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Two screenings of the documentary *We Lend a Hand: The Forgotten Story of Ontario Farmerettes* were shown at the South Huron Rec Centre on Wednesday, Feb. 11. Exeter's Bonnie Sitter is the historical producer of the documentary and co-authored a book about the Farmerettes in 2019 titled *Onion Skins and Peach Fuzz: Memories of Ontario Farmerettes*. Pictured are the film's director and producer Colin Field, left, and Sitter. *SCOTT NIXON*

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HONOURING THE PAST

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Farmerette documentary has first screenings in Exeter

SCOTT NIXON

EXETER “My heart is bursting. . . I’ve met so many wonderful people.”

That was Exeter writer, researcher and now film producer Bonnie Sitter’s reaction when she was asked how her life has changed since she embarked several years ago on a project to tell the story of Ontario’s Farmerette program.

For Sitter, the journey started in January 2018, when she was sifting through some old photos from her late husband Conrad’s family and found a small picture with the caption on the back that said “Farmerettes” and the year 1946.

Sitter began researching the topic, learning about the program that began in 1941 during the Second World War and continued until 1952. As part of this initiative, roughly 40,000 teenage girls left home to work on farms to help with the labour shortage caused by the conflict.

She then wrote an article about the Farmerettes and eventually connected with former London Free Press journalist Shirlean English, who worked as a Farmerette as a teen in the Thedford area. The two co-authored a book on the subject, *Onion Skins and Peach Fuzz: Memories of Ontario Farmerettes*. That work was eventually developed into a play by Alison Lawrence that was performed in Blyth and Millbrook.

Sitter even successfully lobbied to have the Farmerettes honoured by Canada Post on a special Remembrance Day stamp.

But her ambitions didn’t stop there. After the book, she continued researching the Farmerette program and visiting farms that hosted the teenage girls. Sitter began collab-

orating with director/producer Colin Field of London and together they developed an award-winning documentary film on the subject, *We Lend a Hand: The Forgotten Story of Ontario Farmerettes*.

The 50-minute documentary, on which Sitter serves as historical producer, had its world premiere in Sudbury last April, but hadn’t had a showing in Sitter’s hometown of Exeter until Wednesday, Feb. 11, when local group West Coast Active Living presented the film at the South Huron Rec Centre for afternoon and evening screenings.

The film contains current interviews with former Farmerettes, as well as re-enactments and historical footage. Sitter also visits farms in Ontario that hosted Farmerettes, and the documentary wraps up with scenes from a 2024 Remembrance Day service at South Huron District high school during which Sitter spoke and Farmerettes were honoured.

The afternoon crowd at the rec centre included family members of former Farmerettes, as well as a class from the high school. During a post-screening question-and-answer period, Sitter said she feels “blessed” to have been able to work on the project and spoke of the good fortune that the old photo she found in 2018 was never thrown out.

“I think it was meant to be,” she said.

While she said there doesn’t appear to be an official list of all the girls who participated in the program, Sitter has been able to connect people and help them with Farmerette information since she began her research. Despite these efforts, she still hasn’t been able to



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Those who attended the afternoon screening of *We Lend a Hand: The Forgotten Story of Ontario Farmerettes* were treated to the musical stylings of Doug Long, left, along with the Back Seat Girls, Joanne Does, Louise Carroll and Brenda Beaudoin.

identify the three girls in the first photo she found.

Sitter said she expects there will eventually be a historical plaque erected in Ontario to commemorate the Farmerettes.

South Huron District teacher Tracy McLennan, who attended with a class, described the importance of the Farmerettes and the film’s job at ensuring their story is told.

“It’s a wonderful thing that Bonnie and Colin have done,” she said.

Sitter and Field said they hope to take the film to Europe, and they’ve been invited for a screening at the Juno Beach Centre in France.

More information about the film, including the trailer, can be found at welendahand.ca.



We Lend a Hand merchandise was also available.