

Farmerettes documentary to screen in St. Marys

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Regional Editor

The forgotten story of the Ontario Farmerettes will take centre stage in St. Marys this spring when the St. Marys Museum hosts a screening of the documentary, *We Lend a Hand*.

The screening will take place Wednesday, May 21, as part of the museum's speaker series, which is now in its 13th season. Along with the evening public screening, the museum is also working on an afternoon matinee for DCVI students and is seeking sponsorship from local agriculture-related businesses to help cover the cost so students can attend free of charge.

St. Marys director of culture, tourism and engagement Amy Cubberley said the documentary is a natural fit for the museum and the speaker series.

"The film is doing a bit of a tour across Canada right now with a focus in southwestern Ontario," Cubberley said. "As the title says, it's a bit of a forgotten story. I think women's history has often been overlooked and then, as well, agricultural history, so I think we're just re-

ally excited to be able to showcase a little bit of both."

Tickets for the evening screening are \$20 and include both the film and a question-and-answer session with the film's producers.

The documentary tells the story of the Ontario Farm Service Force, better known as the Farmerettes, a program that ran from 1941 to 1952 and saw roughly 40,000 teenage girls and young women work on farms across the province during and after the Second World War. They picked fruit, hoed vegetables and helped bring in crops at a time when many young men were overseas fighting. Their work helped feed both civilians and soldiers and became a vital, if long-overlooked, part of the wartime effort.

The film itself grew out of years of research by Bonnie Sitter, co-author of *Onion Skins & Peach Fuzz: Memories of Ontario Farmerettes*. That book, and the stories it collected, later inspired a stage adaptation at the Blyth Festival before eventually becoming the documentary, *We Lend a Hand*.

The film has been described by filmmaker Colin Field as a reminder that

"everybody can contribute." The documentary also captures the challenge and adventure of the program, from girls living in tents and converted barns to the close bonds they formed while working long, hot days in the fields.

That spirit came through in a guest article published in the *Independent* last year by Peter Allan Rice, whose mother, Adelaide "Dale" Rice, was a Farmerette in 1942. Rice wrote about his mother picking strawberries, hoeing vegetables and, most memorably, picking peaches in the Niagara area, where the peach fuzz would sneak down her collar and under her handkerchief as she worked. He also described the freedom and friendships Farmerettes found in those summers away from home.

While St. Marys may not have a direct Farmerette farming story of its own on the same scale, Cubberley said the town has an important parallel history when it comes to women stepping into essential wartime roles.

"The most direct comparison we have that took place in St. Marys is related to Maxwell Industries," she said. "They received a major contract during the Sec-

ond World War, and so St. Marys was actually the largest producer of grenades.

"Many of the men had gone overseas, so women filled those roles. Again, not agriculture, but kind of a similar story that women stepped up to the challenges."

The Farmerettes documentary screening is a joint endeavour between the St. Marys Museum and the Friends of the St. Marys Museum. Cubberley said the museum is hopeful local interest will be strong, especially as more people begin to recognize the women in their own families and communities who may have taken part in the program.

Tickets will be available through the museum, with an additional retail outlet for ticket sales also being arranged. For more information, call the museum at 519-284-3556 or email museum@town.stmarys.on.ca.

Event info:

- Date and time: Thursday, May 21, at 7 p.m.
- Location: Community Centre at the Pyramid Recreation Centre, 317 James St. S.
- Tickets: \$20 (cash or cheque only).