

Is the pace of life in the countryside making the drop-in visit a thing of the past?

Why don't you drop by and see us sometime?

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Drop in and see us sometime. How often have we heard that and winced. We say "we will," but we know we probably won't.

You could call it bad manners. We should know how to "pop in" for the short visits our neighbours invite us for. We used to go. Remember playing with the kittens outside, or peering into the glassy depths of Mrs. So and So's china cabinet, when parents took us on their visits?

But many don't do much visiting anymore. Now we wave from the road at our neighbours, see them maybe once a year, during Christmas power visiting. The "sorry, busy" excuse is used often when we run into them. Plus, there's a niggling feeling nowadays that it would be "popping in" that's bad manners, maybe even intrusive.

What changed? Not very long ago, most farm homes expected neighbours to drop by often — and they did.

Boissevain-area farmer Elaine Froese says it's a worrisome trend. "Is it my imagination, or are we losing the art of visiting?" she writes in her new book *Planting the Seed of Hope*. Froese says she's seen, in as little as 25 years, a real decline in the way rural families stop in to see each other. It's left those expecting visitors feeling a bit bereft, she says, and those who get invited and can't respond to an open-ended invitation feeling awkward.

Many people now feel they need a very specific invitation, or at the very least, should call and arrange the visit ahead of time, says Froese. "It really seems that the culture or etiquette of dropping by or having the neighbours over is really lost."

Congenial visiting

Is it? It probably depends who you ask. Residents in close-knit small towns, or in some rural districts, might argue, that no, in fact, the neighbours still come regularly to call, and that the socializing they do with them is one of the most rewarding things about rural life. Chances are though, they may be older folk, with the social graces learned over a lifetime's congenial visiting, to still know how to visit — and to receive visitors. It's a younger generation, busy with kids and work that might say, yes, home visiting the neighbours has gotten pushed way down on the agenda. They're the ones that feel the twinges, when they get those open-ended "come for coffee" invitations, and aren't sure how to respond.

"If you say to people, 'please drop in, or please come and see me,' I think most people don't take you at your word anymore," says Froese. "They may think you're just being nice and polite."



A recent change

It's a big change in the social life of farm and rural people, and seen only in the last generation, says University of Manitoba professor in the department of sociology Dr. Cheryl Albas. Albas, like Froese, grew up on a family farm and remembers as well, when people frequently dropped in to her parents' home unannounced. They'd exchange community news over coffee or perhaps a meal, then depart.

It's no mystery as to why it's not happening so much, or not at all anymore.

Many things contribute to a decline in socializing between neighbours, says Albas.

A major factor is women who work outside the home. When more women stayed home all day, one of their primary roles was keeping the household open to visitors, and generally ran the family's social life. She was, in sociological terms, "on call for the group" but today's women working outside the home all day has little time left over for that, says Albas.

Other things have contributed to a decline in socializing. Better roads and cars can and do take families well beyond the vicinity of immediate neighbours to meet social needs. Rural communities centered around schools and churches remain places where strong socializing can continue, but it's where those institutions

have closed that neighbourliness can drop off. Institutions like these could contribute to a lot more interaction between local people a lot more of the time, says Albas, which is why communities know they're coming unglued, literally, when they know a school is about to close.

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"When kids are bussed out of the community, then they've lost those ties to individual neighbours," says Albas.

You don't need the neighbours for entertainment anymore either, thanks to easy access to TV and the Internet. "You don't even have to go outside the home for your entertainment anymore," says Albas.

It's things such as that, plus overall improved prosperity in the countryside, which has the downside of "creating social differentiation" that's leading to a sort of "blurring of rural and urban life" nowadays, Albas con-

tinues. The neighbours dropping in for short, spontaneous visits harkens back to an era when rural people simply shared a lot more "in common" and, having survived settlement, felt much more interdependent than nowadays.

That people feel they may intrude to stop in unannounced stems from a generally more private, and independent lives people now lead.

"We also put a lot more emphasis on the individual than the group nowadays," adds Albas.

Children tow parents

And on children.

Froese says she's observed that much more of the adult socializing now goes on while parents attend the activities of their children. Now, more often than visiting each other in their homes, she says, adults will do their visiting at the rink or ball diamonds, or during committee and volunteer work. That's simply because families focus a lot more now on what the kids want to do, and if they don't want to go visiting, they don't go, says Froese.

"Parents used to take the kids in tow," she says. "Now children tow parents where they want to go."

Are the chats in the bleachers the same thing as the kitchen table banter? Froese doubts it. There the visiting that goes on tends to be of a much more

superficial nature, than what you'll derive from seeing your neighbours in their homes, or having them in to yours, says Froese. Also, she stresses, the dropping in to see someone is a real act of showing you care enough about them, that you've come deliberately to see how they are.

Reluctant to call it loneliness, Froese says what she does detect a lot of is simply a longing among a lot of rural people for more socializing to go on than actually is. "I'm not sure if you call it loneliness, but there's this huge sense of 'I wish someone would call, I wish someone would drop by,'" she says.

And it's not just the kids or grandkids people want to see, although lack of extended family around can really make the countryside feel lonely. That's opened a major gap in many farm families' lives as well, says Froese.

Froese says she and her husband, although having many friends nearby, experience that themselves. "We have no relatives within three hours of us," she said.

Is the countryside becoming a lonelier place? Is resolve to go for that visit going to change that? Given all the changes in farming and rural communities, including the general pace of the lives most people now lead, it's probably not so simple as that, says Albas.

Where lots of socializing continues in the countryside, she said, focuses around food events. It's at the local restaurants, the coffee shops, and all the various community suppers where you find rural people still doing a lot of their visiting with each other, she says.

Strengthening community

Froese, says as a farm family coach, she always stresses the importance of connecting with the wider community, and urges rural people to make those visits, and generally pursue neighbourliness in a deliberate way. It's one of the good things about living in rural communities, and if it's disappearing, we're letting it go, she says.

Making an effort, on the other hand, to establish stronger relationships with neighbours, and build community can move it the other direction, she says. In the long term, that's better for you, and better for the community as a whole.

"I'm a believer in the upward cycle," says Froese. "The act of a visit is a way to build up a strong sense of resiliency. When you know that someone cares about you by spending time with you, then I think you're less likely to disconnect from them in times when you really need help, or just really need to know that someone isn't going solve your problems for you but will care enough to drop by and see how you're doing."

"That's what neighbours do for each other," she adds.