

How Farmerettes helped win the war from home



Director Colin Field & Author Bonnie Sitter

By Nick Fears
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A faded snapshot in an old album led to a nationwide rediscovery of courage, sweat, and sisterhood – and a film now captivating audiences across Ontario. The award-winning documentary *We Lend a Hand: The Forgotten Story of the Farmerettes* will be featured at the Middleport Historical Society's sold-out Veteran's Tribute Night, shining light on a generation of young women whose wartime efforts were nearly forgotten.

Directed by Colin Field and inspired by the book *Onion Skins and Peach Fuzz* by Bonnie Sitter and the late Shirley English, the film tells the story of teenage girls who kept Ontario's farms running during the Second World War.

Sitter said her journey began one snowy afternoon in 2018 when she opened her late husband's photo album.

"I discovered a tiny picture two inches by two and a half inches – three girls sitting on the running board of an old car," she recalled. "It said 'Farmerettes 1946'. I felt rather indignant that there was some Ontario history I had never heard of. At that moment, I decided I was going to teach myself what this was all about."

That decision led to years of research uncovering a hidden chapter of Ontario's wartime story.

"The Farmerettes were teenage girls, mostly 16, 17, and 18, who volunteered through the Ontario Farm Service Force," Sitter explained. "They replaced men who had gone to serve in the military, working long hours to help feed the country."

Between 1941 and 1952, more than 40,000 young women signed up to work on farms across southern Ontario.

The food grown by the Farmerettes was vital to sustaining both the homefront and the frontlines during the war. With thousands of men overseas and food shipments threatened by enemy submarines, Canada faced an urgent need to produce more at home, said Sitter. The fruits, vegetables, and grains these young women harvested filled military rations, fed fam-

A Farmerette featured in the *We Lend a Hand* documentary.

ilies across the country, and were shipped overseas to supply Allied troops and war-torn European nations. Their labour helped prevent shortages, stabilized food prices, and ensured that Canada could continue its crucial role as the "breadbasket of the Allies."

"Service comes in many forms – and by aiding in food production, the Farmerettes absolutely helped win the war," said Sitter. "They were paid 25 cents an hour – the going rate for male labour at the time – and worked 10-hour days.... The first few weeks were brutal, with blisters, sunburns, and aching backs. But by the end of the summer, the farmers were saying, 'I couldn't have done it without you. I hope you'll come back.'"

The Farmerette program continued until 1952, long after the war ended: "Not all the men came back, and many went into trades or further education," explained Sitter. "There was still a need for farm labour until immigrant families from the Netherlands and Belgium began arriving and filling that gap."

Her book, published in 2019, collected letters, photos, and essays from women who served.

"Some said it was the best summer of their lives," said Sitter. "They gained independence and confidence, and they were proud of their contribution to the war effort."

Sitter is still collecting photos and stories to preserve and share the Farmerette legacy, including with a calendar beginning January 2026 with photos not published in the book.

Her work caught the attention of filmmaker Colin Field.

"I had just finished studying filmmaking and met Bonnie again at a festival in Goderich," said Field. "She told me about her book and her research, and I couldn't believe no one had made a documentary about it. These women were in their late 90s. Time was of the essence."

Field, a former teacher and corporate trainer, teamed up with Sitter in 2021 to bring the story to the screen.

"I wanted to make something that wasn't just a history lesson," he said. "It had to be a beautiful film – something that captured the humour, wisdom, and courage of these women."

The 50-minute film combines interviews with 20 surviving

A reenactor in the *We Lend a Hand* documentary.

Farmerettes, archival photos, and rare National Film Board footage – some of which had been mislabeled and forgotten for 80 years: "We actually found film clips showing Farmerettes working in fields, brushing their teeth, getting dressed, all these little details of daily life," said Field. "It was incredible."

To bring the story to life visually, Field also filmed three young women in Huron County wearing period clothing, re-enacting farm work among the orchards.

"I wanted audiences to feel what it was like," he said. "It's not just about the work; it's about the camaraderie, the laughter, and the sense of purpose."

Since its premiere in April, *We Lend a Hand* has been shown more than 30 times and accepted into 21 film festivals, earning six awards including Best Canadian Documentary and Best Film About Women.

"We've had to turn people away at the door," said Field. "In London, 50 people couldn't get in. Palmerston, 30 turned away. Every show seems to sell out."

Audiences have responded with emotion and pride.

"People realize their mother or grandmother was a Farmerette," said Sitter. "They go home, look through old albums, and suddenly recognize those straw hats and overalls. It's been an eye-opener."

The documentary has also drawn international attention, with plans to show it at the Juno Beach Centre in France: "They're planning an exhibit about the Canadian homefront, and they want to include Farmerette artifacts," said Field.

For Field, the response to the film has been deeply rewarding.

"It's a forgotten chapter of Canadian history," he said. "The Farmerettes helped win the war in their own way. It's incredible to see them finally getting the recognition they deserve."

For those who missed the sold-out Middleport screening, upcoming showings and information about *We Lend a Hand* can be found at welendahand.ca or on the film's social media pages.

Remembering
those brave men
and women who
sacrificed their lives
for our country.



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On Remembrance Day, we honour the members of armed forces who served and made the ultimate sacrifice. Their courage and dedication will always be remembered.



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