

# First National Agriculture in the

It was an historic occasion when more than 120 education and agriculture representatives from eight Canadian provinces and one U.S. state gathered in London, Ontario April 13 to 15 to discuss their participation in Agriculture in the Classroom.

The first of its kind in Canada, the national conference was sponsored by Southwestern Ontario Women for the Support of Agriculture and funded in part by the federal and provincial ministries of agriculture.

The goal of the conference was to challenge the educator, agribusiness representative, government agency and agricultural organization leader to facilitate the training and leadership development of volunteers for Agriculture in the Classroom (AITC). Participants were challenged to form a national network for AITC. These were challenges that participants approached with great enthusiasm. Keynote speaker Saskatchewan Minister of Education Lorne Hepworth, clearly explained the importance of Agriculture in the Classroom. Citing the increased urbanization of society, he warned that Canada "is in danger of fostering an agriculturally illiterate society" if our young people don't learn about agriculture. He emphasized that "society needs to have a larger understanding of the important, complex and contemporary issues we face and that our children will face in the future."

## Carolyn Murray



Today's youth find our agriculture courses boring, Hepworth said. He warned, "We are in danger of failing those of our young people who are headed for a career in agribusiness or in farming." He challenged the educators when he said, "We are failing our young people in relevancy. We are not meeting their expectations, never mind we are not challenging them." Today a farmer needs information, knowledge and a finely trained mind.

Hepworth expressed concern over the possibility of a schism developing in society with the urban population versus the rural population. "Agriculture is an issue that has the potential to be the leading edge of the wedge. If for no other reason, Agriculture in the Classroom is important to prevent this schism from developing," Hepworth added.

Other conference speakers echoed Hepworth's concerns. Ontario's Minister of Agriculture and Food Jack Riddell talked about the image problem of agriculture today. He proposed that students need to learn a new set of ABC's. A is for agriculture, B is for big business and C is for

cornerstone of Canada's economy. He appealed to educators and agricultural organizations to work together to tell one clear and compelling story — not 48 different ones.

One of the most inspiring speakers was Mark Linder, program director, California Farm Bureau. In California, the largest farm state in the U.S., 79,000 farmers produce \$14 billion worth of farm products annually. The population of Los Angeles alone is 10 million.

Linder and his staff have developed some unique agricultural awareness programs. The farm day program is a two-day elementary school program where students view farm animals and talk to farmers in their own inner city school yards as well as see a slide show. The Summer Agricultural Institute is a five-day comprehensive program on agriculture for professionals in education. It includes an overnight visit with farm families; an aerial tour of California's agriculture, and classroom activities that include lectures on a wide variety of agricultural issues and topics.

Conference delegates attended workshops on The Role of Agribusiness; Funding and Proposal Development; Public Awareness; Careers; Teacher Training and Curriculum Development.

At the round table discussions, about 15 individuals involved in AITC programs eagerly shared their ideas and resources with conference delegates.

Enthusiasm for the future of AITC was still high at the end of the conference. Delegates made some major recommendations at both the provincial and national level:

1. There should be coordination of efforts among all groups involved in AITC.
2. Form a national organizing committee to act as a clearinghouse and publish a regular newsletter to exchange agricultural information and promote agricultural awareness.
3. Organize and promote a second National AITC Conference in 1988.

**Carolyn Murray is the secretary of the Southwestern Ontario Women for the Support of Agriculture.**



*Pictured above are members of the organizing committee for the National Agriculture in the Classroom Conference. At the podium is Suzanne Leitch, chairman. Behind her, from left to right are Jean Johnson, Sharon Weitzel, Pat Froud, LaVonne Stephen and Debbie Steele.*