

5th National Farm Women's Conference - "Sharing Our Vision"

By Corry Martens

For two days that was exactly what 250 farm women from all parts of Canada did at the Radisson Hotel in London, Ontario. They also shared their vision with politicians, guests, and the media. They discussed economic issues, political concerns, equality and family violence, and they honoured two of their "pioneers," Diane Harkin and Dorothy Middleton.

The following report outlines some of the three-day agenda.

□ Thursday, November 21, 1991

Pat Hayes, Parliamentary Assistant to the Ontario Minister of Agriculture, Elmer Buchanan, officially opened the Fifth National Farm Women's Conference.

The first day of the Convention dealt with the business matters of the Canadian Farm Women's Network (CFWN). The constitution was presented, and following many changes a resolution to ratify was passed unanimously. It was an historic moment that the members of the Network had looked forward to with great anticipation.

The Strategic Plan for the CFWN was also presented and accepted for future direction of the Network. The last item on the agenda was the resolution session, which brought out the genuine concerns from the member provinces. The overwhelming economic dynamics on the farm led the farm women to bring forth many agricultural issues. Eight resolutions were passed.

Thursday evening opened with a speech - "How to Break the Glass Ceiling" - by F. Anthony Comper, President and Chief Operating Officer for the Bank of Montreal. He suggested that Canadian women whether working on the farm or in the bank are similar. Both face invisible, powerful barriers to their advancement, and both are demanding to be heard by their leaders, both expect equality of gender to be a reality and not just a slogan.

Marion Boyd, Education Minister as well as Minister for Community and Social Services, also spoke. She felt that some good might come out of the hard economic times, that urban and rural societies need to work together, and that people must rely on themselves and each other to improve things. And she extended an invitation to the audience: "If you're interested in sharing your talents and expertise, let me hear from you."

□ Friday, November 22, 1991

Friday morning's agenda began with a "A Profile of Canadian Farm Women" by Lynne Nieman, Researcher with Alberta's Department of Agriculture. Robert Glossop followed with "Perspectives on Equality." He stated that the average farm family tends to be larger than the average family, but it is shrinking, raising questions about the future of the agricultural labour force. Glossop remarked that farm families experience high stress levels, and that they are "living on the left-overs of human energy."

Trying to deal with these stress levels was the topic of Lera Ryan, Family Resource Management Specialist with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food. Ryan stated that farm women should be cautious about "role overload." Farm women wear many hats, she explained, leaving little or no time to think of their own well-being. She spoke of how they should claim back a portion of their lives and set aside time for themselves; and remember that "perfection is unattainable."

The Hon. Mary Collins, Minister Responsible for the Status of Women, was the luncheon speaker. She offered the opinion that the work farm women do is not incidental to modern farming; it is indispensable. Collins also mentioned the establishment of the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women, whose role is to facilitate a national dialogue. Linda Reith, Co-ordinator of the Rural Women's Shelter Program in Guelph, elaborated on the topic with her discussion of "The Many Faces of Abuse on Family Farms."

The afternoon ended with a press conference organized by farm women from all the provinces, representing many commodities, and expressing concerns over the viability of the agricultural industry. The group declared themselves "an endangered species;" they urged consumers to join them in their struggle for the survival of the family farm and to recognize the contribution of the agricultural industry to the Canadian economy.

Following the banquet Friday evening, the Rt. Hon. Joe Clark, Minister Responsible for Constitutional Affairs, addressed the gathering. Clark congratulated the CFWN on ratifying their constitution, expressing hopes that it would be contagious. He said that the crisis Canada is facing right now is caused by a failure to know our country. "Gatherings like this national con-

ference help to fight myths about other people and parts of Canada." They also prove that people from all over the country can reach across their regional differences to discuss issues calmly and reach consensus.

□ Saturday, November 23, 1991

The first item on the agenda on Saturday morning was called "Sharing Our Success Stories." Several provinces had members reporting on a success story for farm women in their province.

A panel discussion on the "Influences On Food Prices in Canada" followed, led by Frances Anderson. Panelists included: Verna Thompson, a food producer from Saskatchewan; Joan Hazur, President of the Ontario Consumers' Association; Sandra Banks, Vice-President of Government Relations for the Grocery Products Manufacturers of Canada; Jim Waters, Vice-President of Canada Safeway; and, Ralph Ferguson, M.P. for Lambton-Middlesex.

"Food prices are going to increase one way or another," Verna Thompson said. Either people will pay more at the check-out, or they will pay in tax dollars for the government support programs. She added, if neither happens and agriculture in Canada dies, then consumers will pay in the loss of the industry's contribution to the national income.

In the next session, Ross Daily, TV producer and journalist, said that society is waiting for women to take their rightful place; and that we are now in a transition period. He urged women to achieve influence on their own terms, and not to "play a man's game, the man's way."

Saturday afternoon included two sessions. Alice Brown, a food producer from Alberta, spoke about "Farm Women as Professionals." And "Sharing Our Vision Back Home" was the concluding topic presented by Caroline Young, President of the CFWN. Donna Lunn, President of the Ontario Farm Women's Network and Chair of the Conference's Planning Committee made the closing remarks.

This information was extracted from a report by Corry Martens, Editor of the Ontario Farm Women's Network.