

Fergus Farmerette recalls years in the fields during World War 2

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1 / 5 Sitting in the backyard of her Fergus home, Jean Collier holds a bag featuring the Farm Service Force logo that was used during the Second World War. | Jessica Lovell/EloraFergusToday

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Fergus resident Jean Collier has already seen *We Lend a Hand: The Forgotten Story of Ontario Farmerettes*, but she will be attending an upcoming screening of the award-winning documentary in Alma nonetheless.

Collier doesn't necessarily need to see the film again; she has lived it. But she's looking

forward to the chance to connect with other farmerettes who may also attend the screening – women who shared a similar experience of doing their part during the Second World War by pitching in on Ontario farms.

“You’d think we’d known each other all our lives,” said Collier, 98, of the other farmerettes she has met in recent years.

“We’re all in our 90s, all of us,” she said.

But when they were teenagers, they all did something remarkable.

They left their homes and travelled to other communities hours away to live in farm camps and harvest crops during a time when young men to do the work were in short supply.

Collier hadn’t thought it was remarkable until she saw an appeal in a newspaper looking for “forgotten farmerettes.”

It was the 1990s, and Bonnie Sitter was doing research for what would eventually become *Onion Skins and Peach Fuzz: Memories of Ontario Farmerettes*, a book she co-authored with Shirleyan English.

“Who’s forgotten? I’m not forgotten,” Collier recalled saying when she saw the newspaper.

She eventually told her son that she had been one of these “forgotten farmerettes,” and she blames him for the attention she’s had since.

“I was undercover, and my son squealed on me,” she said with a laugh.

While she doesn't appear in Sitter's book or the subsequent documentary, Collier has done multiple media interviews to share memories from her time as a farm worker.

"I really never, ever, ever thought that this would happen," she said of all the attention she has received.

The [50-minute documentary](#) will be screened at [an event](#) at the Alma Community Centre on Sept. 27. Senator Rob Black is to give opening remarks at 2 p.m. and a Q and A with the filmmakers is to follow the screening.

Collier said she has no plans to speak at the event, but she doesn't mind answering questions about her experience.

She admits the story does seem to have an element of the forgotten.

"It was a story that had not been known; how were those troops fed?" she said.

As a 16-year-old, Collier had been in Grade 11 at North Toronto Collegiate high school when she attended a presentation meant to recruit girls to do farm labour.

Her father, who had enlisted as a chaplain, had died two years before, and one of her brothers was training as a navigator in the air force. She saw the Farm Service Force – as it was called – as her chance to do her bit.

Her mother agreed to let her go, and so she did.

"She was happy when I found a good friend to go with me," Collier recalled.

She and her friend had not known each other well before joining the farm service, but they soon became close.

"We remained good friends for 70 years," she said.

Their first job was in Waterford, where they picked strawberries, and slept at night in bunk beds in a local school gymnasium.

"If you picked 100 quarts a day, you made \$4," said Collier.

When they had a day off, they would go to the movies, and Collier recalls looking at the movie posters and debating the cost.

"Is this going to be worth six boxes of strawberries?" she said they asked each other.

In her three years as a farmerette, Collier also worked in two other camps – one picking peaches and another in Kingsville, where she remembers a farmers losing thousands of melons in one night to an early frost.

“It’s a job that requires such devotion and dedication,” Collier said.

She remembers praying for rain some days for the opportunity to get a little more rest.

“Sometimes you were just so tired that you’d just give anything to stay in bed,” she said.

After seeing the documentary and reading the farmerette book, Collier said she feels fortunate to have had good lodging and worked for good farmers who provided transportation to and from the fields.

She now knows not all the girls were so lucky.

Meeting some of those other girls has been a real plus side of all the attention the farmerettes have had in recent years, Collier said.

“It was such a bond. We just felt like we were old friends, and we’d never met before,” she said.

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