

“I’d give anything to come home” The Farmerette Movement in Ontario during the First World War

Margaret Kechnie, Ph.D.

Volume 113, Number 1, Spring 2021

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076076ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076076ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Kechnie, M. (2021). “I’d give anything to come home”: The Farmerette Movement in Ontario during the First World War. *Ontario History*, 113(1), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076076ar>

Article abstract

The story of Canadian women’s involvement in the First World War is gradually emerging, little attention has been paid to the contribution of women who worked in rural Ontario during the war. This paper will deal with a little-known group of undergraduate women from the University of Toronto who supported the Canadian war effort by responding to a call for agricultural workers, particularly fruit harvesters. These workers became popularly known as “farmerettes.”

"I'd give anything to come home"

The Farmerette Movement in Ontario during the First World War

by Margaret Kechnie, Ph.D.

In the summer of 1917, Erskine Keys, a recent graduate of the University of Toronto, was looking for work. With her brothers fighting for the Allied Forces in France, Keys was also interested in doing something to aid the war effort. Her willingness to work would see Keys become part of a little-known group of urban women who supported the Canadian war effort by responding to a call for agricultural workers. These women were popularly known as "farmerettes."

The history of women's involvement in the First World War is gradually emerging, but little attention has been paid to urban women who worked as fruit harvesters in Western Ontario and the problems they encountered. There was nothing unusual about employing women from Ontario's rural areas to pick fruit; what was different in 1917 was the involvement of the Ontario government in setting up the Women's Farm Department to recruit young urban women for agricultural work. Some of these women were drawn from the ranks of female students at the University of Toronto, the

Abstract

The story of Canadian women's involvement in the First World War is gradually emerging, little attention has been paid to the contribution of women who worked in rural Ontario during the war. This paper will deal with a little-known group of undergraduate women from the University of Toronto who supported the Canadian war effort by responding to a call for agricultural workers, particularly fruit harvesters. These workers became popularly known as "farmerettes."

Résumé: *L'histoire de la contribution des Canadiennes à la Première Guerre mondiale émerge progressivement. Trop peu d'attention a été accordée à la contribution des femmes qui ont travaillé dans les régions rurales de l'Ontario pendant la guerre. Cet article portera sur un groupe peu connu d'étudiantes de premier cycle de l'Université de Toronto, qui ont soutenu l'effort de guerre canadien en répondant à un appel pour des travailleurs agricoles, particulièrement pour la récolte de fruits. Ces ouvrières sont devenues populairement connues sous le nom de « farmerettes ».*

epicenter of the movement.

The intent of the farmerette program was to help fill the labour shortages experienced by Ontario farmers in harvesting fruit during the final years of the First World War. From the outset, the project did not go as planned. Gender ideology and tensions between urban and rural values manifested themselves in the resistance of farmers to hire inexperienced urban women as fruit harvesters. Then again, many women showed little interest in farm work. There were problems with the weather and thus the availability of work. There were also difficulties with accommodations and wages.

The idea for the movement began with the belief that food production and conservation were critical to winning the war and that the demands of the government for military personnel would create a shortage of traditionally male farm labour. Farmers argued that experienced farm labourers were necessary for the optimum production of food and should be left on the land. But the farmers received little support for their proposal. When facing their critics, farmers argued that they always heard the “same old dope” about their inability to attract labour: that shortages were a result of their refusal to pay adequate wages.¹ While admitting that they could not match wages paid by government-subsidized urban industries, farmers claimed that wages paid to their workers had increased substantially during the war.

Low wages were not the only factors working against the employment of farm labourers. Farms in rural Ontario were singularly unattractive places to live and work: isolation, lack of housing for families, long hours, and seasonal work were also among the reasons given. Besides, most workers found the cities to be more interesting places generally, as they provided a level of social life not found in the countryside. Women, particularly, found city jobs to be less arduous than work on a farm. Farmers resented the idea of using unskilled labour and scorned as nonsense the talk of using “boys, old men, women... and the physically unfit... to operate our farms.”² It is not surprising that the farming community saw as both insensitive and insulting the Ontario Government’s plan to take experienced male labour from the countryside and replace it with inexperienced urban women.

The government pointed out that, while the production of food was an important factor in the war effort, the agricultural community must not forget its responsibility for national leadership. It, too, must be prepared to make sacrifices so that men could be sent to the Front. Farmers, like industrialists, must guard against the quest for profits. Resenting accusations about profiteering, farmers insisted on taking the high road in claiming labour exceptions to increasing food production.

Canada’s Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden, was committed to supplying an

¹ “Short Sightedness,” *The Weekly Sun*, 3 October 1917, 69.

² “Schoolboys and Floaters for Farm Labour,” *The Weekly Sun*, 5 March 1916, 16.

additional 500,000 men for the war effort. While farmers argued against Canada's enlistment of their sons and hired men to fight overseas, it was soon evident that the government intended to recruit them. Its attempt to identify untapped female labour was a way of saying to the farm community that food production must increase even if that meant taking men from the countryside.

The government looked to the University of Toronto, where by 1917 the war dominated every aspect of life. Although not all male students at the institution embraced the war effort, many were serving overseas.³ Women students also became involved in the war effort by engaging in war related campus activities. Linda Quiney points out that Red Cross work was a particularly attractive way for University of Toronto women to support the war effort.⁴ In 1916, undergraduate students began their own Red Cross Society, keeping busy with sewing, knitting and packing boxes to be sent to soldiers overseas. With support for the war strong on campus, it came as no surprise that the women students were also asked to consider working in agriculture.

Women who normally worked in agriculture, such as small-town women living in close proximity to farms, found

their own sources of agricultural employment. A critical shortage of labour across all industries in Ontario in 1917, but particularly farm labour, caused the Ontario Government's Trades and Labour Branch and specifically the newly established Women's Farm Department to identify untapped sources of female labour as potential agricultural workers: high school and university students, women attending teachers' colleges, teachers on their summer vacations, and soldiers' wives with no small children at home. These were women who under normal circumstances might not consider summer employment but, because of the war, would be willing to do light agricultural work for at least part of the summer.

The suggestion to use University of Toronto undergraduate students for agricultural work originated from a meeting between Dr. Riddell, Superintendent of the Ontario Trades and Labour Branch, and Sir Robert A. Falconer, President of the University of Toronto.⁵ The realization of the plan was left to women leaders at the University who were committed to the war effort. For instance, Sophie Falconer, the wife of Sir Robert Falconer was a presence on the university campus as National President of the YWCA, as

³ Linda J. Quiney, "'We Must Not Neglect Our Duty': Enlisting Women Undergraduates for the Red Cross During the Great War," in *Cultures, Communities, and Conflict: Histories of Canadian Universities and War*, edited by Paul Stortz and E. Lisa Panayotidis (UTP, 2012), 62-86.

⁴ Quiney, "We Must Not," 65.

⁵ Barbara M. Wilson, *Ontario and the First World War, 1914-1918. A Collection of Documents* (UTP, 1977), xciii. See also Ontario Sessional Papers (hereafter OSP), Ministry of Labour, "Ontario Efforts to Solve the 1917 Farm Labour Problem," undated and unsigned, Box 1, General Subject Files RG 7-12-0-9. See also "University Mobilizes Women to Pick Fruit," *Toronto Star* 26 February 1917, 17.

was Margaret Wrong, Dean of Women at University College, and Winifred Harvey, the National Secretary of the YWCA. These women would emerge as champions of the farmerette movement. It is notable that they were also members of the Women's Thrift Committee, a Toronto group dedicated to the conservation of food through reduced domestic food waste and to increasing the production of food for home consumption by encouraging the planting of urban gardens.

In an address to the Women's Thrift Committee in July 1917, Winifred Harvey pleaded for women's help in food conservation. "It would be to the everlasting shame of Canadian womanhood," she said, "if they failed to respond to the urgent call of their country in the conservation of food."⁶ Knowing the need for agricultural workers and desirous of seeing young women involved in the war effort, women such as Falconer, Wrong, and Harvey turned to the university students with whom they worked daily as potential conscripts. Through the summers of 1917 and 1918, Margaret Wrong acted as matron at the camps set up by the YWCA and Winifred Harvey made regular visits to the camps.

At the start of the project the intent was that women working as farmerettes would live in one of the camps organized by the Women's Farm Department

under the auspices of the Young Women's Christian Association (hereafter the YWCA). The outfit or uniform adopted by the farmerettes, and made much of by the urban press, distinguished them from other women who worked on the land: bloomers, a middy blouse or smock, a bright red bandanna and "an enormous straw hat."⁷ It may very well have been that those behind the farmerette movement were intent on emulating the successful Soldiers of the Soil initiative, the state's recruitment of school boys for agricultural work.⁸ The boys enlisted were too young for war service but were mature enough for farm work. Similar to the farmerettes, they wore a uniform, lived in camps set up by the Young Men's Christian Association, and were awarded a National Service badge at the end of their service. The organization was a resounding success and by 1917, it was receiving national attention. It is conceivable that those behind the farmerette movement could see a similar role for women, one in which young women could combine gainful employment and patriotic service as male students were able to do.

While the Soldiers of the Soil movement provided a model for urban women in agricultural work, there were also other examples the project organizers could consider. In Britain, the United States, and France, women had been successfully recruited for farm labour. In each

⁶ Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library (hereafter MTRL). Minutes of a Regular Meeting of the Toronto Women's Wartime Thrift Committee, 6 July 1917.

⁷ "College Girls Give Illustration of Work," *The World*, 14 December 1917, 16.

⁸ "The Soldiers of the Soil," *The Agricultural Gazette* 5:2 (1918), 940.

of these countries they were referred to as the Women's Land Army, but the term "farmerette" was often used to describe them.⁹

From the outset, few farmers signed up to participate in the program. Ontario fruit farmers resisted the idea of using inexperienced urban women as harvesters. As the head of the Ontario Department of Trades and Labour, Dr. Riddell viewed the farmers' resistance as another example of their antipathy to any government sponsored initiative to assist them.¹⁰ A number of meetings were held between the growers and representatives of the Department of Trades and Labour at which the growers sat silent and sullen. For the growers, the issue was not whether women could do the work; using women as harvesters was a well-established practice in Ontario farming communities. The problem was that urban women lacked experience in farm work. It was only out of desperation that some farmers would even listen to the idea that inexperienced "city girls" could work in the countryside.¹¹ The scenario seems to have unfolded like this: "Do you need pickers?" "Yes." "Can you get them?" "No." "Well, do you want to

guarantee work to these girls?" Silence.¹² Finally, seven farmers agreed to a plan that promised work at the same rate of pay traditionally paid for experienced female farm labour.

As a first step towards initiating the farmerette program, Falconer, Wrong, and Harvey called for a voluntary National Service registration in January 1917. It was held at the University of Toronto's University College and the purpose was to recruit undergraduate women for agricultural work. Those in attendance at the initial meeting were reminded that, as recently enfranchised citizens, they had new and larger responsibilities. They were told of the great need for thrift and service and were admonished to prayerfully consider the matter of farm work. The leaders claimed that University of Toronto men had responded quickly to the war effort, and suggested that the women should follow their example.¹³

The result of the registration showed that some women students were interested in farm work, but the numbers fell well short of expectations. The leaders had hoped to attract 500 women from the University to the farmerette program in the first year, but only 134

⁹ See, for example, Elaine F. Weiss, *Fruits of Victory: The Woman's Land Army of America in the Great War*, (Potomac Books, 2008).

¹⁰ Dr. Riddell To John B. Densmore, Director of U. S. Employment Service, Department of Labour, Washington, May 14, 1918. Ministry of Labour. Box 2, General Subject Files, RG7-12-O-41 and Notes Taken At Entertainment, RG7-12-O-10 December 12, 1917. OSP Report of the Trades and Labour Branch for 1917 IV. 1918 47.

¹¹ "Girls for Fruit Farms," *Toronto News*, 11 April 1917.

¹² OSP Report of the Trades and Labour Branch, 1917, IV, 47.

¹³ "Victoria Women Discuss National Service Matters," *The Varsity*, 7 March 1917; Mary G. Chaktsiris, "Not Unless Necessary": Student Responses to War Work at the University of Toronto, 1914-18," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 47 (2014), 293-310.

women who signed National Service registration cards indicated that they were interested in agricultural work. Although registration of University of Toronto women was disappointing, the overall number of women in Ontario who signed on with the Women's Farm Department was respectable. Some 1,200 urban women from various parts of Southern Ontario went to Ontario farms under the auspices of the Women's Farm Department in 1917. While these numbers suggest growing interest and enthusiasm for the program, the story is more complex. For example, we do not know how many of these women usually worked as fruit harvesters before the summer of 1917 but were now working as National Service workers. Nor do we know how long they worked in the countryside that summer.

The intent of the farmerette movement was to assist the fruit growers of the Niagara Peninsula to harvest their fruit crop: strawberries in the early summer, raspberries, peaches, cherries, and plums mid-summer, and finally grapes and apples in the fall. Eighty-five per cent of the farmerettes were involved in this kind of work in both the summers of 1917 and 1918.

Originally it was expected that women would work for the entire summer, but it soon became evident that many women were only willing to pick fruit for a short period. Expectations were adjusted to accommodate and attract

such women. As the project evolved, any woman or girl willing to harvest fruit for any length of time was welcome. It seems that many women saw agricultural work as a bit of a lark, a way of spending some or all of their summer vacation. The lack of commitment to farm work would become more pronounced as the project evolved, in ways that were unexpected. It had much to do with the decision to involve undergraduate students from the University of Toronto. Female undergraduates in the early part of the twentieth century may have been patriotic, but they were by no means passive or submissive. They had been trained in their clubs and organizations to make sure that their voices would be heard when decisions were made. Their voices would be heard in the agricultural community, to the dismay of many.

Women did not object to the work itself. Erskine Keys, for instance, spent the summer of 1917 at a YWCA camp in the Beamsville area and picked fruit at nearby farms. She enjoyed the work. In her letters to her mother, Keys wrote, "I love hoeing," "Picking cherries is a glorious job," "[I'm having] lots of fun [picking plums]," "Pitch[ing] hay into heaps [is g]reat joy. Blissful work," and "Lordy, I love it here."¹⁴

From the outset of the project, providing accommodation for the farmerettes was recognized as the point on which the project would either succeed or fail. The involvement of the YWCA

¹⁴ MTRL. Erskine Keys to her mother, July to October 1917. See also Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), Lois Allen papers MG 30, C 173, 1918.

in resolving the problem is not surprising. Its work among students and working women in cities such as Toronto in finding safe, affordable housing and its commitment to the war effort made it the obvious organization to consult. Most of the farmerettes in 1917 were women in their late teens or early twenties, and it was necessary to assure parents that their daughters would be properly supervised if they joined the war effort. The YWCA had established such a record for itself. There was a belief that without the involvement of a credible organization such as the YWCA, the farmerette movement would not attract "the type of girl we want."¹⁵

Whether parents were pleased with the way in which the YWCA fulfilled its role of chaperone is not certain. If the Beamsville camp in 1917 and the Winona camp in 1918 can be taken as examples, the young women seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed the camaraderie of camp life in an environment that appears to have been relatively free of rules and restrictions.¹⁶ At Beamsville, any occasion was reason enough for a party; a box from home made it an absolute necessity. Late night swims and sleeping outside of tents on hot evenings seems to have been done without permission, interference, or reprimand. If a curfew existed, it was

either ignored or not enforced.¹⁷ According to Erskine Keys' diary entries and letters home, unescorted walks into town for ice cream or a movie and returning to camp close to midnight were common. The only time that Erskine Keys found the camp oppressive was when a visiting YWCA leader organized a church service where they had to listen to "the most mournful prayers and sermons."¹⁸

The overriding need to save money meant that conditions in the camps were less than ideal. Simply put, the camps were ill equipped and poorly run. In order to lower the cost of transportation to and from farms, camps were placed close to the farms that had agreed to hire farmerettes. Any unused buildings, from dilapidated houses to old stables, were rented and converted into kitchen and dining facilities with borrowed equipment.¹⁹ The workers usually slept in discarded military tents obtained from the federal government that were rumoured to be old and of poor quality. Cots were scrounged from whomever would loan them; campers brought their own bedding and towels. Following meals, women were expected to help with the dishes and in the morning to make their own lunches before leaving for work. General camp maintenance was left up to the women or simply neglected. Women

¹⁵ OSP, Trades and Labour Branch, 1919, #44, 93.

¹⁶ MTRL. Erskine Keys to her mother July to October 1917 and LAC Lois Allen Papers, May to August 1918.

¹⁷ MTRL. Erskine Keys to her mother 2 August and 20 September 1917. See also NAC, Lois Allen Papers, and *Women's Work on the Land*, published by the Trades and Labour Branch, circa 1918.

¹⁸ MTRL. Erskine Keys to her mother, 2 July 1917.

¹⁹ OSP, Trades and Labour Branch, 1919, 16.

resented the “housework” component of camp life. Workers paid \$4.00 a week for room and board. They were expected to maintain their tents and do their own laundry. In the early days of planning the camps, it was suggested that each camp could grow its own produce. It was assumed that the campers would take responsibility for tending such gardens; there is no indication that this ever happened.

The lack of work was also an issue facing the women. There were two reasons for this. First, harvesters could not depend on good weather. In the early summer of 1917, it rained almost every day and delayed the ripening of the strawberry crop. The lack of work and thus the lack of pay frustrated some of the workers. Writing home to her mother from Beamsville at the beginning of July, Keys tells her that she would “give anything to come home. I have only worked 3 ½ hours this week... the fields are full of water... at least at home I would not have to pay board.”²⁰

Even though some farmers found other work for the women, such as hoeing, weeding, packing fruit, or working in canning factories, when the weather was bad there simply was nothing to harvest. The second issue was attitudes toward women as farm workers. Gender ideology played an important role in the work that farmerettes were allowed to do. Dr. Riddell specifically stated that

women’s work was to be of a light nature and he advised against employing girls for pitching hay. While some farmerettes did such work, the purpose of the farmerette movement was not to replace the hired man and there is little indication that they did.²¹

The complaints brought by women regarding camp life and weather conditions were insignificance compared to the issue of wages. In the heady days when the idea of employing urban women on the land was first discussed, the subject of wages was seldom considered. Through contact with organizations such as the YWCA, many urban women, particularly those from the University of Toronto, believed strongly in service to others. The YWCA encouraged young women to dedicate their lives to Christian social service and the regeneration of society. However, young women had also learned that earning a wage was an important measure of self-worth and a reflection of an individual’s commitment to productive work and a meaningful existence. For instance, Erskine Keys turned down a job with the juvenile court in Toronto because it did not pay. Keys began the summer with a clear idea that she wanted to earn a wage. There was little hope of the farmerette making much money. Keys was lucky to clear \$5.00 a week. Only 9% of women fruit harvesters registered as National Service workers earned between \$8.00

²⁰ MTRL. Erskine Keys to her mother, 1 July 1917.

²¹ OSP Report of the Trades and Labour Branch, 1917, Vol. L, Pat IV, 1918 56. Both Erskine Keys and Lois Allen refer to pitching hay but this activity was not a regular chore.

and \$12.00 in 1917. Most, like Keys, made much less than that. Thirty-six per cent made between \$6.00 and \$7.00 per week, but more than half of the pickers earned between \$4.00 and \$5.00. In fact, it cost money to work as a farmerette: the expenses of the job included the uniform, room and board, and transportation to and from the women's camps.²² Over the course of her time in the countryside, Keys seems to have resigned herself to the fact that she would often not make enough to cover expenses.

Early in the summer of 1917 there is evidence that wages were an issue. During the strawberry harvest, one of the women living at the Beamsville camp confronted a farmer when her wages were less than expected. A meeting was called with the farmer. The young women chose a committee of their peers, one of whom was Erskine Keys. Winifred Harvey, a frequent visitor to the camp, was there and represented the interest of the YWCA. The farmer seems to have won the day. In a letter home, Keys stated, "We all came to a thorough understanding of farming and [the farmer] isn't in the wrong so much after all."²³ However, by mid-August the anger of at least one woman had reached the boiling point about the low wages. Keys reported to her mother: "Rita certainly did light into Miss Harvey

[about her wages] with a vengeance."²⁴

Beginning in November 1917 and continuing into winter of 1918 a series of meetings were called to air the farmerettes' grievances. In attendance were Winifred Harvey and Margaret Wrong, representing the interest of the "Y", some of the farmerettes who had worked as harvesters, and a contingent of the farmers who had hired them. The first issue raised was aimed at the "Y" leadership regarding the conditions in the camps. The urban harvesters wanted improved sanitation and floors in the tents, and they also wanted to be exempt from housework, including dish washing and preparation of lunches.²⁵

Questions about the length of the workday and wages were addressed to the farmers. It was common practice for agricultural workers to work a ten-hour day. Erskine Keys and other young women housed at the YWCA camp at Beamsville began work at 7:00 a.m. and returned to camp at 6:00 p.m.; they had a one-hour lunch break. Representatives from the Women's Farm Department cited studies that argued that limiting the workday to eight or nine hours would increase the efficiency of the workers. Farmers were willing to accommodate the farmerettes about the shorter workday as long as the women were not paid by the day but paid

²² OSP. Annual Report, Trades and Labour Branch, #45, 1918, 48, and #16, 1919, 14. Women paid their own transportation and uniform costs. The "Y" charged \$4.00 and \$4.50 per week in 1917 and 1918 respectively, for a shared tent and three meals a day. See MTRL, Erskine Keys Diary XXII, 22 June 1917.

²³ MTRL. Letters Erskine Keys to her mother, 7 August 1917.

²⁴ MTRL. Letter Erskine Keys to her mother 1 July 1917.

²⁵ Ontario Archives (hereafter OA). Memorandum, Dr. Riddell from Women's Farm Department, undated and unsigned.

only for the amount of produce that they picked.

The concept of the “guaranteed contract” became a sticking point with farmers. In early discussions between the Department of Labour and the farmers, the “guaranteed contract” meant that farmers would agree to hire inexperienced urban women as harvesters. Over time the “guaranteed contract” came to be viewed as having less to do with a promise to hire urban women to harvest fruit, and more to do with ensuring a certain level of pay to the pickers. In other words, it came to be construed as a minimum wage and the term minimum wage was even used in some government publications.²⁶ For example, a booklet published by the Trades and Labour Department entitled “Women’s Work on the Land” stated “While picking on piece rates \$1.00 a day is guaranteed rain or shine, six days a week... and a rate of \$9.00 a week for a 10-hour day when picking larger fruits. Especially good workers will be paid at the rate of 20 cents an hour” and a half-day off on Saturdays.²⁷

The farmers refused these demands arguing that the weather must dictate the harvest. The women also asked for a bonus at the end of the season “like the munitions industries.”²⁸ Many of the female urban fruit harvesters were from areas in Ontario where munitions industries figured prominently, most notably Toron-

to, Hamilton, and London. Munitions industry workers had been successful in gaining good wages, and women’s industrial wages particularly had increased substantially during the war years. This request was also rejected.

Farmers were reluctant to accommodate the farmerettes’ demands since doing so would mean upsetting the customary working conditions and wages for the fruit harvesters that farmers’ hired yearly. Nor was there assistance from the Department of Labour regarding how much harvesters should be paid. Even though Dr. Riddell felt that women harvesters should be paid the same as male harvesters if they did the same work as the men he made it clear that “we do not dictate the rate to be paid.”²⁹ The problem was that women harvesters were seldom allowed to do the same work as the male farm hands.

While the controversy over wages continued, it does appear that there was some agreement that the wages women were paid in the summer of 1917 were not fair, but the growers were not prepared to go along with the amounts suggested in “Women’s Work on the Land.” There was little agreement about what a fair wage would be. Farmers who participated in the negotiations offered fifteen cents an hour for actual time worked, and also stated that a minimum of five dollars per week would be guaranteed exclusive of the time lost through “down

²⁶ OSP. Annual Report Trades and Labour Branch, #16, 1918, 46.

²⁷ PAC. Lois Allen papers. “Women’s Work On the Land,” circa 1918.

²⁸ “Girls Tell of Fruit Picking,” *The Globe*, 26 October 1917.

²⁹ OSP. Riddell 40. File RG 7-12-0-41, May 14 1918.

time.” The women refused the offer. They stated that they would not work for less than a guaranteed living wage and that the farmers must adhere to their demand of a flat rate for the full season.³⁰

A number of factors worked against the farmerettes’ wage demands. Time between harvests due to the weather was one thing, but there were times when woman simply did not show up for work. Farmers resented the days the women were absent and argued, “Had these girls worked the full time, it would have helped to bring up the average [wage].”³¹ It appears, however, that the inexperience of the urban women as harvesters was the main issue. The government recognized the importance of experience and its impact on wages from the outset of the project. The initial plan was to have the farmerettes commit to work for a two-month period. It was expected that, over time, the low wages earned by the harvesters at the beginning of the summer would be offset by the higher wages they would earn as they became more proficient pickers. As one farmer stated: “A more faithful lot of girls I never saw... and they did very good work, but of course they could not pick as many berries as the local women who had been used to it.”³²

Although many farmerettes from the University of Toronto were disappointed with their experiences in the summer of

1917, the issue of whether to return to agricultural work was debated at one of the reunions enjoyed by the farmerettes after returning from the countryside. With the Allies in crisis and the world facing a possible famine, it was argued that the problems that the women encountered in 1917 should be of secondary importance to the war effort. They voted in the affirmative to return to agricultural work. However, in the summer of 1918, the character of the farmerette movement was different than that of 1917.

For one thing, while the Women’s Farm Department was able to increase the number of fruit pickers sent to the countryside from 1,265 women in 1917 to 2,325 in 1918 the composition of the corps of women harvesters was also different. In 1917, over 25% of the women were university undergraduate students; in 1918, this group made up only 8% of the pickers. While the fact that fewer women students from the University of Toronto signed up for agricultural work in 1918 may reflect the disappointment with the experiences of women the previous summer. Linda Quiney also argues that by 1918 Canadians were “war weary.”³³ Women were encouraged to focus on their studies since their expertise would be needed in the post war years, even if that meant lessening or curtailing their patriotic endeavours.

³⁰ See “Meeting With Pickers Representatives of the 440 Who Went Out in 1917,” 12 January 1918. AO. Ministry of Labour, Box 1, General Subject Files, RG 7-42-0-10.

³¹ OSP. Annual Report of the Fruit Growers’ Association, 1919, 94.

³² OSP. Annual Report of the Ontario Fruit Growers’ Association, 1918, 44.

³³ Quigley, “We Must Not,” 67.

Another difference in 1918 was that the women were younger. In 1917, 60% of the women were in their 20s; in 1918, 50% were teenagers. Also notable is the fact that the majority of the women in 1918 were either raised on farms or were experienced pickers; only 40% of the total had no farming experience. Women who traditionally harvested fruit were usually not classified as National Service workers in 1917 by the Women's Farm Department, but may have been during the harvest of 1918. In 1918, the presence of a large number of young girls brought the movement much closer in nature and character to the "Soldiers of the Soil" movement that placed between 7,000 and 8,000 boys on the land in 1917 and looked to see 15,000 boys volunteer in 1918.³⁴

As well, wages increased in 1918. An explanation for this may be that farmerettes in 1918 were more experienced pickers. Although only 1% earned between \$14.00 and \$15.00 a week, 60% of the women earned between \$8.00 and \$13.00 and 39% earned between \$5.00 and \$8.00.³⁵ Many women who came to the countryside in the summer of 1917 believed they would earn at least a \$1.00 a day, and if paid on the basis of piece-work they could earn even more. Most women earned far less than this and were disappointed and angry. Winifred Har-

vey did not attempt to hide the problems of 1917, stating that "many hesitate... They hear that farmers are hard to please, that insufficient return is given and that the work is hard.... There is considerable truth in this."³⁶

The media portrayal of the farmerettes in the summer of 1917, particularly the emphasis placed on the fact that they were inexperienced "girls," suggested that farm labour was easy and disparaged the work that they were doing. They were seldom taken seriously as workers but characterized as girls doing patriotic work during their vacations. The farmerettes and their perky uniforms received more attention than any other effort by the government to recruit farm labour.³⁷

Although the media does not appear to have taken the work these women were doing seriously the discourse of militarism and patriotism often permeated their interpretation of the movement. The *Globe* referred to the women as a "little army of recruits"; The *Telegram* spoke of women "enlisting" and ready to "train for service"; and The *Varsity*, the University of Toronto's student newspaper, saw them as women who were on "active service." Like the soldiers, the women joined an "army" of agricultural workers for "service" in the fields of Ontario.³⁸ Attending "recruitment meet-

³⁴ "The Soldier of the Movement," *The Agricultural Gazette*, 5:2 (1918), 940.

³⁵ OSP, Subject Files, RG 7-12-O-10.

³⁶ "A Call to National Service," *The Varsity*, 27 February 1918.

³⁷ "College Girls Make Good as Pickers Saved Situation," *St. Catherine's Standard*, 18 August 1917.

³⁸ "Women To Enlist for Service," *The Globe*, 20 February 1918; "College Girls Make Good"; "Varsity Girls Give Fine Representation of Work on the Farm," *The Varsity*, 14 December 1917. See also Erskine Keys to her mother, 16, 18 and 20 September 1917.

ings” held at the University of Toronto was the first step to introduce the young women to farm work as patriotic service. Camp life included tents once used by the men of the 84th Battalion in France and provided by the Canadian Militia. Like soldiers overseas, the farmerettes were encouraged to wear a distinctive uniform. They even sang the songs sung by soldiers overseas, the lyrics adapted to reflect farm work.³⁹ The young women of the Beamsville camp formed themselves into a “battalion” and marched military style to and from their work on the farms with hoes or shovels slung over their shoulders in imitation of the soldiers’ rifles. At the end of their “tour of duty,” they received a National Service worker badge, and like soldiers they wore them with pride.⁴⁰

These inexperienced fruit harvesters were not soldiers; they were working women and, like Erskine Keys, they wanted to help the war effort and earn a wage as well. Part of the problem regarding the wages of the farmerettes was the wide range of women who went to the farms and the probable differences in their motivations or their need of an income. There is no doubt that many saw agricultural work as a patriotic and even an enjoyable way to spend a week or two of their vacations. But others went on the

understanding that they would earn a wage, even a good wage. In 1921 it was estimated that a wage of \$12.56 a week was the amount necessary to allow a woman “food, clothing, shelter and such simple comforts and enjoyments as are requisite to the proper conduct of life.”⁴¹ It seems to have been assumed by the Trades and Labour Bureau that farmerettes would be young women committed to patriotic service, living at home, with fathers who provided for them. The image ignores a philosophy central to the lives of many of the young women, that is, the personal satisfaction they gained from being financially independent.

It is difficult to measure the success of the farmerette campaign. The leadership of the YWCA at the University of Toronto asked students to “support the war effort... cultivate discipline, make sacrifices, and undertake national service work.”⁴² With three brothers in France, one of whom encouraged Keys to stay in the countryside for the “duration,” it is understandable that Erskine Keys would want to make a contribution to the war effort. Other than the call to service, there are few ways to explain why so many women stayed with a project fraught with problems when the monetary rewards were meager, if not sacrificial. In the fall of 1917 Erskine Keys, a university-edu-

³⁹ LAC. Lois Allen Papers.

⁴⁰ “Proud To Do Her Bit,” *The Toronto Daily Star*, 16 September 1918. Erskine Keys received her National Service Badge 18 July 1917. See Erskine Keys to her mother, 18 July 1917.

⁴¹ Margaret McCallum, “Keeping Women in Their Place: The Minimum Wage in Canada, 1910-25,” *Labour/LeTravail*, 17 (Spring 1986), 44.

⁴² Diane Pedersen, “Keeping Our Good Girls Good:,” ‘The UWCA and the ‘Girl Problem,’ 1870-1930” *Canadian Woman Studies* 7:4 (1986), 179.

cated woman, found herself harvesting apples during the day; at night she slept in a tent the middle of a farmer's frost-covered field with a hot brick wrapped in a blanket to keep her warm.

The young women who went to rural Ontario during the First World War did so because they felt they were filling a labour shortage and assisting in the war effort. Gender ideology and tensions between urban and rural Ontario prevented their widespread acceptance. Given that they were inexperienced in fruit picking, these women acquitted themselves well even though they made little money and, in some cases, did not even cover their expenses. As fruit harvesters they had no qualms about introducing confrontational politics into the coun-

tryside. They were willing to face the farmer over working conditions, and to demand a scientific approach to hours of work and unfair wages even if that meant upsetting labour conditions throughout the countryside. While doing this they tended to exacerbate the invisibility of traditional female fruit harvesters. The young urban farmerettes attracted a level of media attention never given to traditional female farm labour and the press persisted in treating the idea of women's agricultural work as something unusual. This paper not only reveals the need for more information about the farmerettes, but more enticing for the researcher are the questions the farmerettes raise about all women who were employed as seasonal agricultural workers in rural Ontario.
