

Ontario Agricultural College,
University of Guelph
Alumni Oral History

Graham Burton

B.Comm. 2017

Interviewed by Cameron Macphail



What year did you start at the Ontario Agricultural College?

In 2013, I started my first year at the Ontario Agricultural College at the University of Guelph.

Where did you grow up, and where did you attend high school?

Burlington, Ontario, where I attended Notre Dame Catholic Secondary School.

What made you decide to go to Guelph?

The location was good, it was far enough away from home that you could move away, but close enough you could visit on weekends. Besides that, it was really the agricultural program that intrigued me.

Have you always been interested in agriculture?

Yes, since a young age. My uncle and cousins have a farm out in Eastern Ontario, so that kind of captured my interest. Being able to combine it with a degree helped too, because you really need one these days. It was the best of both worlds. The Ontario Agricultural College made a lot of sense.

When did you graduate from the Ontario Agricultural College?

2017.

Were you looking at any other options other than Guelph?

I got accepted to Carleton University, the University of Ottawa, and Trent University. The programs at Carleton and Ottawa were general business programs. The program at

Trent was also related to agriculture, but I chose Guelph because of the location and some of my ties to the university.

What kind of ties?

I had some friends who had attended the University of Guelph before, and I had been there to visit a few times. My brother also went the year before me, and he took economics and finance. So, before I attended, I was able to tour the campus. I also had an uncle who attended years ago, but I am not sure about his program.

What program were you enrolled in at the Ontario Agricultural College?

I was in Food and Agricultural Business for the entirety of my time at the University of Guelph.

Did you have a favourite class or a particular subject you enjoyed?

In fourth year, the classes got more involved and relatable. We had an agricultural business class in fourth year where we got to create a business plan and pitch it to the professor. That was very interesting.

What was your business plan for that course?

We did hard cider. One of our group mates, who is a good friend of mine, has an apple orchard. We proposed that we were going to add a cidery to his apple orchard. Looking back now, we should have actually done it. It could have been successful. Everybody calls his dad Farmer Tom, so we were going to call it Farmer Tom's Cider.

Did you have a favourite professor, or did any stand out in particular?

I remember I got along well with Alfons Weersink; he was the professor of futures, options and agricultural management. Professor Weersink was good and cared that we would learn the material. He structured the class so you would work with the material directly instead of just a series of lectures.

You mentioned the draw of moving out from home, where did you live during your time at Guelph?

I lived in residence at the Lennox-Addington building in my first year. After that, I moved into a student house with four other guys at Briarlea Crescent. They were all in the

same program, so we would study together, and were close friends. We lived in the same house for the last three years. I really enjoyed it.

Did you enjoy the residence experience in first year?

It was fun. It was easy to meet people because you are all there living in residence, and you are close to everybody. I was in my own hallway, which was actually kind of nice, because I got to meet people from a wide variety of other programs in residence. I already knew most of the people in the Ontario Agricultural College through my classes.

Were you part of any clubs or extra-curricular activities outside of classes?

Yes, I was part of the Ontario Agricultural College Soil and Crop Club. The club would have industry guest speakers come in and talk to you about fertilizer, seeds, and so on. We also went on a few tours of different farms. I help out with that club now. I go in once a year and do a presentation for them on precision agriculture and John Deere. We have actually hired a few students through that program.

What did you do in terms of your social life during your years of study?

We socialized a lot. In second and third year we would try to go out every night of the week, except Sunday. As Aggies we always went to The Stampede Ranch on Thursdays. Other days we would go to Trapper's Alley in Downtown Guelph. Back then, there used to be a little bar called Squirrel Tooth Alice's, that is closed now, but we would go there because it was right at the end of our street. They would have a great open mic night on Tuesdays.

Did you get involved with any other activities at Guelph? Like homecoming, Gryphons games or anything else?

Yeah, there was always some party going on for homecoming. I remember going to a few hockey games because they would always have an Ontario Agricultural College or Aggie Night for us.

Did you feel like you were a part of the Ontario Agricultural College, or that it was a community within the University?

Oh yes, there was always things we were doing. Like the Good Times Banquet, along with other traditions. I was part of a square-dancing team with some close friends, and we would compete at College Royal and then at the Royal Fair in Toronto. We won one

year. I am not sure how we got involved in that, but someone asked us, and we decided to do it. Most of the time we would hang out with other Aggies. In any week there would usually be two or three events or something going on with the College.

Did you have one of the Aggie jackets or get into any other traditions?

I had one of those leather jackets. We always went down to Ridgetown for the Ontario Agricultural College Winter Games. There is a bit of historical rivalry between the schools, but it was never too competitive. I would play hockey and broom ball.

How many people were in your program or the Ontario Agricultural College during your time there?

I am not sure on the exact head count. I think our agricultural business degree was only thirty-five or so in our year. We got to know each other very well by taking courses together, and all the events. That said, we would also have different electives, so you were not always with the same people. With all the degrees, programs, and years at the Ontario Agricultural College, it is tough to know the exact numbers.

How many people would attend the Ontario Agricultural College events?

Different events would have different amounts of people. Some would get really big, like the Good Times Banquet, which would have a thousand or more people. There would be a lot of Ontario Agricultural College students, alumni, and so on.

What was your favourite thing about your time at Guelph?

I would say the social aspect of meeting and hanging out with a lot of close friends. A lot of people I work with on a day-to-day basis are other Guelph graduates. There are a few older graduates in my current company, and I met a lot of other people in the industry during my studies.

Did you go through any tough times or have any difficulties at Guelph?

No. First year is always tricky in getting used to university and the curriculum, but it helped that all our friends were in the same program. We would support each other in studying.

For your studies, was it focused in any particular area?

My degree was a bachelor of commerce and agriculture, which was heavy on the business side. It was not really focused on production and growing crops, but there are degrees focused on that, like crop science. You start in first- and second-year learning about basic micro and macroeconomics. In third and fourth year you learn more in-depth on grain trading. You learn about grain trading futures and options, hedging grain and all of that side. It is really for any commodity, but grain is the central example.

Did you learn about starting your own agricultural business or was it more about the environment of business?

It was more about generic business structure. An overview of the whole process instead of any particular part.

Would you recommend the Ontario Agricultural College?

Definitely. It gave me a good education base on generic business, economics, and marketing issues. The agriculture side has helped me a lot in my career. I would say it is foundational, but I do find myself using the core principles a fair bit. Outside of that, there is a lot of non-baseline knowledge I have learned since.

Did you find there were any courses you did not enjoy?

Econometrics. It was very math heavy and more focused on computer programming. It was about how to build patterns and trends within a computer program. It was good to learn, but quite in-depth. As hard as it was, it helped me learn about using computer code to create things, which is very popular today. A lot of what I do now involves computer codes. The explanations and information on coding could have been better, but it provided me with the base knowledge for dealing with it today.

I see that you were a Research Assistant at the Elora Research Station, what did that entail?

The Elora Research Station is a research beef and dairy farm. We oversaw all the feed and field crops that become the feed for all the dairy and beef research farms. So, I was operating equipment every day, doing hay and corn stillage. We were filling bunk silos with hay and corn stillage with tractors and other equipment. Since my job today involves supporting tractors, it was useful experience. I do not operate them day to day, but occasionally I still do.

What is your career now?

I am the Precision Agriculture Manager at Premier Equipment, which is a local John Deere dealership in Ontario. Precision Agriculture entails all the GPS technology and data that is in tractors and equipment these days. I have a team of five people that are at our different dealership locations and help support farmers with their Precision Agriculture technology. Before that, I worked for John Deere in Grimsby, fulfilling a similar role.

Do you enjoy it?

I enjoy it, it is fun. It keeps us busy this time of year with all the harvesting.

So, with your current role, do you go out in the field or help people over the phone?

It is very much in the field. Not really for mechanical issues, but the software side. We can diagnose the tractors over the air using our laptops.

Thank you for your time.

You're welcome!