

Province ditched museum too early, says history buff

Facility needs a few years to get back on its feet, contends Walt Elliot

By STEVE LeBLANC
Special to The Champion

Local heritage buffs with previous ties to the Farm Museum are blaming the Ontario government for its recent closure.

According to Walt Elliot — who spent over a year raising funds for the now mothballed facility — the province beat a far too hasty retreat in their funding of the museum.

The provincial government gave up control of the Ontario Agricultural Museum last spring.

A private investors group, called Country Heritage Experience, took up the reins and renamed the Milton-based site.

The group has shut down museum operations indefinitely and laid off all of its employees.

"I still think there should have been a gradual phasing out of funding by the government," the former Liberal MPP said. "It's a dynamite facility

but one year wasn't enough of a window to turn it around under new ownership. It'll take three to five years."

While the province relinquished control of the site, they did provide the private consortium with a \$325,000 subsidy this year.

"The government has agreed to offer \$300,000 and \$275,000 in funding over the next two years as well. That's what was agreed upon. I know some companies that would give their eye teeth for a \$900,000 subsidy over three years," said Halton North MPP Ted Chudleigh.

However, Milton Historical Society charter member Jim Dills said this subsidy only helps cover the cost of maintenance and didn't get the museum off on a sure footing.

"If the Farm Museum remains closed the government has a tremendous responsibility to react," he stressed. "This is not something that they can



Walt Elliot

simply wash their hands of."

Both Mr. Dills and Mr. Elliot were part of Ontario's Rural Heritage Preservation Committee.

The volunteer group organized several fundraising efforts for the museum last year after the province announced it would soon sever ties to the local attraction.

Mr. Dills said he'd be hard pressed to come up with ideas on how the Farm Museum could be made to work, but did suggest the "museum" part of its name does not bespeak

excitement.

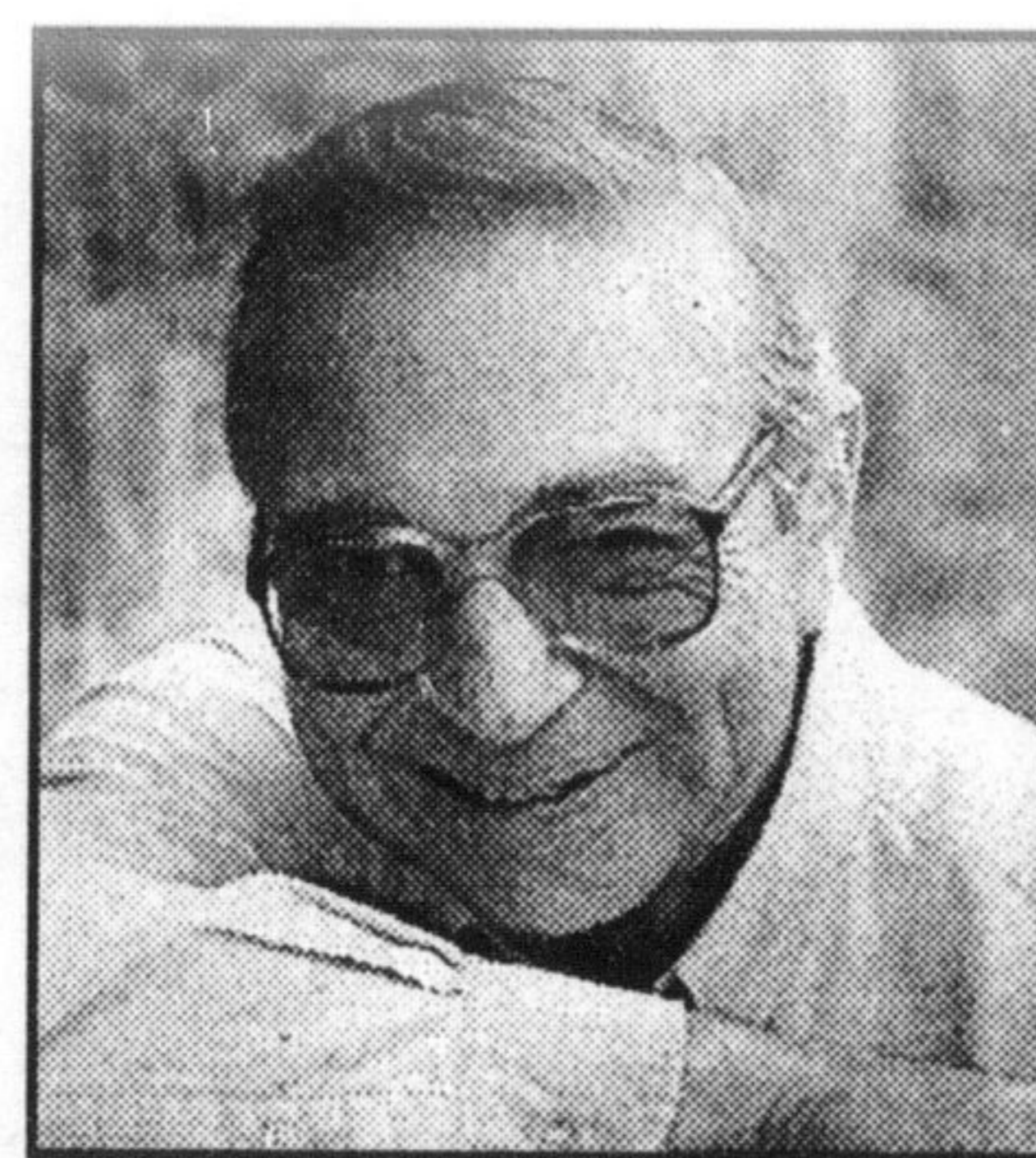
He added, "I'm not a big fan of the word museum, but at the same time I'm not sure what else you could call it."

Not as willing to let museum operators off the hook for financial shortcomings, Mr. Elliot said a number of ideas to attract visitors were initially introduced but were never followed up.

"I know the owner of Wally's Meats (Peter Stemmann) made an initial offer to refurbish the Gambrel Bicentennial Barn and become the museum's caterer during weekend entertainment events. The offer was never followed up on and he was never called back," Mr. Elliot said.

He suggested having different weekend events, such as an introduction to the horse industry and antique automobile showcase, might have offered more appeal to potential visitors.

While realizing the group's



Jim Dills

\$800,000 to \$900,000 operating budget didn't offer much leeway for publicity, Mr. Elliot said posting a few signs around town wasn't nearly enough to attract break-even crowds.

He also questioned the logic behind the name change, adding that more people would likely have been willing to support the facility under its traditional-sounding Ontario Agricultural Museum title.

"You've got to have a hook to lure people. People might have been willing to come to the rescue of the Ontario

Agricultural Museum if they heard it was closing, rather than this seemingly new Farm Museum.

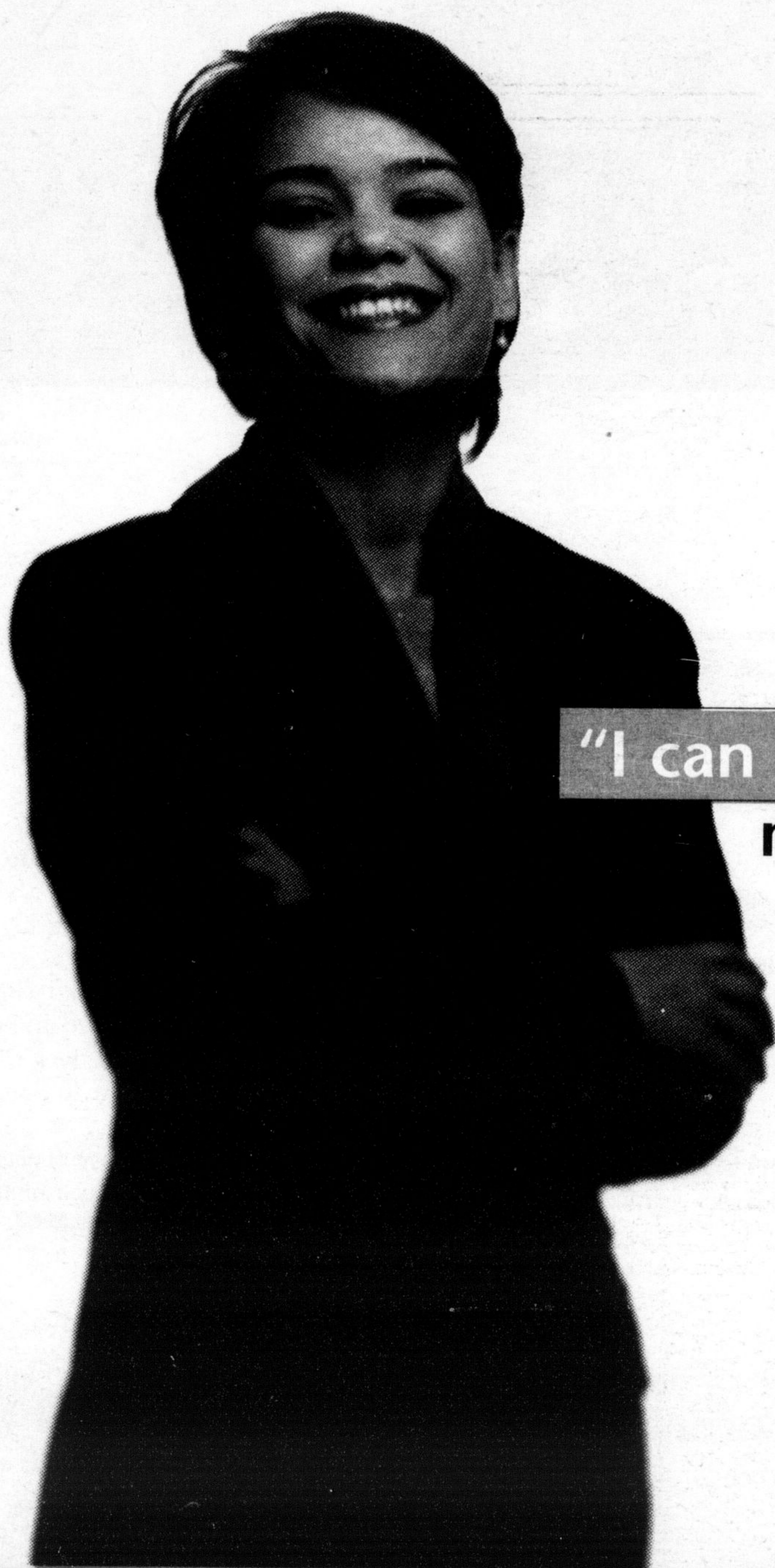
"Once the site start making some money then they could have changed the name."

The Farm Museum, Mr. Dills said, has one of the most impressive collections of agricultural antiques and artifacts in Canada.

Pointing to successful farming museums in western Canada, he said he's "appalled that we can't sustain one in Ontario."

Mr. Chudleigh said the provincial government has no intention of reclaiming control of the museum should Country Heritage Experience divorce themselves from it.

"The province still owns the property although we wouldn't reopen it as a museum. There are other groups that are interested in the property, but it's premature to be thinking about that," said Mr. Chudleigh.



"I can now offer my customers even more. That's the real change."

NATALIE ARAUJO: National Trust employee, Toronto, Ontario since 1988

Simply put, you don't change a good thing. That's why National Trust customers will continue to see the same friendly, helpful staff working in branches right in your neighbourhood. The major changes since the union of National Trust and Scotiabank come from the wealth of new products and services National Trust customers have been offered... from telephone banking to Stock-Indexed GICs. And that's just the start.

NEW THINKING, TRADITIONAL VALUES. That's what National Trust customers are experiencing since the alliance with the Scotiabank Group. We've combined the very best elements of both organizations to create *The Best of Both Worlds.*

National Trust

Scotiabank

© Registered trade-mark of The Bank of Nova Scotia. National Trust has been authorized to use this mark.