

150 years of women in ag: How far have we really come?



BY COURTNEY DENARD

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Write about anything you want concerning the past 150 years in agriculture.”

That was the task my editor, Paul Mahon, gave Ontario Farmer reporters a few months back.

While some people took their time picking their topic (the results of which you can see spread across this issue) I knew immediately I wanted to focus on women in agriculture.

As a woman in agriculture myself, I have become enthralled with this subject over the course of my career.

I noticed early on as a farm reporter I was often the only female at industry meetings and the large majority of my interview sources were men.

It was a rare day to interview a female from the agriculture sector and that never sat well with me.

So I made a move towards change.

I started seeking out women in the sector to connect with and highlight in my articles.

I pitched a series that profiles female farmers, which is now run in the Ontario Farmer on a regular basis.

I made a commitment to advance the industry for women in any way I can.

With that in mind, I thought writing an article on 150 years of women in ag would be celebratory. I thought it would leave me feeling proud and empowered. I thought it would be fun.

And though working on the

piece was all of that it was also something else.

Upon looking for women who have been recognized for their contributions to agriculture, I didn't exactly come up with as many as I thought I would.

The Ontario Agricultural Hall of Fame, for example, has only inducted 16 women out of 219 inductees in the past 37 years.

The Canadian Agricultural Hall of Fame is even lower with only five females out of 223 inductees since 1960.

That's seven per cent for Ontario and two per cent for Canada if you do the math.

The industry groups I phoned all said the same thing (usually apologetically).

There had only been one or two women in leadership roles over the past 50 years or longer they told me.

Some associations even said there have been zero women in a leadership role to date. Zero!

Being that the Ontario agriculture industry has been around since the late 1800s this left a knot in my stomach.

Have we really only come this far after more than a century?

I would say the answer to that is yes.

It's undeniable to me that women play an important role in agriculture even if it continues to be in the minority.

It doesn't help that the women who do contribute to the sector are not being recognized or documented nearly enough.

On that note, I put together a timeline highlighting some of the contributions women have made to Ontario agriculture over the past 150 years.

The timeline is listed below and I implore you to not only read but consider.

Women in ag have accomplished some pretty amazing

things over the last century and a half but it's up to us to see that and more importantly to value it.

1893: Laura Rose, instrumental in modernizing dairying in the late 1800s and early 1900s, becomes supervisor of the Home Dairy Department at the Ontario Agricultural College.

1897: Adelaide Hunter Hoodless and Erland Lee co-founded the Women's Institute.

1900: The first three branches of the Women's Institute in Ontario are up and running by 1900.

The objective of the first branches was to improve women's skills in the art of homemaking and childcare.

The Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario (FWIO) celebrates 120 years in 2017 as it continues to serve 3,500 members in 270 branches province wide.

1903: Macdonald Institute for women is co-founded by Adelaide Hunter Hoodless and Sir William Macdonald.

The Guelph-based institute initially features instruction for young women in nature study, manual training, domestic science, and domestic art.

1917: Ontario women are awarded the right to vote.

1921: Susannah Isabella Steckle (née Chase) is the first woman to graduate from the Ontario Agricultural College with a bachelor of science.

1929: Canadian women are legally recognized as "persons."

1952: The first four-year degree females graduate from Macdonald Institute. By the mid-1950's, Macdonald Institute is the premier home economics school in North America.

1976: Vera Maguire, a well-known member and leader of the Women's Institute, is named Minesing Citizen of the Year.

Maguire was a television personality with a one-woman cooking show who went on to pioneer the food committee at the Barrie Fair, which she guided for 20 years.

Maguire was an author and editor as well as a winner of the Agricultural Service Diploma awarded by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food.



Karen Sample (left) became the first female editor of the Milk Producer, the Dairy Farmers of Ontario's magazine, in 1982. Sample was the first woman to hold this position since the publication's beginning in 1952. Sharon Laidlaw (right) is the second female to serve in this role. Her tenure began in 2013.



1980: The Ontario Agricultural Hall of Fame (OAHF) names its first female inductee and the honour goes to Ethel Chapman, a teacher, civil servant, author and editor who inspired rural women.

1982: Karen Sample becomes the first female editor of the Milk Producer, the Dairy Farmers of Ontario's magazine.

Sample is the first woman to hold this position since the publication's beginning in 1952.

Sharon Laidlaw is the second female to serve in this role. Her tenure as editor started in 2013 and continues today.

1983: Ruth Thoen becomes the first female president of the Canadian 4-H Council.

Thoen is the first woman to hold this position since the council's inception in 1931, 52 years prior.

1989: The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food names Kate Butak as Deputy Minister.

Butak is the first woman to advance to the position and only one of two females to hold the office to date.

The second was Deb Stark who acted as Deputy Minister under the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs from 2013 to 2016.

1997: The Ontario Cattlemen's Association (now known as Beef Farmers of Ontario) elects its first female president, Linda Barker of Haldimand County.

The association has seen two female presidents, out of a total of 44, since 1963.

The second to be named president was Darlene Bowen of Temiskaming in 1999.

2009: Ontario Pork, which

originated as the Ontario Pork Producers' Marketing Board in 1946, elects Wilma Jeffray as its first female chair on the board of directors.

The second woman to hold this position is Amy Cronin who chaired the board from 2012 to 2017.

2013: Kathleen Wynne is sworn in as Ontario's 25th Premier.

The former Ontario Minister of Agriculture is the first woman ever to be elected Premier of Ontario and the first openly gay head of government in Canada.

2013: Jennifer Christie establishes the Ag Women's Network (AWN), a group dedicated to connecting and empowering women in agriculture.

At 1,800 members, AWN represents women from a diverse cross-section of the agriculture and agri-food sector.

2015: The Advancing Women in Agriculture Conference East is held for the first time in Toronto.

The gathering, which focuses on leadership and empowerment, brought together over 450 delegates representing 230 organizations from nine provinces and four U.S. States.

The conference is now an annual event in Ontario.

2016: Shikha Jain becomes Dairy Farmers of Ontario's first female director taking on the role of Director, Planning, HR & Organizational Development.

2017: Ontario women make up 29.7 per cent of farm operators according to the 2016 Statistics Canada Census of Agriculture released on May 10, 2017.

This figure is up from 28.4 per cent from the last census.



Jennifer Christie founded the Ag Women's Network in 2013. Four years later, the group, which is dedicated to connecting and empowering women in agriculture, has 1,800 members. PHOTO SUBMITTED BY JENNIFER CHRISTIE.



Shikha Jain is Dairy Farmers of Ontario's first female director. Jain took on the role of Director, Planning, HR & Organizational Development in 2016. PHOTO SUBMITTED BY DAIRY FARMERS OF ONTARIO