

Meet Rennie Feddema — Ontario Farm Women's Network President

By Carol Stewart-Kirkby

Rennie Feddema, the president of the Ontario Farm Women's Network, believes she was elected to office because of her lack of ties to already existing women's groups. In other words, she sees herself as neutral.

"I became interested in the network discussions after going to a couple of national farm women's conferences. But I wasn't there as a voting delegate. I was a member of the Christian Farmers' Federation (of Ontario) at the time," Rennie, a mother of five, explained.

The CFFO was a stepping stone to her current position. In 1982, Rennie was the first woman on the provincial executive of the Christian Farmers' Federation of Ontario. She subsequently served three two-year terms as provincial secretary. "We have been members locally for as long as we've been farming," Rennie added. She and her husband have been dairy farming for 25 years and currently farm outside Strathroy.

Attending the farm women's conferences gave Rennie a chance to hear and see first hand the specific issues which impact on farm women. "I really dislike the term 'women's issue'. I believe these issues impact on the family and the men have just as much to do with the family as the women. However, sometimes, the ramifications of these issues are detrimental to the women," Rennie said.

Rennie was elected coordinator of the Ontario network at the national farm women's conference in Saskatchewan in the fall of 1987. At the time, there wasn't really a network in place. "It was my mandate to form a network," she said.

After a lot of hard work and support from other farm women in the province, the Ontario Farm Women's Network was born in March 1989 at a conference and annual meeting. The constitution for the group is in a draft form. Rennie expects it to be finalized and accepted at the group's next conference in March 1990.

The core group of women, who have been involved in the network idea since the early 1980's met several times before the first annual meeting this year. A three-year action plan was drawn up. Rennie is pleased to report the first year

of the plan has been successfully carried out. She is looking forward to the next two. A meeting at the end of September of the OFWN executive will help chart the course of those two years.

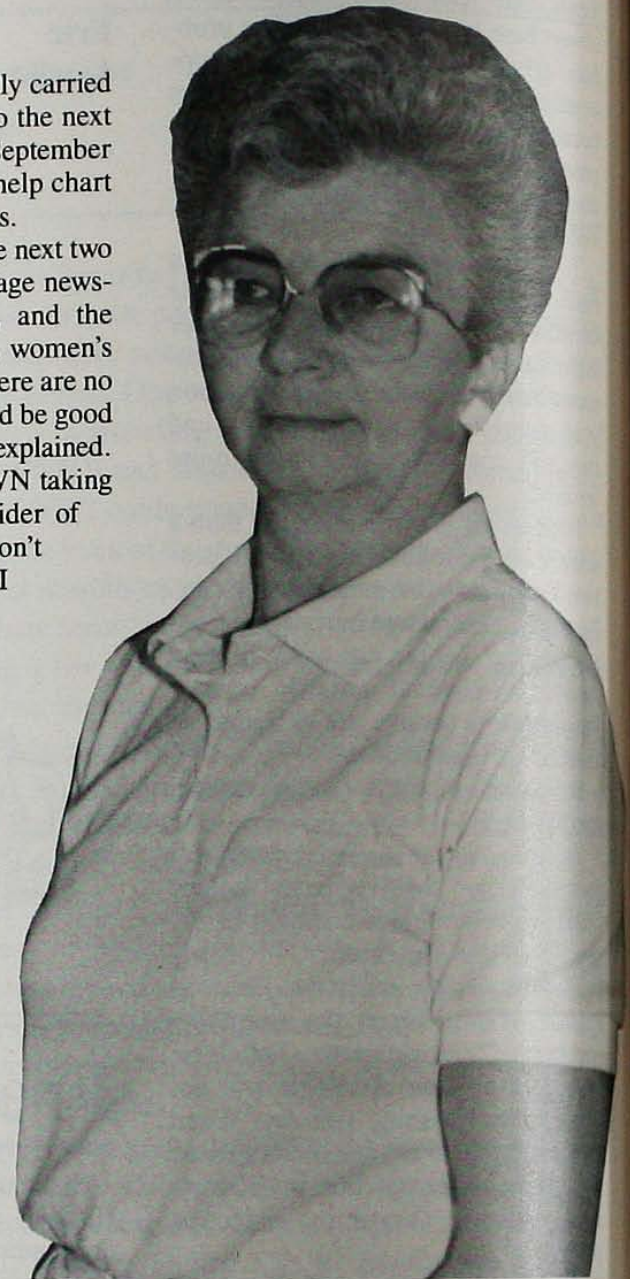
A couple of objectives in the next two years may be a French language newsletter for OFWN members, and the encouragement of local farm women's groups. "In some counties, there are no farm women's groups. It would be good to have local groups," Rennie explained. But, she doesn't see the OFWN taking on a teaching role as a provider of workshops for instance. "I don't see the network doing that. I think the organizations have that responsibility," she added.

The current membership of the OFWN stands at about 200 individuals and 17 organizations.

"I hope everyone is making a concerted effort to get new members," Rennie said. When asked what benefits individual members receive over group memberships, Rennie explained individuals get a newsletter delivered to their homes; have the chance to become more immediately involved with the OFWN; and have a vote at the provincial annual meeting.

One of the important roles played by OFWN is as a provincial voice for farm women. "We are now speaking on behalf of organizations and individual members. Periodically we are called on to give a response to an issue or make a presentation," Rennie explained.

"I also feel the network plays an important role in presenting a professional image of farm women. As well, there is a need to consult with other farm organizations," Rennie added.



As well as farming and her work with OFWN and CFFO, Rennie has been involved in many volunteer activities. She and her husband were foster parents for 11 and a half years for a total of six children. At church, she is the chairman of the Education Committee. She is also a volunteer with the Middlesex Support Services for Seniors, and works at the Cross-Cultural Learner Centre in London — an Oxfam project.

"I have really made some wonderful contacts during my involvement in agricultural organizations," she said.