

Ontario Agricultural College,
University of Guelph
Alumni Oral History

Tim Lambert

B.Sc. (Agr.) 1983

Interviewed by Jesse Laidlaw



Where did you grow up? And where did you attend high school?

I grew up in Ottawa in the city. I was not a farm kid or a country kid, and I went to Hillcrest High School. That's in the southeast end of the city. My father was the executive chief of the Ottawa Fire Department, so nothing to do with agriculture initially.

What peaked your interest in agriculture?

My favorite courses in high school were science based and I was either going to do my degree in fisheries and wildlife biology or agricultural science and picked agriculture because it seemed like there were a lot more career opportunities. I couldn't see myself on the laboratory end of things; I wanted it to be practical, so I boiled it down, and that's how a city kid got involved in the agricultural program at OAC.

What year did you start at the OAC?

I started in '78, but I graduated in '83. I took some time off to work between my second and third year just to go back to Ottawa. I had a job at an engineering company and tried to get money, then came back, finished, and graduated in '83.

Was there a specific event or reason that led you to Guelph? Did you find the campus more appealing or was it more, so the agriculture program was what spoke to you?

I happen to have an aunt, my mother's sister, who lived in Guelph, and I lived with them my first year, so we had some family in Guelph. Guelph's always had this really strong reputation for the quality of its education. But I hadn't spent much time on the campus or in Guelph. When I got there, I just fell in love with the place right away. It's such a gorgeous campus: trees, parks and buildings. Things always seem to happen for a

reason and coming to Guelph, more than profoundly impacted my career, it made my career. And the people that I'm still friends with to this day that were students there; I formed lifetime friendships. Got an absolutely superior level of education which I don't think I fully appreciated at the time and a really strong mix of academic quality, but then also a really good social environment. So, it was well-rounded education and Guelph's a great city.

What did you major in, and did you decide on that major right away?

I majored in animal and poultry science. Like I said, the science part was always of interest to me in high school, and I loved working with animals. I spent 40 years, so my entire working career in agriculture, working in the pork industry, I've worked in the sheep industry, I've worked in the beef cattle industry, and then 20 years in the poultry sector, I give the university a lot of credit. As I've gotten older, I realize even more what a life shaping experience being at Guelph was. Which is pretty cool, it says a lot about the institution and the people.

I know you said you wanted more of like a practical aspect in schooling. How does that mix in with your choice of major?

I think part of it was not coming from a farm. A lot of Aggies come from a farming background, and they're already rooted in the rural community, and I wasn't. And so, I worked at the Elora Beef Research Center, I worked at the Swine Center at Arkell, I tried to get either volunteer work, project work or part-time work to gain some of that practical experience that I didn't have. And it turned out to be the chance to work with farm animals and I have a lot of fond memories of that.

Was that extra experience through the school or was that more you taking your own initiative?

Just my own initiative to try to gain that practical experience and practical knowledge. Some parts were volunteer, for example, to help friends that were doing projects to get in the barns.

Understanding the fundamentals of how everything works, and having done some hands-on stuff is probably very important, right?

Yes, for sure. It gives you a good grounding! It was interesting when I graduated there were a couple of jobs in Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food, a couple with some feed companies, a couple with some pharmaceutical companies. My first job upon graduating was with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food and I was involved in managing what they call a record of performance programs at the time. But basically, I

was working with breeding genetics to produce superior quality breeding stock in the hog industry and the sheep industry. So that was my first job. I got it before I graduated, which was really fortunate. I was quite blessed because there weren't a lot of jobs going around at the time.

Do you remember any of your profs and were there any lasting connections that you made with some of them or kept in touch with after your studies?

Yes, there's several, actually. I remember Dr. Jim Wilton. He was the beef industry professor and I got to know Jim really well in later years when I worked at Beef Improvement Ontario, we started a research chairs program with the University of Guelph. Jim also had a group of guys that played recreational hockey together all through university and then post-graduation and had a lot of fun and we kept in touch. Dr. Brian Kennedy, he was on the pork side, unfortunately, Brian passed away now quite a number of years ago, but he was a really, really good friend. Academically, a few stand out, TK Worley, who was my economics professor had a really good sense of humor and a way of making economics interesting. And Dr. Howard Swatland was on the structure of farm animals side. The last I would mention that stood out was Dr. John Burton from my horse production course. I would say those folks stand out the most. And why is that? Well, they're good at what they did, they all had a passion for what they were teaching. That speaks to that quality of education which, in my view, keeps people very engaged. I just remember course after course, very engaged, passionate professors and researchers that were approachable and easy to build a connection with. And I think that is an important part of the university experience - that you have that connection.

What was campus life like for you? Did you enjoy the experience?

Yes, right from day one I remember everybody amassed in Peter Clark Hall for orientation, and you are standing there in a new community and looking for somebody you recognized from your local high school. But I didn't see anyone. And immediately, people just started to connect. A lot of the kids that came from the farming communities around Guelph already had friendships, but they weren't picky at all. Everybody was just really welcoming, and it wasn't long before you had a big group of friends and knew a lot of people. It got me grounded in the community. And then from there, I met some really good friends. I never lived in residence. I know that's recommended first year to make friends, but I never really found that it that difficult to meet people and make friends. In terms of classes, I remember getting my first schedule, and science programs are demanding because you've got not only your courses each week, you know, chemistry, biochemistry, botany, genetics. You've got labs as well, so you got a three-hour lab thrown in there and then it being a 13-week semester, it's just jammed with midterms and lab reports. I remember getting my schedule. It's a big campus when you don't

know it and you're trying to get from the animal science building to the plant science building in 10 minutes between lectures. You have no clue how to get there. I remember getting lost and getting late to some of my first classes in first year. I'm sure this is an experience repeated by thousands of students over the years.

Did you have a favorite class? Did any of them really kind of stick with you over the years?

Not specifically. I would say I really enjoyed genetics a lot, I spent the first 20 years of my career working in genetics in one way or another, and I found that really fascinating. Zoology I enjoyed. I found any of the animal science courses extremely interesting, and that just makes it that much easier to learn. There were a couple courses that were particularly challenging, there was one called CHEM*100 and I think it was one of those courses, at least in the science program, designed to weed out a certain portion of the class so that was tough. But genetics, animal science zoology, I found that by the time you hit third and 4th year, it really got that much more practical. The 100 level courses are basically: get your feet under you, weed out the people that are not making the best choice for their academic pursuits or career, and then they really start to give you the more practical content in 3rd and 4th year. That's also where the social and the university environment becomes so important. Casting my mind back 40 years, I came to an unfamiliar city, unfamiliar people, a new life. I think I was fortunate to have gotten a good quality education at Hillcrest in Ottawa, I think that helped. But what worked study-wise at high school, doesn't cut it in university. I wasn't all that disciplined as a student in high school, but I got by because I was able to learn enough but it wasn't nose to the grindstone in the books. I was more interested in my sports and social life. And then you come to university, and you've got 2 midterms and the final for five courses in the 13-week semester plus all your lab reports, it felt some days like you had something due or an exam almost every day. That first year was it was a real eye opener.

I know you mentioned you came to Guelph for hockey, was that for the varsity team or more intramural?

I was recruited to go and play for the Gryphons, but I got hurt part way through training camp. I ended up having knee surgery the next summer. And so, I never ended up playing for the Gryphons after that first year. Realizing the rigors of getting a science degree, I didn't go back to play varsity. But there's an Aggie tournament team and intramural hockey, and I played that throughout. That was really hard to go from coming to Guelph to do my science degree and play varsity sport and to then be injured, not play, realize that, gosh, if I was going to get an honors science degree and try to play a varsity sport, something was going to come crashing to the floor. I wasn't going to make a living at sport. So, rightly so, I stuck with the academic side of it, but I still love hockey. In fact, last year I went back to Guelph to play in the alumni hockey tournament with a

group of former classmates. A lot of them from my last year. Even though it wasn't varsity, you still have all these lifetime friendships through your social activities. In my case, sport.

Do you feel part of the Ontario Agricultural College, and can you remember taking part in any OAC traditions?

More social events you know, their homecoming and there was always, an aggie homecoming and I'd show up to the social events. Long ago, it used to be called The Keg, now it's Brass Taps. I never participated in the painting of the cannon. That was a time-worn tradition, but I wasn't part of that. Just the pub nights and the social nights. I had a pretty close group of friends from the get-go that I met there, and we hung out together and in fact still do. I mentioned coming back for the alumni hockey tournament last year and then a group of us are planning to get together next summer. We've kept in touch over the last 40 years.

I noticed you started your career out of university at the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food as the manager of the Genetic Improvements program. How would you say your time at the University of Guelph prepared you for that?

It was everything, I wouldn't have gotten the job without the education or the opportunities. I interviewed for the job just before graduation, just after I finished my finals in April and I started working 2 weeks later and then 40 years later, finally, just stopped working. The doors that opened were for a 40-year career. I couldn't possibly overstate the importance of it. The network of the Aggie group, you know, there's a lot of former Guelph grads everywhere I go in Canada. You mentioned being recognized as one of the top 50 most influential people in Canadian agriculture. Everybody meets people from Guelph populated throughout Canadian agriculture, it's just a vast network of people and connections. So, it launched my career, gave me the platform for my career, it gave me the ability to think critically and to think abstractly and I just think it made my path. And it was the right university, the right program for me. And I can't say enough good about it.

Between having left school and now, how did you develop your skills? From what you learned in university until now, are there still some fundamental parts of what you learned in school that you still use, or have you had to develop them further along the way?

I think you have to constantly evolve yourself and your skill set, and I would say as you get older you find yourself more in positions where you're helping mentor or support others. I would say to anybody the skills that got you the job you have won't be the skills

that will help you succeed in your next job. The skills that you have today might get your promotion to the next opportunity, but the next opportunity will require that you reinvent yourself or be willing to really succeed. I went from having some training on the science side, which was more technical and detail oriented, but I ended up for whatever reason in positions of management and leadership. And that's just a totally different skill set but you take a lifelong learning approach. When I first graduated, was working at OMAF (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food), they were really good about allowing you to take courses, so everything from supervisor skills, management skills, leadership training, making effective presentations, dealing with difficult people. I was a sponge for learning new skills and I think that really helped fuel my career path. When I went into the private sector with Ontario Swine Improvement, Beef Improvement Ontario and subsequently the Egg Farmers of Canada, I had an opportunity through work to travel the world. I think I've been all over South America, Canada, there's not a state I haven't been to in the US, Western Europe, Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, of course Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Asia. Seeing a lot on that journey, it occurs to you that we're blessed. Not only talking specifically about the opportunities at Guelph, but to live in a country like Canada with the stability we have economically and politically and socially. I've just been so fortunate and so blessed. How can I use what I know or learn to give back, and that's what led me into any of the volunteer things that that show up on my CV, whether it's the International Egg Foundation, whether it's Heart for Africa, which is an orphanage in Eswatini Africa where we built an egg farm and we've now probably fed some 12 million eggs to orphans and vulnerable children through a network of 30 churches and schools. You hit a stage where you know you've had a good career, you've earned a good living, raised a family, and then you start to think, ok, how can I pay some of this back? It's time to do something else. Now, a lot of what we do with the International Egg Foundation is teach emerging farmers the tools and skills they need to become commercially viable. But I'm not an egg farmer, I'm not an expert on that. What we do have is a network of veterinarians, nutritionists, farmers who have this specific knowledge and expertise and we run training programs and courses to support them. So just to be clear, I'm not the subject matter expert in any of these things. My role is really on leadership, mentorship organization, process, if you will, side of it.

Looking back at your time in university, do you have any advice that you give to a first-year student that would help them get through their academic career?

I expect you're going to get a variety of answers to that. What you're going to go through, everybody's going through the same thing. People play it differently emotionally. Some come across as super confident while others are less so. But I guarantee you every 17–18-year-old is living the same experience in one way shape or form. Guelph is such a welcoming community. I think that you have to immerse yourself and embrace that newness as the next phase or chapter of your life where you're going to get an education and then you can build your career. The best way to succeed at that is to throw yourself into it and just accept that it's going to take you miles out of your

comfort zone. But you know, any pursuit in life will always take you out of your comfort zone. That's part of moving ahead. So being a lifelong learner you'll just never stop growing. You'll never stop learning if your mind is open to it.