

Peel. Biog. Bk.

MAY 21 1980

Erindale College professor experimenting

Arctic 'green thumb' out to win cold war

Peel Biog. Bk.

May 21 - 1980

By MARGARET WEBB

You won't notice anything too unusual about the gardens surrounding Ray Cummins' townhome in Streetsville, except perhaps the odd Arctic plant nestled in amidst the rows of corn, snow peas and zucchini.

And, although he spent seven years cultivating on experimental farms in the Canadian Arctic, including the world's most northerly farm, the Erindale College professor says his wife has the green thumb in the family.

"There are no exotic roses in my garden," said Cummins. "You can't make me out to be a green thumb or anything like that. I'm a farm boy at heart. My wife does all the gardening at home."

Yet, Cummins' experiment growing everyday garden vegetables was considered an exotic venture — when it was carried out 300 miles north of the treeline. At Rankin Inlet, on the west shore of Hudson Bay, the snow melts around June 25 and locals start watching for flurries in mid-August.

Cummins, along with fellow researchers Josef Svoboda and Mark Romer, set up 40 miniature 4-foot by 8-foot greenhouses in 1979 to study whether Arctic plants could be nudged to higher yields under protective covering and whether southern greens, under the same covering, could adapt to the poor Arctic soil and the continuous sunlight of the Arctic summer day.

The town of 1,500, half southerners and half Inuit, told them they were crazy: nothing edible could be cultivated in the north. In fact the National Film Board had recently put out a movie, *You Can't Grow Potatoes in the Arctic*.

Ironically, the potato grew remarkably well, as did lettuce, peas and carrots. Although Arctic plants continued to do poorly even in the greenhouses, the U of T botanists had identified 22 varieties of plants that could be grown economically, perhaps even commercially. By the time



Ray Cummins experimenting to grow crop in the Arctic.

Cummins left the experimental farm behind last year, nearly every family in Rankin had built a makeshift greenhouse onto the side of their house.

The botanists repeated the same experiments with similar success at Alexandra Fiord on Ellesmere Island — the world's most northerly farm.

A 4-by-8-foot plot produced 250 heads of lettuce in a six-week growing season, a doubly green yield, considering a single head commands more than \$4 in Arctic communities and is usually brown by the time it arrives. The results of Cummins' research could have considerable impact on northerners.

In fact, Cummins' flirtation with farming in the north may prove more successful than his efforts to convince people in his own southern community that the local land is worth farming. Cummins was active in APPEAL, an

association dedicated to saving farmland in Peel County, but left the organization because he couldn't stand seeing the farmland come under the till of bulldozers and graders.

"Very often agriculture and cities are clashing but in every case the city is winning out," said Cummins. "Here we are in the Golden Horseshoe and we're paving the best farmland."

But Cummins does not blame local farmers for selling out to developers — in fact, having grown up on a farm near Hamilton, he knows all too well that selling to speculators is often the only way of making a farm turn a profit.

"I've always had the feeling food is underpriced. I keep waiting for the renaissance of the farmer. We take food so much for granted and it is so cheap. It was refreshing to go to the tundra where food is so appreciated."