

## Colonies at a crossroads



David Hofer is the secretary and treasurer of the White Lake Hutterite colony in Alberta. Axel Tardieu/Radio-Canada CALGARY

Some Hutterites view technology as a necessary evil. Others worry about the future.

Axel Tardieu Radio-Canada Jul. 19, 2022

They've been a presence on the Canadian Prairies for generations, communities steeped in religion, farming and a culture harkening back centuries to their European roots.

But after years of hard-won growth – and undying efforts to keep the temptations of the secular world at bay – many Hutterite colonies now find themselves at a crossroads.

Technology is essential for their communities' growing, large-scale farms, but at the same time it puts their unique way of life at risk.

“I’m very scared if things keep on going in this modern way of life, I’m afraid our young people are going to be misled. But we pray every day,” said John Hofer, the pastor and minister of White Lake Colony north of Lethbridge, Alta.



John Hofer, 85, is the pastor and minister of the White Lake colony in Alberta. Axel Tardieu/Radio-Canada

Still, some things are constant.

Every lunchtime at the White Lake colony, the community comes together to eat in the dining hall. The room is divided in half, the women on the left, the men on the right.

Everyone knows their job. The women cook and do the dishes. The men have dinner and then go to work. Their clothes are made on-site and the meals are made with products from the farm.

Hutterites live outside of cities and towns. There are differences of opinion about technology among communities across the country, but many believe their society is best preserved in a rural setting.





The White Lake Hutterite colony is located north of Lethbridge, Alta. Axel Tardieu/Radio-Canada

The communities have one main activity: agriculture.

More than 80 people live at the White Lake colony, made up of 19 Christian Anabaptist families who primarily speak German.

“The Hutterites are unusual,” said John Lehr, professor emeritus of geography at the University of Winnipeg, who has studied nearly 40 Hutterite colonies.

“They are without any doubt the longest lasting, truly communal society anywhere in the world.”







*While Hutterites make up a tiny fraction of the Alberta population, they produce 80 per cent of the eggs, 40 per cent of the pork, 25 per cent of the milk and 20 per cent of the poultry. Axel Tardieu/Radio-Canada*

## Land first

David Hofer, secretary and treasurer of the White Lake colony, is one of the colony's senior members. He rides a quad to get around the 20,000 acre farm.

Their clothes may look old fashioned, but their farming equipment follows the latest trends.

"You can't run a farm anymore without a computer," said Hofer, who added that technology helps the community better understand the state of the crops, and communicate easily if there is a problem.



The White Lake colony covers 20,000 acres. Axel Tardieu/Radio-Canada

Their agricultural activities are linked to the world market. Their potatoes end up in Korea and at McDonald's. Their chickens and pigs are sold in major grocery stores.

They're also faced with the same issues as other farmers.

"We have to work a lot harder right now. You have to go into specialty crops to make that high price equipment pay for itself," said Hofer. The colony is now growing corn and lentils to offset the rising cost of fertilizer, gasoline, and electricity.



Even though the farming business isn't as lucrative as it used to be, most Hutterite colonies are doing well financially, said Simon Evans, adjunct professor of geography at the University of Calgary, who studied this topic in 2019.

"Hutterite agriculture in Alberta is flourishing. The next decade or two will surely see the trends that have been outlined continuing. There will be more colonies, and they will be larger," said Evans.



Following the Ten Commandments by the letter, Hutterites do not like to have their picture taken. Axel Tardieu/Radio-Canada

"By pursuing agricultural activities with the aid of modern technology and science, while at the same time adopting a self-sufficient lifestyle and strict limitations on consumer spending, the Hutterites have been able to accumulate capital on a scale, and at a pace, that would be the envy of any family farmer," said Evans.

Indeed, in terms of production, they punch above their weight.

While Hutterites make up a tiny fraction of the Alberta population, they produce 80 per cent of the eggs, 40 per cent of the pork, 25 per cent of the milk and 20 per cent of the poultry in the province, according to figures from Alberta Milk, Alberta Chicken Producers, Alberta Pork, and Egg Farmers of Alberta.



All of the colonies together own about four per cent of Alberta's farmland, said Ian MacLachlan, professor emeritus of geography at the University of Lethbridge.

The colonies also enjoy certain advantages inherent in their communal living.

It's a workforce that also does not take vacations, is not unionized and goes under the radar of Employment Standards, the organization responsible for compliance with working conditions in Alberta.

Are they more profitable than other farms? MNP accountant Scott Dickson, who does work for nearly 280 colonies across the country, says no. But Hutterites are careful to put aside money to open new colonies and invest in their operations.



“I have lots of colonies that do two, three or four per cent in a good year. I think that’s similar to most farm return on investment. When you consider fair value of the land ... return on investment compared to what you’d make putting in the bank account, they’re no better,” he said.

“Slim profit margins in agriculture make the hill that you have to climb to build the next place no matter what farmer you are, but the cost of capital is increasing exponentially.”

When a colony reaches 150 people, another is created to accommodate half of them. According to Hofer, the necessary budget averages around \$30 million dollars.

To stay competitive, colonies invest in modernized tractors and have learned to adapt to globalization. Settlements are branching out into new industries like high-end door and window manufacturing, sectors that require less land to purchase.



A girl wears a bonnet and holds a smartphone at White Lake Hutterite colony in Alberta. Axel Tardieu/Radio-Canada

Advances in technology help them to compete and some view it as a necessary evil. But others feel the presence of computers and the internet in some colonies does not bode well for the future.

“We don’t know what’s on there. They can spend too much time on there, too. We want them to be out in the field, in the tractors, working and not sitting on the phone all the time,” said David.

The elder Hofer, John, shares his fear.

“Maybe we shouldn’t get involved so much in this modern technology.”

## About the Author

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Axel Tardieu

*Axel Tardieu is a videojournalist for Radio-Canada in Calgary. Originally from Paris, France, he covers stories about social affairs, business, environment and tech.*

Hutterian colonies have long had more variety than public opinion has acknowledged. In the 1990’s as a crop hail adjuster across the prairies I saw it, or rather those colonies that even then diverged from the Luddite norm.

One hail storm pounded the crops of an entire colony North of Regina into the ground. Radically, the leadership there had insured heavily. (Insurance could be seen as distrust in God and an attempt to avoid His judgment.) The Boss asked us to come Sunday morning. We—the Boss, another adjuster, and myself—simply drove across the devastated fields, stopping occasionally for Mr. Hofer to peer down out his window and mutter “Sum Bitch,” chattering away otherwise in sing-song Hutterite German on the radio. We were done soon, able before lunch to write up and sign off on \$300 000+, a big sum at the time. The Boss and everyone sitting around in the office was feeling very pleased with themselves, though some looked a little weary and hungover from—I kid you not—having attended the Big Valley Jamboree that weekend. A snap of the fingers and a boy ran out to come back with a case of beer to celebrate before lunch. Boiled goose is what I remember.

That colony bought insurance again the next year—but from another company. The spurned agent had sealed the previous deal with a case of whisky from his trunk; maybe the next lucky agent had a better brand. TJB