

Dorothy Middleton

By Carol Stewart-Kirkby



Dorothy Middleton joined Women for the Survival of Agriculture (WSA) in 1977 just to get their newsletter. Since then, she has established the very successful annual seminars called Survival Techniques for Farm Women; has become an experienced lobbyist and public speaker; is presently co-ordinating a research project for Agriculture Canada; and is the current president of WSA!

Born and raised in the city, Dorothy and her family moved to their dairy farm at Crysler, Ontario the same year she joined WSA. Before that, her family bought a small farm near Picton as a summer place while Dorothy and her husband continued to work in Toronto. 'Going back to the land was something I always wanted to do, but it wasn't long before I realized that we couldn't survive on two cows, two pigs and a bunch of chickens, no matter how much butter you make yourself,' Dorothy explained. Also, one of her two sons was expressing a lot of interest in farming and that helped prompt the decision to go farming full time.

Dorothy's background is in nursing and teaching, but for a while she worked for a sand and gravel company. She attributes that small business experience to the reason for choosing dairy farming. 'After some research, we realized that dairy farming is connected to a marketing board and is more stable and provides a regular source of income,' Dorothy said. 'We chose eastern Ontario because it was like the land of milk and honey with lots of good land,' she added.

Because Dorothy and her family had no dairy experience, they attended any and all educational courses available. 'It was during my quest for knowledge that I came upon WSA,' Dorothy said. Almost right away, a woman asked her to conduct a couple of meetings on farm safety, because of her background in nursing and teaching. That woman was Dianne Harkin, founder of WSA, and Dorothy has been involved ever since.

'Once I got to the meetings, I was swept away by the women and the challenge of making more people aware of what's happening in farming,' Dorothy said. Soon after she reached the farm, Dorothy realized none of the amenities she had enjoyed in the city were available in the country. She felt WSA could go a long way towards bringing some of those amenities to rural Ontario.

After a couple of courses for farm women at Kemptville College of Agricultural Technology, it soon became apparent the women had an insatiable appetite for knowledge. Once again, because of her teaching background, Dorothy was an obvious choice for organizing some sort of seminar series. By January 1981, the Survival Techniques for Farm Women series was established. It is an eight-week series, one day per week. Dorothy reported 125 topics have been covered to date and range from computers to artificial insemination in dairy cattle to bookkeeping to behavioral problems in children.

Each seminar is full and there are always people who want to attend but can't because the numbers are limited. 'I think the program is successful because by educating the women, we are all gaining more confidence and becoming more motivated,' Dorothy said.

Women for the Survival of Agriculture is the only national farm women's group in Canada, with a membership of about 2,000. Dorothy explained that although the group in southwestern Ontario call themselves the Women for the Support of Agriculture, they still belong to the national group. 'What's in a name.

What is important is what you do,' said Dorothy. Keeping the communications lines open between the various provinces is the key to a successful national organization.

As well as providing educational information, the WSA in eastern Ontario was one of the first groups to recognize family abuse in our rural communities. As a result, the Naomi Family Resource Centre was established in Winchester. 'Social problems, agricultural problems and women's issues in the rural area are what we concentrate on,' Dorothy added.

Dorothy is involved in a number of other activities. As well as being a mother and wife, doing farm chores, and being on-call for farm emergencies, she is on the finance committee of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture and is a member of the Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry Advisory Council. She is also a member of the advisory committee for the National Agriculture Museum in Ottawa. And, at the moment she is working on a project for Agriculture Canada to determine the training needs of farm women and the barriers facing farm women in receiving this training. She expects to present the first phase of the project (collated questionnaire results) at the National Farm Women's Conference in Saskatchewan in November.

How does she do it? 'Run,' is her answer! She said without the support of her family and husband she wouldn't be able to do a lot of the things she does now. Also, her involvement in WSA provides her with lots of facts and contacts to make some of the jobs a little easier.