-op farms began a steady decline. In 1956/57, there were 27 registered but only 19 of those reported. Ten years later there were 23 still registered but only 12 reported. Those 12 had but 68 members. In 1972 there were 24 co-op farms on the books, but only 11 of them reported and they had only 61 members.<sup>11</sup> Instead of an average size of 11, the average size had dropped to 5.5 members, a decrease of 50 percent over the early years.

When I first visited Matador, some 38 years after it was founded, the original houses had been replaced by large, contemporary ranch-style homes for the new generation of members. These new places expressed a certain level of achievement, material success and comfort. Lorne Dietrick and his wife, Kay, continued to live in their modest, original

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<sup>7</sup> *Saskatchewan Department of Co-operation and Co-operative Development Annual Report, 1946 to 1952 inclusive.*

<sup>8</sup> Watson H. Porter, "A Striking Example of Co-operative Farming at Matador," *Farmers Advocate and Canadian Countryman*, October 4, 1952, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> George Melnyk, "Co-operative Farming: A Model for Worker Ownership in Agriculture" in Jack Quarter and George Melnyk, *Partners in Enterprise: The Worker Ownership Phenomenon* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1989), p. 93.

<sup>10</sup> See George Melnyk, "The Role of the State in the Establishment of Co-operative Farms in Canada: The Early Years," *Journal of Rural Co-operation*, Vol. XV, No. 1, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> *Saskatchewan Department of Co-operation and Co-operative Development Annual Report, 1956 to 1972 inclusive.*

home. Of the few old buildings still standing was the one-room school house, where Lorne's wife had taught. Its windows were broken, its former white paint grey and peeling, and nailed to its side was a worn, faded sign, "Matador Co-op Farm." The fact that this unused building remained and yet was not kept up expressed the ambivalent relationship of the current generation to the past. It was a past that had nurtured them but which was now behind them — it was history. A photo of the 1979 grand reunion of Matador residents and former residents and their children shows a large gathering that looked on the surface like a huge extended family. I wondered what Matador would be like today if all these people were still here and instead of a hamlet, there were 20 or 30 houses.

One of the major areas for the establishment of co-op farms was the northeastern mixed-forest region of the province in an area called Carrot River, where five veterans' farms were incorporated in 1948. They were called River Bend, Sunnysdale, Pasquia Hills, Spruce Home and Sturdy. The land was bush and had to be cleared for farming, using bulldozers and tractors. It was a true pioneer experience that most Saskatchewan farms had undergone much earlier.

In 1949 Lorne Dietrick spent a week at the Carrot River project on behalf of the Department of Co-operatives and Co-operative Development, and he had misgivings about the size of the project and the motivation of some of its members.<sup>12</sup> He felt the area should have a mix of co-operative and private property farms. A few years later the Carrot River co-op farms, facing harsh conditions, began to dissolve.

Conditions at Matador continued to improve during the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1953 the co-op had 6,300 acres of crop, most of it in wheat with a projected harvest of 150,000 bushels.<sup>13</sup> By this time the 17 veterans, who were mostly single men in 1946, had married and had begun families.<sup>14</sup> The official membership of the co-op remained male and

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<sup>12</sup> Dietrick, "Memoirs," p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> Porter, "Striking Example," p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

the women who came to Matador tried to recreate the single-family units to which they were accustomed. They were not interested in communal facilities and did not play a role in farm work. Childrearing and house work were the main female activities at the time.<sup>15</sup> Lorne feels that the co-op community would have done better if women had gotten more involved, but attitudes were different then.

Economically, relations at Matador were tied to the issue of land tenure and private ownership. Originally the land had been leased in units of 480 acres per member, who in turn leased this acreage to the co-op. In 1956 the right-to-purchase clause in the leases kicked in and Matador faced its first major internal crisis.

Three of the members decided to leave the co-op. They took their houses from Matador to the neighbouring village of Kyle. In an article published several years after the 1956 split, one of the Matador women is quoted as saying, "We can't get used to losing Ruby and Beth.... All of us feel as if a part of the life here was torn from Matador. It wasn't the women's fault. If it hadn't been for the women on the farm, we might have lost more in this crisis."<sup>16</sup> Lorne likens the event to the pain of divorce.

The decrease in the size of the co-op was made up partially by adding new members later on but the general trend of decline in co-op farms was firmly established. At the same time the number of "production co-ops," which involved a limited form of machinery pooling or pasture sharing increased from 52 in 1949 to 313 in 1964.<sup>17</sup> It was obvious that the intentional community lifestyle was not attracting people the way the single-family farm was.

The co-op farms that were functioning in the 1970s were mostly family operations, that is, related members of a family who had chosen to incorporate as a co-operative in which each member held an equal interest. In other words, the great experiment in

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Cooperstock, "Prior Socialization and Co-operative Farming," in B. Blishen et al., eds., *Canadian Society* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 227-28, and Dietrick, "Memoirs," p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> *Family Herald*, February, 1958.

<sup>17</sup> "Report of the Agricultural Production Co-op Conference, 1964." Courtesy L. Dietrick.

co-operative living and owning had been reduced to a pragmatic solution to the need for larger and larger acreages to create a profitable farm operation run by family members. The bond was traditional kinship and not socialism. Eventually co-operative farms became mainly an extended family farm.

What were the causes of the co-op farm movement's quick rise and gradual demise? Initially the input of the CCF government gave the movement credibility and support. It was viewed as a noble leftwing experiment that had state sanction and involvement. However, this founding support waned after 1952 when the movement came to be viewed as one of narrow appeal and unimportant to CCF re-election. The days of interest in collectivization when the Soviet Union was an ally (1944) had been replaced by the Cold War, when everything leftwing and collective was suspect. Co-op farms now had to survive in a hostile environment.

Secondly, the experiment never achieved a critical mass that would allow it to evolve through the three stages of co-operative growth that characterizes successful co-operative movements — utopian, movement and systems.<sup>18</sup> The utopian stage is the stage of experimentation, model building and development. The movement stage is the stage of replication and proliferation. The systems stage is one of hierarchical structure and organizational rigidity. Co-op farms never matured beyond the utopian stage. Their numbers were too small and their appeal too limited to have a successful movement stage.

Thirdly, there was an “absence of boundaries between co-operative farms and their envioning communities” as one observer put it.<sup>19</sup> Lorne Dietrick mentions one episode that captures the tension between internal and external values. When he took a public stance as a member of the peace movement of the fifties, some members of Matador took out an ad in the local paper disassociating themselves from his views.<sup>20</sup> They did not want Matador to

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<sup>18</sup> Melnyk, *Search for Community*, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Cooperstock, “Prior Socialization,” p. 237.

<sup>20</sup> Dietrick, “Memoirs,” p. 82.

be viewed as a place of leftwing radicalism. The emphasis at Matador was on integration with the views and values of the wider society because acceptance is critical to those who are considered different.

In addition, the experience of military camaraderie that had underpinned the early years at Matador — the sense of brotherhood among the single men — was changed by marriage and loyalty to family and children. These traditional responsibilities and commitments modified the focus of the members' lives. Of course, the slow disintegration of other co-op farms had a demoralizing effect on those who remained in the movement. An ever-shrinking co-op farm reality increased the stress on the survivors because departure from the movement was more feasible than relocation within it. Psychologically, a person seeks to be associated with success rather than demise. At Matador, the gradual demise of the movement meant that Matador as a single entity became more and more of an island in a sea of single-family farms.

Meanwhile, the acculturation of the generation born at Matador was progressing. The onsite school closed in 1966 because of declining enrollment and the remaining children were bused to outside schools. As well, the children of Matador were reaching the age of maturity in the late sixties and their future had to be accounted for. Since the co-op farm was just that — a farm — those who did not want to be farmers or for whom there was no room at Matador had to leave, and that meant the majority of children. They were absorbed into the mainstream elsewhere since there were no other co-op farms to move to and there was no energy to start new ones or new co-operative enterprises.

The issue of land for the new generation and the continuation of co-op farming at Matador was resolved in 1974, when the successor to the CCF, the NDP, was in power. The NDP government had proposed in 1971 the establishment of a *land bank* which would purchase land from retiring farmers and then lease it back to their children or other young farmers. The program was meant to support the continuation of the single-family farm and so did not apply to farms incorporated as co-ops.

Eventually an adjustment was made to the program and the younger generation incorporated an entity called the Matador Farm Pool. It leased the Matador lands from the Land Bank, which had purchased it from the retiring co-op farmers. At the time, only about 25 people were left at Matador but the transfer brought in another 20. The male members of the new co-op were all under 30 years of age.<sup>21</sup>

By the mid-1980s there were only eight official members of the Pool remaining and the population was made up of children and grandchildren of the original members as well as the new people that joined in the 1974 transfer. Lorne and Kay Dietrick decided to stay, while the majority of the founders left.

The other co-op farms that were created by nonrelated members have long gone, including the neighbouring co-op farm at Beechy which was sold to private interests and then resold to a Hutterite colony. Matador remains, after almost half a century, a symbol of a socialist experiment unique to Canada. Its longevity has saved the honour of the co-op farm movement, but even the feisty and committed Lorne Dietrick eyes the future of group farming as bleak. He predicts that even more consolidation of the membership will occur at Matador in the future.

### **Reflection On A Movement**

Intense community life requires adjustment and an ideological or religious fervour that sustains members when things get rough. The courage of maintaining unpopular convictions and actually living those convictions over a period of decades requires a special kind of person. All the mechanisms of the dominant society are oriented toward conformity. Nonconformity survives only when it is strong and powerful and large enough to attract a constant flow of new adherents, creating within its ever-expanding boundaries its own

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

system of conformity. Matador and the other co-op farms never achieved that critical mass nor that powerful subculture that meant growth.

One of the major long-term problems of co-op farms was a trend that affected all agriculture — the trend to fewer farmers operating ever larger units. In 1941, 60 percent of the workforce in Saskatchewan was engaged in agriculture, while in 1981 it was a mere 18 percent.<sup>22</sup> Today it is probably closer to 12 percent. Matador was part of the shrinkage occurring throughout the province. Its land base did not grow so the community shrank to fit the land base, which could support fewer and fewer families. At the time Matador was formed there were 130,000 farmers in Saskatchewan. This had dropped to 60,000 by 1985.<sup>23</sup> Matador's membership fits this trend perfectly, falling from 17 to eight. By 1990 there were only 50,000 farmers left in the province. One suspects that at Matador the number of members will decline, reflecting the general trend. Only an increase in the size of Matador, an ever-expanding number of co-op farms, and other enterprises and occupations could have made co-op farming a significant socio-economic reality. Why did this not happen?

Several possibilities may explain the lack of expansion at Matador. The continuing uncertainty over land tenure and the unclear legal basis for co-op farm landholding was a destabilizing factor. If the Matador co-op had bought the Beechy co-op nearby, then a sense of growth and sharing may have arisen once again as there had been in the 1940s. The old tree would have given rise to new shoots. But this need was not acted upon at Matador. No doubt economics had something to do with it, but money is never an insurmountable obstacle, only a temporary obstacle. The economic argument usually is an excuse to cover something more fundamental — the lack of a motivating vision that overcomes individual

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<sup>22</sup> Gerald Friesen, "The Prairie West Since 1945: An Historical Survey," in A.W. Rasporich, ed., *The Making of the Modern West: Western Canada Since 1945* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1984), p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> A Nikiforuk, Sheila Pratt and Don Wanagas, *Running on Empty: Alberta After the Boom* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1987), p. 51.

self-interest for a wider good. Unfortunately, the co-op farm movement had deteriorated to such an extent that it no longer represented anything wider. The only common good was Matador itself and the interests of its members.

Any radical movement requires leadership if it is to survive and grow. The co-op farm movement was initially led by politicians and ideologically motivated bureaucrats who inspired people to join. The movement never developed its own indigenous cadre. Although it did set up a federation of co-ops in 1949, this federation was more a traditional lobby group for government aid than the collective voice of a new society.

In contrast, the liberal democratic co-ops of Saskatchewan were indigenously led and member-inspired. They were first and foremost a self-help movement that was initiated outside of government. This was not true of the co-op farms. As well the liberal democratic co-ops viewed the co-op farm movement as a reality on its fringe — a freak. The co-op farms were an experiment in group living akin to the kibbutzim of Israel and the kolхозes of Russia and this was antithetical to the liberal democratic tradition.<sup>24</sup> Only outstanding leadership could provide the focus for expansion in light of the new atmosphere of hostility. This was lacking.

The co-op farm experiment was itself ideologically confused and divided. While it was a departure from the norm in society, it tried to structure and view itself as living a lifestyle similar to its single-family farm neighbours. Initial adherents to the concept came for a variety of reasons, some were high-minded while others were opportunistic. Some were revolutionaries while others were simply interested in government aid. The commitment to co-operative living varied from person to person. Individual family residences and integration into the wider community were prominent goals. This resulted in a broad range of political opinion and attitudes, which the co-op farms had to work out

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<sup>24</sup> Henrik F. Infield, *Utopia and Experiment: Essays in the Sociology of Co-operation* (New York: Praeger, 1955).

internally. There was no coherent, unified body of thought to guide the experiment and build loyalty. People worked things out as they went along.

There was also a failed process of socialization. Initially some of the settlements had their own one-room school houses and here the children were raised in a spirit of co-operative ideology practiced by their parents. By the 1960s these schools had to be closed down as children were bused to consolidated schools. At this point the children became exposed to the predominant values of the wider society, which encouraged individual achievement, competitiveness and hierarchy. Because the co-op farms were scattered over a vast land area, they were dependent on the educational resources of society rather than being able to build institutions that would foster their own values.

The co-op farms did not have an indigenous secular utopian tradition to relate to. Whatever co-operative community movements they may have wished to identify with were not in Canada. This isolation resulted from their position as pioneers because earlier attempts at secular utopianism had been short-lived. They were as much the creators of a tradition as its heirs. This founding role placed a heavy burden on the experiment.

It was in the area of external support that co-op farms had advantages, but even here the extent of the support meant a certain level of dependence which later was to help undermine the experiment. In fact the initial government activity on behalf of co-op farms did not allow a substantial self-help attitude to appear which would have promoted mutual aid and interdependence among co-op farms. Instead co-op farms turned more to government assistance than to each other. The internal strength necessary to build a successful movement simply never matured. The result was gradual demise.

Matador as a co-operative farm has entered the mythology of Saskatchewan's democratic socialist identity. It has come to symbolize an indigenous form of collective economy. Here was a homemade social experiment with an historic track record that cannot be ignored or forgotten. And the keeper of the myth of Matador has been Lorne Dietrick.

His vision has moved Matador from the realm of history to the realm of myth. It is a vision worth exploring.

### **One Man's Vision**

Matador is not an easy place to find for a city person like myself who feels uncomfortable on empty gravel country roads that seem to lead every which way. When I first reached Matador I thought it resembled a tiny kibbutz. There was a lot of land around Matador and no other farms easily visible. Coming upon a cluster of homes and farm buildings in the middle of *nowhere* only added to its identity as a mythic oasis of collectivism.

The 1950s home that the Dietricks live in is an important part of Lorne's commitment to the founding days. Maintaining it and keeping it as a home when the other old places are gone, as well as continuing to live at Matador, has come to symbolize Lorne Dietrick's association with the early years. He remains a bridge between the early work and that of today. That home and his continued presence at Matador is a permanent link to the history of the place, which he preserves and treasures.

He had positioned himself, figuratively speaking, at the door to Matador and every interested stranger, from journalist to academic, deals with him. Lorne's strong idealism about co-op farming, his devotion to Matador, and his leftwing views have preserved a tradition.

In 1986, I was appointed research associate of the Canadian Plains Research Centre, University of Regina, to help Lorne with his memoirs and also to begin work on a broader scholarly history of co-op farming. For two years Lorne and I worked on his memoirs — he as author, I as editor. Most of the relationship was on paper — letters and edited or typed pages of the manuscript. His letters were often handwritten in pencil, while mine were invariably typed, often on letterhead. There was a spontaneous quality to his work as he wrung experiences out of his memory for my comment and typing. My letters were more

formal as I played the persona of the professional editor. His life unfolded on these sheets of paper, which I returned to him after photocopying.

In his writing, Lorne was eager to develop the story as he saw it. He was reticent to write about his pre-Matador life, as if it did not matter, and when he wrote about Matador he was cautious and not very personal. I was forever trying to get him to open up about personal incidents of community life.<sup>25</sup> I realize now his reserve came from the need to focus on essentials. Its enemies were not inside so much as outside — a betraying government, a hostile social and political environment. External forces and not internal forces were the main causes of any failing in the movement was his message.

My appointment to the research centre was renewed in 1987 and we did two more drafts with the final one completed by the summer of 1988. Just before its completion I visited Lorne once again. It was a time of drought with no rain all spring. Lorne took me up to see the spring that provided water for the hamlet. Walking the dried out land to the spring was the first time I had experienced the land beyond the yards and gardens of the hamlet. Visiting the spring was a return to the source. The spring had figured in the choice of the original site and Lorne liked the fact that the water went into people's homes by the natural force of gravity, though the land where it was located was no longer owned by Matador. For Saskatchewan dryland water it is was excellent. Matador was a real oasis, not just a mythological one.

Uncovering the dark well to check the water level was like peering into the past, into some kind of eternal mirror, where the reflection of Matador was always fresh and clear. I realized that was Lorne's vision of Matador — always fresh and clear like that spring. It was more than water to him; it was the very lifeblood of Matador and symbolized the flow of history as he viewed it. It was genuine, unpolluted, and perpetual — the way he had hoped co-op farms might be.

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<sup>25</sup> L. Dietrick, letter to G. Melnyk, August 24, 1986.

In a 1983 book on prairie farming which contains an interview with Lorne, there is a photo of him standing at the head of a portable picnic table around which are seated men of the swathing crew.<sup>26</sup> It is his stance of leadership and is also visible in a 1948 photo of him at the head of the Matador farm baseball team, glove in hand.<sup>27</sup> It should be remembered that at the beginning he had been elected Matador's president.

Lorne has been at Matador from the beginning and he will die a resident of Matador. It has been his life's project and he cannot abandon it as others have. His dedication to the ideal of co-op farming, his pragmatic efforts to keep things going, and his political work with government to find solutions and get assistance form the core of his contribution. I suspect that Matador would not exist as a co-operative venture today if it were not for Lorne Dietrick. For that, Matador residents and those like myself, who value its myth, will be ever grateful.

His intensity came from a deep ideological belief, which, I suspect, few others at Matador shared. "The philosophy required for the development of co-operative farming," he writes in his memoirs, "must emphasize the building of a co-operative society rather than a competitive one."<sup>28</sup> In this statement are the keys to understanding his vision. First of all, he is clear that ideology is essential. Without that ideological conviction there can be no development. Unfortunately, ideological conviction was not a prerequisite for this social experiment, nor was the content of that ideology all that clear and precise.

Second, the goal of his ideology is the creation of a co-operative society to replace the capitalist one. That is what Lorne has always wanted. However, such a grand vision only makes sense when a revolutionary state creates these collectives in place of private property. There was little likelihood that a CCF or NDP government would mandate such a radical move, though, in the early days there was this hope.

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<sup>26</sup> Lois Ross, *Prairie Lives: The Changing Face of Farming* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 1983), p. 117.

<sup>27</sup> Jim Wright, *Co-operative Farming*, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> Dietrick, "Memoirs," p. 51.

Third, there is the concept of builder. Lorne Dietrick's experience of Matador and co-op farming is that of a founder and builder, of a social entrepreneur who started from scratch, but that role is superceded in time. It is valuable, essential and to be commemorated, but it is not the total experience. Matador and co-op farming is a continuum in which other visions and myths eventually develop and take root. Historical experience moves on. Other people and other needs come into play. Because of the ideological convictions of Lorne Dietrick, and perhaps a few others, Matador had the strongest foundation of any of the 1940s co-op farms. The umbrella of co-operative philosophy and liberal democratic co-op institutions for which Saskatchewan is famous proved to be a leaky one with poor protection for co-operative communities that said no to the single-family farm.

The last sentence in his memoirs states, "...if the privatization schemes of current governments continue there will be no co-op farms left by the year 2000."<sup>29</sup> Here in a nutshell is the underlying belief that kept his vision alive and also limited Matador. For Lorne the role of the state is fundamental. He is a socialist from the time when both communist and social democrats believed that the state was the great harbinger of justice and new institutions and that little could happen without sympathetic governments. Governments in the hands of capitalists made things easy for capitalists, so governments in the hands of the people are necessary to reverse things. When co-op farms were in their heyday, so were the collective farms of the Soviet Union, and the Chinese were to soon communalize all agricultural production.

This context molded Lorne's thinking and his approach to Matador and the co-op farm movement. He felt that the movement could not go it alone. The land, the financial and legislative assistance, and the legitimacy that the CCF government gave co-op farming by pronouncing it a state program was the way co-op farming was first experienced. Lorne approved the role of the state in co-op farming because he felt that this would help ensure its

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 99

success. Any bitterness that he may feel about the experiment comes as an expression of betrayal by the powers that be — politicians that gave up. Co-op farming was a child of the state and when the state turned his back on the child, the child felt abandoned.<sup>30</sup> Eventually it had to stand on its own two feet and when it did those feet were wobbly indeed.

Co-operative farming is more than a socio-economic experience for Lorne. It is a political vision. He is a political person who ran twice for provincial office (1940s and 1960s). There is a photo of Lorne on a train in China in 1976, the year Mao died. It is a closeup of him looking out the window of the train. He is gazing intensely into the distance. His face is in profile. It is a fitting photo for a visionary of group farming in a country, China, where group farming was the imposed norm. Here the believer and the keeper of the faith in co-op farming could *see* co-operative society. China served as a substitute visionary home, but his true home was an isolated island of socialism in a sea of single-family private farms.

One day, the collective experience at Matador will be unraveled and a new interpretation will arise. Lorne's vision will be part of that. Meanwhile the myth of the noble experiment and the viability of group farming that Lorne believes in will survive and will serve us in good stead. For those who have come to question government, it is all too easy to forget that those who grew up during its seeming importance were, like co-op farms themselves, in harmony with their times.

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<sup>30</sup> See G. Melnyk, *The CCF and the Establishment of Co-operative Farms in Saskatchewan 1944-1952*, in J. Andre and D. Laycock, eds., *The Theory and Practice of Co-operative Property*, Proceedings of Canadian Association for Studies in Co-operation Annual Meeting, 1987 (Saskatoon: Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, 1988), pp. 111-121.