

“Agriculture Award of Merit”

A life shaped by the family farm

Nov. 25, 1987



Beth Slumskie, of RR 2, Dobbinton, is the 1987 recipient of the Bruce County Federation of Agriculture's 'Award of Merit,' presented at the Federation's annual banquet at the Chesley

Community Centre November 13. The award is presented each year to a person who has contributed significantly to the community of agriculture.

When Beth Slumskie received the Bruce County Federation of Agriculture's 'Award of Merit' Nov. 13, she said she couldn't believe it.

Slumskie, the wife of a R. R. 2, Dobbinton beef farmer, and one of the two founding members of 'Concerned Farm Women', received the award at the Federation's 46th annual meeting and banquet at the Chesley Community Centre.

The award, which used to be called the 'Farmer of the Year' award, is presented every year by the Federation's executive to a person they feel has contributed significantly to the community of agriculture.

"I was shocked," the president of 'Concerned Farm Women' from 1984-1986 said after she won the award. "Because of the economic situation I've gone back to work and haven't been able to devote time to farm economic issues. I've had to back off and let others carry the torch," she said.

Giselle Ireland of R. R. 2 Teeswater, who along with her husband Brian donated the award to the Federation back in 1979, presented the award to Slumskie at the banquet. Ireland too is an early founding member of 'Concerned Farm Women'.

"Beth has always been very very aware of the contribution the family makes to the farming community," Ireland said in a telephone interview Nov. 20. "(As a member of CFW) she was very instrumental in getting rural day care started," she said.

Ireland also spoke about Slumskie's personal qualities, qualities that Ireland noticed as the two women worked

together from the founding of CFW in 1981 to the present.

"It was her extreme caring for other people," Ireland said, mentioning one of the traits that she felt made Slumskie more than deserving of the award. "If she didn't have time she would make time for people that needed help. When things got you really down (it was always Beth that helped bring you right back up again)," she said.

It has been amazing that Slumskie has been able to have this effect on others. She has suffered more than her share of personal misfortunes while being a farm mother and wife.

In 1975, one of Slumskie's two sons was killed when the tractor he was driving overturned, pinning him underneath it. He was only 12 years old.

Ten years later, and four years after helping found CFW, the bank called in the loans on the Slumskie farm. By 1986, the Slumskie farm was gone.

"In 1981 I really didn't believe we were going to lose the farm," Slumskie said. "I kept hoping we could save it. I didn't know then that that was a myth," she said.

"Losing a farm is Hell on Earth, that is," Slumskie said. It was in June, 1981 that Slumskie and Doris Sweiger, also of Dobbinton, began to realize that farmers and farm families were plunging into a financial crisis.

"People were paying more in interest (on loans) than they were getting in wages, 24 hours a day," Slumskie said. "Something (had) to happen."

In September, 1981, Sweiger and Slumskie called up about 10 people they knew to come to a meeting to discuss farm problems at Sweiger's home. Fifty-one people showed

up.

At a public meeting the two women helped organize in Chesley, to voice concerns over the worsening financial situation for farmers in Grey and Bruce Counties, 250 people attended.

In October, 1981, Slumskie and Sweiger organized a demonstration in front of the then federal agriculture minister, Eugene Whelan, as he was giving a speech to the Port Elgin Chamber of Commerce. The demonstration involved farm men, women and children.

The demonstration was one of the first lobbying actions of the fledgling 'Concerned Farm Women' movement. It was also important because it initiated a new song: "Old MacDonald had a farm, but the banker has it now."

Whelan told the demonstrators that he would help them or he would resign from the government.

Slumskie said the early focus of CFW was to try and make the government aware of the plight of the family farm and thus gain government help.

Early CFW activities that Slumskie engaged in included standing at the International Ploughing Match, trying to encourage farmers and farm wives to write letters to their MP's and MPP's, and also to encourage three to five of their friends and neighbours to do the same thing.

"We were sure that was the solution," Slumskie said. "I believe that if the government had intervened at that time we could have stopped farm bankruptcy, and prevented farm families from breaking up. But the government didn't have the political will to do it," she said.