

# Petrolia's Farmette recalls life in the fields

**Heather Wright**  
The Independent

During the 1940s, young women were called to their patriotic duty – to lend a hand on the farms of Ontario.

But for Petrolia teen Beryl Anderson, her sister, Jean, and her friends, Lois Duncan, Mona Dougall leaving home to tend the fields and orchards of the province was an adventure and a way to get out of writing exams in the spring of 1945,

Beryl Anderson is now almost 100 years old and is Beryl Beckett. She lives in Florida, but still loves to talk about her time as a Farmette. *The Independent* contacted Beckett just before the film about the young women's war efforts as Farmettes, "We Lend a Hand" was screened at Victoria Playhouse Petrolia.

The film is drawn from the experiences of the young women, including Beckett.

When the young women first heard about the program, they jumped at the chance to leave school early. They arrived in Niagara, destined to work at a small farm camp run by the Goodwin family.

About 30 young women would rise early, ride in the back of the farm truck to the fields they were to work in that day. "We were always getting leaves and twigs and bugs into our hair. That's why the Farmettes wore bandanas around their heads."

The days were long and Beckett had little experience.

"I was an only child, and coming up in Petrolia, we never had any kind of farm work... we kind of had farmers in the family like my dad's cousins, but that was just to go visit...I don't even

remember planting a garden," she laughed.

The young women earned about 25 cents an hour. But there

were lots of places to spend the cash and Beckett remembers her father sending money for the board she had to pay in the dorm.

Beckett and her friends loved the freedom of being away from home. But as a teen, she wondered about the Japanese family who worked beside them. She felt the family worked too hard.

Over the years, Beckett has come to realize the situation was not as bad as she may have thought.

The head of the family served with the farmer overseas.

At the time, Canada had interned Japanese families. Beckett believes Goodwin likely spent a great deal of time and money to bring the family to his farm for a better life.

"He was able to keep that whole family intact, move them to a safe environment where they had the freedom as much as they could...but having the freedom to live as much a normal life as they possibly could. So all that time, I had maligned Mr. Goodwin when he should have had a medal," she says.

While the young women from Petrolia helped keep the agriculture industry going during the war, Beckett says they never felt they were patriotic.

"I hate to say I don't think I ever had a really serious job at that age. I don't think it even crossed my mind that we were doing a job that was essential. I mean, it was just fun," she said.



**Beryl Beckett**