

WI changing to meet new challenges

"Once content with only the challenges of hearth and home, farm women are today pushing into leadership positions as they react to changing times and an unprecedented financial crisis.

No longer content with simply keeping the books and quietly raising the children, more and more farm wives are becoming full partners in the family business as they try to deal with forces off the farm which are having such a profound impact on their lives.

Even once staid and home-bound organizations as the Women's Institute are changing their colors and pushing for a more active role for women in setting farm policy. . . ."

So began a recent article published by the Daily Mercury in Guelph under the headline "Women's groups change to meet new farm challenges." The story, authored by Steve Arnold, was part of a series of articles about the new activism among rural women. The following is an excerpt from the WI-related article.

Despite its proud history, the WI is seen in many circles as an antique, interesting for its historical value, but of little practical use.

"I think we've certainly seen the death of the traditional Women's Institute, but like the family farm it just refuses to lie down and be buried," says Erin resident and University of Toronto doctoral student Mary Lou Olah.

Marg Leuty, Wellington County's member on the provincial board of the Federated Women's



M. LEUTY

Institutes of Ontario, admits the group was first formed to help women upgrade their skills as homemakers, but says its current focus is much broader.

"We're taking part in education programs and working with other organizations, organizations which have been pretty well male-dominated," she said. "We still feel the family is an important part of society, but now we are reaching out to develop other leadership skills in women."

WI representatives, she noted, have been appointed to the Canada Food Council and the boards of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, the Royal Winter Fair and the Ontario Agricultural Museum in Milton.

Beth Burnett, former WI district president and currently alternate board member, says WI resolutions have been behind many social changes which have improved the quality of life.

Burnett said future WI efforts are

Steve Arnold



going to have to draw a distinction between the concerns of rural farm women and rural residents, while Leuty sees a need to encourage girls to consider non-traditional occupations and to work to change the view of women in society.

"We deplore all this degradation of women in pornography. We deplore any degradation of our sex," she said. "Working on things like this all develops the leadership abilities we need."

Specific projects for the future include this decade's theme of Safe Water for All, as well as lobbying efforts for improved pensions for farmers and better rural day care services.

The issue of day care is especially important for them. All the women have memories of juggling the needs of the children and the demands of the farm.

Pensions for farm families is another area requiring the attention of activist groups, Burnett said, noting she is not permitted to contribute to the Canada Pension Plan as a farm wife "and that just isn't right."

The only pension she has is the farm itself and they have seen the value of that asset steadily declining over several years.

Solutions to many of the problems they are facing, the women agree, will require farmers to be more vocal about themselves than they have been accustomed to.

"Farmers aren't inclined to go out and blow their own horns and complain about their faults," Burnett said, while Leuty added "we have all started to be more vocal. The WI has been working quietly in our own communities for years, but we just haven't talked about it."

"The women just haven't realized that they should be talking about the job they are doing," she added.

too proud to seek help

to improvise, to make ends meet. There are homes in jeopardy here as in "For Home and Country".

The other way in which I would like to see more Women's Institutes become involved is in the area of **Agriculture Education**. For the past two years, the Rural Organizations and Services Branch has been helping to develop a program called *Agriculture in the Classroom*. There is a whole generation growing up without any idea where their food comes from before it reaches the supermarket shelves. A vast number of teaching resources have been catalogued and new ones have been developed for classroom use. A binder entitled "Food Systems and Agriculture" should be in every school

and school board office in the province.

If you are not already aware of this program and what it entails, then educate yourselves first. Talk to your Rural Organization Specialist, contact me, or contact Marjorie MacDonald in the Guelph office. Marjorie is our Provincial Education Specialist. Then, approach your local school board members and teachers to see if they are aware that these teaching resources are available and encourage them to use the material, to give agriculture the priority and the high profile that it must have in our society. Maybe, just to spark some extra interest, you could sponsor a competition with an agricultural emphasis for a particular grade level.