

A Few Farmerettes Served in Ottawa Area

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By the way, according to Bonnie Sitter, the author of *Onion Skins and Peach Fuzz*, there were Farmerettes in the Ottawa farming area, and also some young Ottawa women who went to southern Ontario to serve as Farmerettes, so that they could be part of the programme and war effort. She mentions Farmerettes on the Dr. Barnhart farm in her book.

Although most of the farm work for young women was in southern Ontario – especially in the Niagara area – Dr. Walter S. Barnhart hired Farmerettes from Glebe Collegiate to pick raspberries and strawberries at his farm northeast of Alta Vista in the late spring, and then beans, carrots, lettuce onions, peas, potatoes, squash and turnips, when each of these was in season through the late summer and into autumn.

Other Programmes

Across Canada, more than 40,000 young women served during WWII in Farmerette programmes. Although the primary programme was in Ontario, young women from Alberta and Saskatchewan were recruited to facilitate fruit

harvesting in British Columbia; in particular the Okanagan Valley's fruit industry.

England, Australia and USA all had similar 'farmerette programmes' to recruit young women to combat the farm labour drain and produce vital food items to feed homeland requirements and to feed their troops.

In 1939 England restarted its *The Women's Land Army*, as England relied heavily on imported foods. The war blockades necessitated home grown foods (and serious food rations) to ensure that British people and soldiers were fed throughout the war. Over 200,000 women known as "Land Girls" did hard farm work, such as milking, plowing, hedging and pest control.

The Australian Women's Land Army was formed in 1942 and at least 3,000 women served seasonally or were posted on farms longer.

The United States revived their *Women's Land Army* in 1943 in conjunction with the *US Crop Corps* and the *Emergency Farm Labour Service*. Amazingly the program had about 1.5 million non-farm women along with their *Victory Farm Volunteers*, including teenagers. They focused on indispensable war crops; mostly grains which, being non-perishable, could be sent overseas to feed the soldiers and war refugees. Information about all of these programmes and the people who served in them, can be found in their respective national archives, or county and local archives.

We Lend A Hand

In 2025, Colin Field directed and produced *We Lend A Hand: The Forgotten Story of Ontario's Farmerettes*, the documentary



Promotional poster for Colin's new film, *We Lend a Hand*.

about the WWII Farmerettes. Colin wrote and distributed the documentary via his film company, ALBIREO Films. Bonnie Sitter participated in the historical research for the film and narrated it. The film has been shown throughout Ontario and plans for screening the documentary across Canada and internationally are in the works. Visit the *We Lend a Hand* website, here.

We Lend a Hand tells the extraordinary story of teenage girls who volunteered on Canadian farms and helped to win WWII. Bonnie Sitter, an author based in Exeter, Ontario searched through her family photographs, and found a captivating black and white image of a group of smiling young women on the running board of a vehicle. When she flipped the photo, an intriguing caption read, "Farmerettes 1946". This moment sparked a compelling research continued on page 7 . . .



Farmerette badge to be worn on the bib or apron, while working.

Movie Tells the Story of Ontario's Farm Force

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journey that eventually led Bonnie to co-author a book on a subject that people in Ontario know almost nothing of.

Told from Bonnie's perspective, *We Lend a Hand* reveals the true and forgotten story of the Ontario Farmerettes – teenage girls who volunteered to work on farms between 1941 and 1952. Arriving from different parts of Ontario and Quebec to many locations in southwestern Ontario, the young women began this challenge with no prior farming experience. Their job: to ensure critical food production during the most perilous period of modern history. This remarkable contingent of young women were called upon to replace the men on Canadian farms; and they helped the Allies to win WWII.

Through reenactments and unique archival images, *We Lend a Hand* recounts the heartwarming story of these magnificent young women, now in their late 90s, bringing back their most cherished memories while reminding us – perhaps for the last time – that service comes in many forms.

Screening at the OAG

Colin's film was screened at the Ottawa Art Gallery (OAG) on June 7. The *Alma Duncan Salon* was packed with enthusiastic viewers.

Following the presentation, there was a panel discussion with Dr. Barker; Barbara Brown, a local visual artist Faith Fyles; and Jessica Weatherhead, a contemporary farmer. I had the honour of introducing these guests, as well as Bonnie and Colin, and also senator Robert Black; a keen supporter of Ontario's Farmerettes, of *We Lend A*



Ruth and fellow Farmerettes with their day's load of apples.

Hand, and of *Onion Skins* and *Peach Fuzz*. No stranger to hard work, Black was a farmboy from Fergus, Ontario who earned a degree in Agricultural Science at Guelph University and worked with young farmers as a 4-H organizer.

Faith Fyles was the first woman botanist hired by the federal government, and worked at the Central Experimental Farm, in Ottawa. *Faith Fyles: In Full Bloom* features a collection of detailed sketches and paintings made while Fyles was serving as the Department of Agriculture's first botanical artist. The exhibit is a stellar collaboration between the OAG and Ingenium - Canada's Museums of Science, Innovation and Agriculture. The exhibition's research and collaboration occurred among many of Canada's agriculture and science organizations, along with OAG's curation and Ingenium's horticultural art and artifacts

collection. Truly well worth seeing – many times.

Senator Black said some words in praise and gratitude for the service given by all of the Farmerettes during WWII. In addition, the screening and panel discussion were blessed with the presence of two amazing Farmerettes living in Ottawa/Ottawa Region; Olive (Gubb) Girard – 98, and Lois (Davidson) Lawrence – 99. They received a warm and extended standing ovation in gratitude for their service to their country.

The panel discussion was excellent. All three speakers provided us with insights, knowledge and their personal experiences, and approached the issue of women in agriculture and war/conflict from their own research and personal experiences. Their presentations prompted questions from the audience.

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World War: A Tale of Cabbages and Kings

Richard Collins

I'm sure a discovery I made, of a black and white photo, didn't have quite the same impact on me as a similar event (mentioned in Robin's article) had on Bonnie Sitter. The photo Bonnie found, of ladies sitting on the running board of a farm truck, revealed an important part of her family history.

My encounter with the past, at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa, was not one about my family, but of the family that grew strawberries and apples on the orchards where my Mississauga apartment is now.

The writing on the back dates the photo to 1917, so these ladies were helping James Pengilley (it was the "ngilley" on the side of the truck that raised my interest) while his sons, Tom (age 23) and Fred (21) were serving His Majesty with the 19th Battalion in Belgium.

The Ontario Farm Service Force (OFSF) that Robin writes about wrangled ladies from across Ontario to work on farms during World War II. One war earlier, James hired his workers through the Port Credit YWCA. In 1917, the girls were local. They returned home each evening. The Ontario Farm Service Force, from 1941 to 1946, was better organized. Ladies



Farmerettes in Clarkson, Ontario in 1917.

stayed for the season, living in barracks provided by the farmer, or at an OFSF-managed camp. James' WWII pickers lodged at Stevenson's Tourist Camp; a ten-minute walk away. The province rented their cabins each summer.

Cabbages, carrots and peppers grow in Exeter, where Bonnie hails, but the town is famous for its rutabagas . . . if rutabagas can make a place famous. Bland (in my opinion) but high in iron, Canadians were urged to eat more of these tasteless tubers during WWII so that

other (more delicious; again, in my opinion) iron-rich foods like beef, pork and eggs – more easily hydrated and canned – could be sent to the soldiers. Carrots were favoured by the Agricultural Supplies Board because they didn't spoil as quickly as leafy crops. They were also light in transit and, as such, were better able to make the long journey from home to the front. Cabbages and rutabagas seemed almost heavy enough to sink a merchant marine vessel faster than a U-boat.

Remembering Farmerettes and Faith Fyles

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Bonnie signed her amazing book and spoke to visitors sharing their experiences. Click [here](#) for CBC coverage of Bonnie's book.

The screening of *We Lend A Hand* was held during Doors Open Ottawa 2026 weekend, and also complemented OAG's *Faith Fyles: In*

Full Bloom exhibit.

In addition Colin, Bonnie and I were invited to do an interview with Susan Johnston, on CKCU, Carleton University's radio station. Really went well.

Thank you and congratulations to Colin and Bonnie, and also to Felipe Gaj-Levra who produced the

documentary. Last but not least let's all thank the Farmerettes who served Canada during a difficult time in our history. This year is the International Year of Women in Agriculture, and the Farmerettes are a significant part of Canada's military, agriculture and women's history. Lest We Forget!