

NFU 40th National Convention - Ottawa, Ontario - November 26-28, 2009

Address by Evelyn Potter NFU Women's President (1969-1975)

Hello and welcome to all NFU members. I regret that health concerns keep me from being present today. However, I shall be there in spirit.

Congratulations on 40 years of solidarity and struggle. That is a great achievement and cause for celebration. This convention, members will have the opportunity to reflect on recorded history. We will then better understand the broad context from which we came. It will be a time to reflect but also look ahead. What is the role of the NFU in the next decade? What is the future of the family farm? Of the farm family? What will be the role of farm women?



Going back to 1968 at Camp Goldeye, Alberta, where delegates from existing provincial unions thrashed out the constitution for the NFU, there was a heated debate related to women's positions. Some felt that there should be even man/woman representation on every board from local to national level. Others said elections should be thrown wide open and women should fight for the position if they wanted it and felt they were qualified for the office. The result of the discussion was women's and youth positions were set out in the constitution to ensure that our women and young people would be involved in the organization. I might add that this has been a bone of contention for some throughout the years.

By creating these positions at that time, I believe we faced reality. We gave farm women the right to participate, to learn through experience and the opportunity for equal status. There were special efforts aimed at getting women to participate in an activity and accept responsibility – not always an easy task.

In those first years of helping to organize locals and attending many, many meetings, it was usual to find only men present with one or two women in the kitchen making coffee and preparing lunch. They were hesitant to participate in the meeting. When the men were asked why they didn't bring their wives they had various excuses, but mostly it was: "I hadn't thought of it." Remember, over forty years ago most tractors didn't have radios – therefore – who was listening to the house radio for up-to-date information, farm news or prices – the woman was. She was informed. She was knowledgeable, but she was not at the farm meetings.

I am fairly certain that in many areas of the NFU, locals would not have had women involvement except for our constitution and a lot of work to break through tradition and barriers of the past.

One of the successes of women's involvement resulted in the book "Nature Feeds Us". During my tenure as Women's President, the first National Farm Women's Conference was held in 1973. At that conference we mapped out plans for a book on food and the food industry – the first of its kind in Canada. The book was to deal with all aspects of food production, from farm

field to the store shelf. It was to look at the health aspects of foods, examine profit and pricing structure of the industry, examine marketing practices, chemical farming and growth stimulants. Also included would be a few recipes for a healthy diet.

The point of this project was not only to have a book published as an end result, but the process was an all-important aspect as well. The success of the book rested upon grassroots involvement, that women at the local level take responsibility and make the initial contacts. It was to be a learning process, through research spearheaded by women at the local level, however, the whole family was to be involved.

Book committees were formed at the local level and were responsible for undertaking specific topics related to the broad area the book would look at. The Women's Advisory Committee member coordinated the activities of the District Women's Director within her region. Information was funnelled back to Head Office where an NFU Literary Committee was appointed to go through the mounds of material and put it all together. The whole process involved many, many members. As they did the research, they learned, they discussed and they had a great social time together.

The result was the book, "Nature Feeds Us". By the way, the title was selected from numerous entries in a contest to name the book. The title had to have the letters "NFU" in it. I consider this project a great accomplishment by the members.

I want to review a bit of history about the "Person's Case" because it had great impact on women's lives. Many Canadian women alive today, including myself, were not considered "persons" when they were born. Not until October 18, 1929, were women declared persons under the British North America (BNA) Act and this judgment was made in Britain. We should celebrate the conviction and persistence of the "Famous Five" – those five women who made it happen 80 years ago. The definition of personhood was challenged by Emily Murphy when she sought to run for the Senate. She was turned down by the fact she wasn't a legal person by law, but she could petition the Government of Canada if there were five in agreement to lobby with her. Thus, these five women gathered for tea parties to strategize and the rest is history.

While in Ottawa, if you haven't already seen their statues, they are on the grounds of the Parliament Buildings. Emily Murphy, the first woman magistrate in the British Empire, was President of the Federation of Women's Institutes. Louise McKinney was the first woman to sit in a legislature in the British Empire, Henrietta Edwards studied the legal status of women promoting changes in the law. Nellie McClung was elected to the legislature in Alberta in 1917 and lectured throughout the prairies. Irene Parlby worked on behalf of farm women. She was Minister without Portfolio in the United Farmers of Alberta government for 14 years. Each was a strong worker for women's rights. They were uniquely gifted, unified in their purpose obeying the law of the land. They committed their lives for the advancement of freedom and equality.

Going back to May, 1918, the right to vote in federal elections was extended to all women. In 1921 the right to hold elected federal office happened with Agnes MacPhail being the first woman Member of Parliament elected. Today there are 308 Members of Parliament, only about 18% are women.

Women have been totally involved in our organization, participating at all levels. They have been involved in forming policy, with lobbying, picketing, demonstrations and passing out information leaflets. Women are great organizers and canvassers,. They have written briefs and submissions. They worked on policy positions for women's rights and matrimonial property rights, to name a few.

Women are an important and integral part of the union. Yet we have had only one woman as National President in the past 40 years. Why? I know it is a great sacrifice to hold a position in the NFU. I am aware of it from experience. I know too, this is true not only for women, but for everyone. In many cases, the financial hardship is too great.

Throughout the years, because of necessity, women have contributed labour and management ability in order for the family farm to survive. They have taken on an increasing share of the farm work and also work off the farm to supplement income.

I know that in the NFU we need more women with conviction and courage. Remember those 5 women over 80 years ago and their continued struggle for what they believed. It is the job of women to voice our strengths and move forward together; for women and men to work alongside each other, in union, to work for equality and justice. We must continue to promote gender equality.

At this meeting, one should assess not only our organization, but what we see about us.

What is the future of the family farm and the role the NFU should play? People more and more are not knowledgeable of where their food comes from. Urban dwellers are 1 or 2 generations removed from the farm, so it's becoming challenging for a farm organization to get their message out.

Looking towards the future is one of change and challenge. When countries such as Japan, China, South Korea and Libya are buying up huge tracts of agricultural land worldwide, and, for example, when 18 First Nations bands in Canada combined to form a corporate farm of 1 million acres, then....

What is the future of the family farm? What is the future of the farm family? Our farm youth?

These are but a few questions that should be foremost in discussion today.

I will close with a quotation from Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer of great worth and wisdom: "Man is defined as a human being and woman is defined as female. Whenever she tries to behave as a human being, she is accused of trying to emulate the male." These are words to ponder.

Thank you for your attention. Have a great convention and continue the struggle. Bye bye for now.