



# Hoeing Harvesting

## *Farmerettes 1941-1951*



# ng and Some Hitchhiking

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By Bonnie Sitter



*It was a little known and often overlooked chapter in Canada's WW2 war effort. However the young girls who volunteered to harvest the crops that fed the Commonwealth soldiers played a vital role in the eventual victory.*

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LEFT: Farmerettes at the Thedford camp are photographed in 1949 just fooling around with an old wheel from the former flax mill that was renovated to become their summer home.

*“As I set about researching the Farmerette story I discovered that most people were like me, they had never heard the term Farmerette until I mentioned it.”*

**O**n a winter's day in 2018, as I was sorting through photos that had belonged to my late husband Conrad Sitter, a black and white photo caught my eye. Three girls had posed for the photo by sitting on the running board of a very old car. Their faces were not familiar. I felt sure they were not relatives. I turned the photo over, hoping to see that someone had recorded their names. No luck. Ah, but there was a clue. Clearly written was, “Farmerettes about 1946.” I had no idea who the Farmerettes were and why the Sitter family had a photo of them. I was curious and decided to make an effort to learn about the Farmerettes. To date, I have not discovered the names of the Farmerettes in the photo, but my life has been forever changed and enriched by researching the Farmerette story. A chain of events that is quite amazing led me to Farmerettes who are now in their late 80s and 90s. As I set about researching the Farmerette story I discovered that most people were like me, they had never heard the term Farmerette until I mentioned it. When no help was forthcoming I discovered a novel had been written by Gisela Sherman. It was titled “The Farmerettes.” A novel for teens was not what I was looking for. I wanted answers to the questions of who, what, why, where and when. I caught a major break when my girlfriend Sarah asked me what I was doing. I replied that I was researching the story of Farmerettes. Right away she

asked me if I would like to meet a Farmerette and of course I replied yes. She then told me that her mom had been a Farmerette in 1946 at an Ontario Farm Service Force Camp near St.Catharines. Since her mother now lived nearby in Huron County where I live, she said she would arrange for me to interview her. Her mother, Norene Pye Turvolgyi invited me



into her suite and told me her story about the summer of 1946. The next excitement was the fact that the 17 letters she wrote to her family that summer had been saved and returned to her. At nearly 90 years of age and numerous moves that included living in Montreal and Toronto she still had the letters! The letters included descriptions of the long work days cutting asparagus, the new sprayer for the orchard, and a dress she had her eye on in a St. Catharines shop for her grandparents 50th wedding anniversary. It was forbidden to swim in the Welland Canal but that did not stop the young girls from climbing the fence and jumping into the 50 feet of water. Soon after arrival, Norene's letter had a sketch of the inside of the Nissen Hut she shared with 3 other girls that summer. The post cards mailed home showed views of Niagara Falls, Queenston Heights, Brock's Monument and the Rainbow Bridge. For Farmerettes who worked in the Niagara Peninsula hitchhiking to these places was considered a must.

I felt I had won the lottery. The interview with Norene and the information I had gleaned from the internet and through newspaper articles and photos convinced me it was time to write an article for a magazine called The Rural Voice. The story was published in June 2018 and a few months later the August edition of The Rural Voice had a letter to the editor that brought another surprise. The letter was written by a Farmerette named Shirleyan English. She did not subscribe to the magazine but it had passed through 2 sets of hands and ended up in hers because a friend said she remembered Shirleyan talking about being a Farmerette. Her letter to the editor described the summer of 1952, which was the last year of the Ontario Farm Service Force program, when she was at Camp No. 6 Thedford Ontario. She had worked for the Sitter family in the

*ABOVE RIGHT: These Farmerettes from Thedford Farm Service Camp No.6 pose with farmer Alan Donald. It appears it was their lunch break as the black lunch box that was common at the time is in view.*

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*“The stories included the hard back breaking dirty labour, the long days in the sun, the salt pills, climbing the ladders and the seeping rashes caused by the peach fuzz.”*

peppermint and onion fields. She said reading the article brought tears to her eyes as she still remembered it as the best summer of her life. She also said she had dated the farmer’s son George that summer. She felt I must be connected and I was. I married his brother Conrad. I located her in London and the conversation led to the amazing fact that she had planned to write a story in 1995 for a women’s magazine about that summer of 1952 when she left her home in North Bay and became a Farmerette. She placed an ad in newspapers all over Ontario asking for former Farmerettes to get in touch with her. Nearly 300 ladies wrote letters to her. Many said, “send me the questionnaire” and others said “what do you want to know?” Some even said “call me, I would like to help.”

A few ladies wrote detailed letters of the summers spent as Farmerettes. Shirleyan never did write the article but I discovered she still had the letters. Without hesitation I said, “we are going to write a book!” Then I added “we are going to have it ready to read in a year so the Farmerettes who are still alive will be able to read their stories.” We will finally acknowledge their service in food production from 1941-1952. So important was their contribution that it continued for 7 years after the war ended!

It was my turn to read the letters, which I did, and then I began to try and locate the ladies. Naturally I got a lot of “This number



ABOVE: Farmerettes, known locally as “camp girls” are shown in a field in what was known as “the bog” near the Thedford Farmerette Camp. These girls are pulling the mature Dutch onion sets which are then left in the field for the tops to die before being gathered to be screened. Whether you were weeding them or harvesting them, it meant kneeling or bending hour after hour in the hot sun.

ABOVE RIGHT: Two unnamed Farmerettes pose beside the Ontario Farm Service Camp sign at Cottam Ontario. The Essex county location is described in a detailed 1945 letter written by Ardyss Daniels as having 75 girls.

is no longer in service,” recordings. When I would find a Farmerette and explain what I was doing the joy in their voice as they recalled their time spent as a Farmerette was amazing. Many had never spoken about their Farmeretting experiences simply because no one had asked them.



They did their bit and then went on with their lives.

Their memories in most cases were still fresh and they were eager to tell me their stories. The stories included the hard back breaking dirty labour, the long days in the sun, the salt pills, climbing the ladders and the seeping rashes caused by the peach fuzz. Their accommodation that ranged from tents, Nissen huts, converted barns, school gyms, and farm houses was always a topic of conversation. But the hard work was put aside and the stories continued as they described the hitchhiking, the dances, buying records and listening to the hit tunes, organizing and putting on variety shows to raise funds for patriotic causes and of course talking about boyfriends and making up fun songs about their camps and singing while they worked. Oh, and the curfews were talked about! Of course sneaking back to camp after curfew did happen.

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Their lives were changed for ever as they became soldiers in bib overalls. For many years the wage earned was 25 cents an hour, although sometimes they were paid by piece work or by the pound for fruit. They paid \$4.50 a week for room and board. Their breakfast and evening meals were prepared for them, seven days a week, but they made their own lunches, carried in lunch buckets or brown paper bags to the fields and orchards. Drinks of water from a jug or a hose was common and some recalled a farm wife making lemonade for them. When they arrived at camp they handed over their ration coupons and the cooks did the juggling of the expenses and prepared the nourishing food. When beets were harvested the beets and beet greens were on the menu. If asparagus was in season you could expect that it would be served in a variety of ways. You ate what was served and most girls were happy about the arrangements. If lunch was pork and beans sandwiches, well, you were hungry and found it filled an empty stomach. Some girls got homesick but you signed up for 13 weeks and if you quit, you paid your own way home and would have to face a disappointed family. The girls supported and encouraged each other. For girls from the Toronto area, a weekend at home was possible by taking the SS Cayuga ferry for a dollar each way. Girls from further away didn't have a hope to get home so they made the best of it and sometimes a friend would invite them to visit their Toronto home for a weekend. So many girls came from Northern Ontario that I feel confident in saying the program was a success because of their participation. Some girls, from towns like South Porcupine, said they had never been more than 7 miles from home. Adventure awaited them and parents were not so sure it was a good idea to allow their teenaged daughters to head to Southern Ontario to do farm labour. The boys got summer jobs in the mines and mills but for girls it was a completely different story. When you volunteered and you had good marks in school, you could be excused from school as early as April and when you could prove that your service had been at least 13 weeks you were excused from final exams and passed to the next grade. Some girls said it was their best hope because they were not going to pass physics or math! Girls who had never seen an orchard or farm field rode the trains and buses to partake in the adventure and experience freedom. They signed The Ontario Farm Service Force pledge and promised to do their best and keep themselves physically fit and serve as long as they were able. It seemed a chance of a lifetime.

From 1941 to 1952, over 20,000 girls, mostly aged 16, 17 and 18 volunteered and replaced the men who had been employed on market garden farms and orchards. The men left the farms because they enlisted in Canada's military. The farmers were desperate for help and appealed to the government to take action.

*ABOVE RIGHT: This is the photo of the three Farmerettes that started the research that uncovered the stories of the Farmerettes and their contribution to food production through a program organized and managed by the Ontario Farm Service Force. They pledged to "Lend A Hand" when they volunteered as teenagers.*



Something had to be done or food would not be produced. When the appeal for help was promoted in the high schools and in newspapers and on the radio, the girls stepped "up to the plate" so to speak and volunteered to spend their summers in farm labour. Often the girls would volunteer for a second summer and bring along a sister. University girls were hired as Labour Secretaries by the YWCA who also played an important role in the program. One family from Timmins had 5 daughters and all served at least one year as a Farmerette. Many served two years. Quite a commitment.

I continue to collect stories and photos and tell the Farmerettes each story is important. When their country needed them they answered the call and proved the naysayers wrong.

How on earth would the girls from cities, towns and villages be able to replace the men who had done the labour? It simply wouldn't work! But it did work, and interviews with farmers that were reported in the newspapers, especially in the early war years, had nothing but praise for the Farmerettes. They were more than pleased and hoped the same girls would be back the next year.

We kept our promise about having a book ready to read within the year. In September 2019 our self published book, titled *Onion Skins and Peach Fuzz Memories of Ontario Farmerettes* was on the shelves. We dedicated it to all the Farmerettes.

The book contains over 50 personal letters and essays and 200 black and white photos with details about how The Ontario Farm Service Force was organized.

I have chosen some memories that have been shared with me in the past year that are not in the book. These memories have been written by women now in their 90s. Important life lessons were learned during those summers. The girls experienced the satisfaction of doing a great job for their country by doing physical labour in food production. Our thanks to them is long overdue. Their motto was "We Lend A Hand" and in 1943 a second motto was added to the badge. Food For Victory 1943 gave a powerful message that food was needed to win the war.

Posters saying "We Can't Fight If We Don't Eat." And "We won't Eat if YOU don't help Ontario farmers this summer."

Next Month: Personal recollections of Farmerettes revisited. 🍁