



The Farmerettes

Questions for Class Discussion



Bring history to life in your classroom! Introduce your students to the story of the Farmerettes, Ontario teens who helped Canada during the Second World War.

We are pleased to provide an education session for your students that explores a little-known part of Canadian history. It relates to agriculture, the Second World War and the lives of teenagers in the 1940s.

Meet author Bonnie Sitter and Farmerette Shirlean English who wrote *Onion Skins and Peach Fuzz: Memories of Ontario Farmerettes* as they share the stories of a largely forgotten part of Canadian history when teenagers took on agricultural work when the demand for soldiers left farms without essential workers. Although they focus on the role of teen girls, teen boys were also asked to work on farms; it was considered the patriotic thing to do.

Educators will find a selection of free resources designed to enrich and deepen classroom learning:

- STEM Challenge
- Wordsearch
- Customizable Bookmark
- Literacy Activity Pack
- Postage Stamp Project
- Free 12" x 18" Poster

About this Guide

This guide provides discussion questions to deepen the learning from the videos or the virtual session with the Farmerettes. These questions can be used with your class as you introduce students to the topic or debrief the virtual class visits.



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Historical Background

During the world wars, farms were more important than ever. In addition to the people in Canada, we had soldiers to feed overseas as well as allies, both military and civilian.

What we could not grow in Canada, we also could not import easily because many merchant ships were redeployed to military use or sunk by the enemy. Before the war, locally produced food was available to buy; during the war, much of what was grown went to support the war effort. Canadians desperately needed farms to be productive, but with able-bodied men sent to war, farms were short of labour, which meant food was in short supply.

During the First World War, the Canada Food Board established the Soldiers of the Soil program, asking high-school aged boys to work on farms. In Ontario, the provincial government established the Farm Service Corps for girls 16 and older to provide farm labour; the corps existed from 1914 - 1918, the entire duration of the war. The girls were called Farmerettes.

In the Second World War, the Ontario Farm Service Force called on high school students to help; they initiated the Farmerette program in 1941, two years after the war started. The girls stepped up to “lend a hand” throughout the war years and even after, until 1953. Boys and girls alike pledged their allegiance to King George VI and confirmed their purpose to support the military forces – Army, Navy, and Air Force – by helping to produce food.

The Farmerettes worked hard; a Department of Public Works brochure explained their work as including “picking, packing, shipping, weeding, hoeing, cultivating, gathering vegetables, pruning, spraying, and tying up vines.” It took a lot of perseverance and a positive attitude to make it. They developed positive relationships through the experience and developed a growth mindset.

For more information visit <https://GoodinEveryGrain.ca/classroom-resources/>.



Guest Speakers

Shirleyan English grew up in Northern Ontario where her father worked for the Ontario Northland Railway. She attended high school in North Bay and while there, volunteered for the government-run Farmerette program when she was 16 years old, spending a memorable summer working on a farm in Lambton County. She is co-author to the book *Onion Skins and Peach Fuzz* (2019).

Bonnie Sitter resides in Exeter. She retired in 2008 after more than 40 years in the travel industry and discovered a new hobby in photography which led to book publishing. She regularly writes articles for *The Rural Voice* and recently co-authored the book *Onion Skins and Peach Fuzz* (2019). She travels the province sharing the story of the Farmerettes and in 2020 released a new book – *On the Wright Track, Memories From C.P.R School Car #2*.

Good in Every Grain wants to bring this story about Canadian women and Canada’s agricultural history to your students. Our **FREE** resources use real-life agriculture topics and fun approaches to help you teach problem-solving, critical thinking, STEM skills and connections, life systems, sustainability and more!



Onion Skins and Peach Fuzz: Memories of Ontario Farmerettes, written by Bonnie Sitter and Shirleyan English in 2019, has proven to be a great success. The story has been featured in *Readers Digest*, many newspapers, and is currently being developed into a play (to set stage in 2024). Shale Ridge Winery near Thedford has introduced a Farmerettes Rosé wine, and the Lambton County Heritage Museum near the Pinery Park has revealed that their plan is to open their Farmerette "permanent exhibit" in January of 2023. There is also an ongoing effort to see a Farmerette stamp be offered by Canada Post.



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Discussion Questions

How was life different for teenagers during the Second World War compared to now?

For older students: How would the Second World War Farmerettes' experiences be different if the war took place in the 21st century?

Aim: Provide context that students can relate to.

Background: This discussion is meant to help students understand what lives were like in 1940 for Ontario students by comparing past to life today. Use the pictures on the Good in Every Grain website and the resources linked below as a starting point. (<https://GoodinEveryGrain.ca/?s=farmerettes>)

Topics for comparison include:

- Clothing (bandannas and sunhats but no ball caps or bib overalls)
- Music (they sang and listened to the radio – what songs did they sing? What did they listen to?)
- Teenagers in war (many Canadians serving in the military were teenagers, as young as 17. About 700,000 Canadians under 21 served during the Second World War. Would teens do that today?)
- Food (war rationing meant very simple diets but food was less diverse than now, even before the war)
- Communicating (no phones! Those serving in the Second World War wrote many letters.)
- Taking photos of their summers (no cell phones with built-in cameras)

For the most part, the farms the Farmerettes worked on did not require a lot of heavy farm equipment. In fact, some of the equipment on farms could not be used because rubber tires and fuel had been given to support the war. What types of tools did the Farmerettes use? Was that a productive way to farm? Would it be different today?

Aim: To observe and draw conclusions from the material presented, and think about technological changes in agriculture.

Background: The Farmerettes describe pulling weeds by hand, using hoes to weed and dig the soil, and hand tools for other tasks such as pruning. We see them on tractors and wagons going to and from the fields. It is amazing to think that they kept farms productive with the tools they had. There is very little mechanism talked about or shown in pictures. Would they have produced larger crops if there had been machines to do the work? How does technology help farmers?

Modern farms use a lot of equipment; as commercial endeavours, they have to produce a lot. Grain farms provide an excellent example of technology in farming using equipment such as:

- Tractors are the workhorse of the farm, used for pulling the tools that do many things – turning the soil, planting seeds, weeding, fertilizing, harvesting, moving things.
- Seed drill (air seeder or planter) to plant seeds evenly in rows at the right depth.
- Combine for cutting and separating the seed from grain plants.
- Grain trucks to take the crop from the field to the storage facility or shipping points.
- Grain augers to move grains into storage containers.
- Grain bins or storage elevators (large storage facilities to store harvested grains in bulk).

Modern farm equipment is very sophisticated, using computer technology, satellite links and many computer sensors in the pieces of machinery.

More information:

Harvesting equipment: <https://GoodinEveryGrain.ca/2020/08/13/photo-story-harvest-equipment/>



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Food insecurity was a big problem during the world wars. What factors contributed to the problem? What would it have been like to live with food rationing? Would people have been able to stay healthy?

Current Event Connection: Food rationing was used during the world wars as a way to ensure the fair distribution of food and resources when they were scarce. Have you ever experienced rationing or food shortages? Think back to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many items were rationed or hard to get. How did people react? How was COVID-related rationing different from the rationing during the world wars?

Consider:

- During COVID-19, toilet paper, some medical supplies, frozen food, canned goods, and cold and flu medications were available in limited supply.
- People reacted in different ways. Some hoarded items while others shared with those around them. Some people were mean, scared, or angry.
- COVID-19 rationing lasted a short time and it was only on a few specific items. During the Second World War, rationing lasted for years.

Aim: To understand how events outside of agricultural concerns can impact food security, and to assess the requirements of good health.

Background: Food was rationed during the wars because so much was required to feed troops and civilians in war zones. As well, the war caused labour shortages and problems getting foods to market. Rationing meant people were issued ration cards that they showed to get limited amounts of what was available. To supplement their rations, people picked wild berries for fruit and planted Victory Gardens. When the Farmerettes and other farm workers showed up for work, they handed over their ration cards so their camp supervisors could buy food.

Weekly rations for an adult in 1942 (amounts changed over the course of the war and as materials were available):

- Sugar: 1 cup
- Tea: 2 oz / 56 g (a tea bag typically contains 2 g)
- Coffee: 8 oz/227 g (1 oz is 5 tbsp)
- Butter: 4 oz / 113 g (1/4 lb)
- Meat: 24-32 oz/680-900 g (adult daily requirement of protein is .8 g per kg of body weight)*

* *Canada's Food Guide*

Extension opportunities:

- Research rationing (sources linked below in Additional Learning and Reading).
- Look at rationing and recipes and how the recipes were presented. Stretching ingredients, going without, and recycling were patriotic duties.
- Do the math to determine how much food a household could have. Students could use the size of their own family as an example.
- Bake a ration-depression cake with your students, or provide a recipe to make at home:
<https://GoodinEveryGrain.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Ration-Cake-for-discussion-guide-pdf>



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Think about heroic qualities or characteristics of a person. You may see the Farmerettes and teenage boy farm workers referred to as heroes of the Second World War. Do you think they were war heroes?

Consider: This could be done in “chalk talk” style where students create a collaborative cluster web in silence, building off of each other’s ideas. You could also ask them what images were in their minds when they were thinking about the qualities of a hero. This would be an opportunity for a great critical thinking analysis to talk about our assumptions of traditionally portrayed heroes vs. Farmerettes. Heroes come in all shapes and sizes and do all sorts of heroic acts.

Aim: To discuss traits such as dedication, loyalty, perseverance, and citizenship.

Background: The Farmerettes and other farm workers were teens and many had never been away from home. It may have seemed like an adventure but doing something new, far from home, and not knowing anyone can be scary. They did something very important but they also had fun. They were also under pressure to help the country. The challenge was explained** as “Shall Government of the People, by the People, for the People Perish from the Earth?”. Do those things add up to heroism or bravery? How do you imagine bravery or courage?

** See *Canadian Heritage Matters in Additional Learning and Reading*

What is the significance of peach fuzz in the title of the book? (*Onion Skins and Peach Fuzz*)

Aim: To discuss changes in food, touching on plant breeding.

Background: Shirleyyan English talks about the roughness of peach fuzz when they harvested the fruit. It was so rough it made their hands hurt. It is hard to imagine peaches could be difficult to handle, but she notes that peach fuzz was much coarser years ago. Long before that time, peaches originated in China and were much smaller and less flavourful. Researchers from several universities studying peaches have learned that they are among the most ancient domesticated fruits, with fossilized pits found that are more than 2.5 million years old. Professor Gary Crawford, of the University of Toronto, notes that it likely “took about 3,000 years before the domesticated peach resembled the fruit we know today.”

Organisms change naturally over time and farmers are able to select types of plants for certain characteristics, such as finer peach fuzz, and breed species to be more nutritious, more flavourful, or have less fuzz. Imagine what it would have been like to eat a peach with coarse fuzz compared to a peach you would eat today. Nature does it when one characteristic thrives over another, such as a plant that resists harmful insects (eg, chives, basil, lemon thyme). Over time, the plants in that species that lack the characteristic die off while the insect-resistant ones thrive. Humans can do something the same by choosing plants that have natural characteristics, such as drought tolerance, and breeding those seeds rather than others. They can also choose plant characteristics to meet consumer demand, such as peaches with softer or less fuzz or Arctic apples that don’t turn brown. In Canada, the only crops that are genetically modified are corn, soybeans, canola, and sugar beets.

More information:

<https://GoodinEveryGrain.ca/2019/02/04/what-does-gmo-mean/>

<https://goodinEveryGrain.ca/2021/08/30/how-many-different-types-of-whole-grain-are-grown-locally-in-ontario/>

https://www.science20.com/news_articles/genetic_modification_of_peaches_in_5500_bc-144279

<https://gmoanswers.com/>



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The Farmerettes and other farm workers made a promise; they pledged loyalty to the king and promised to stay well so they could work hard. Have you ever been required to make a pledge like that? What would you consider important enough to make such a serious pledge?

Aim: To evaluate the requirements of global citizenship and consider their own position.

Background: Global wars are nothing to take lightly; during the world wars, everyone was expected to pull together and defend the country's democratic values in some way, from conserving resources by recycling, to fighting the enemy. The temporary farm workers employed during both world wars played an important part in supporting Canada's efforts in the war and in maintaining life in Canada. They pledged their allegiance to King George VI and confirmed their purpose was to support the military forces – Army, Navy, and Air Force – by helping to produce food. They promised to stay physically fit and mentally alert at all times.

The Farmerettes worked hard to ensure food was available for the people of Canada, locally and overseas. What do you think the greatest benefits of a local, sustainable food system are? Is it important to produce food locally? Why?

For younger students: Do you know where and how your food was grown and by whom? When was it harvested? Discuss the benefits of local food sources.

Background: We are fortunate in Canada to have access to food from around the world. But we have seen during the pandemic how food distribution can be interrupted and we have learned by examining climate change that distributing food across long distances has environmental consequences. Crops that are grown and processed locally mean we may have a smaller range of food, but it also means we do not have to transport it across long distances to be processed and brought to market.

Grains grown locally (such as barley, corn, oats, soybeans, and wheat) are used as the base for so many foods and other products, have all the benefits of locally grown produce. They have the advantage that grains can be stored easily and turned into other foods as they are needed so local consumers are not restricted to what is seasonal the way they can be with produce.

Eating locally grown food supports the local economy, benefits the environment, and promotes a safer and more reliable supply.

The fruits and vegetables the Farmerettes harvested were all foods that will grow in Ontario's climate, geography, and soil. Consider all of the fruits, vegetables, and grains grown right here in Ontario. If you could only eat food grown locally, what would be your favourite?

Aim: To understand the importance of climate to agriculture and to consider food diversity.

Background: Every plant has its own requirements for growth – soil, water, sun, and heat. We are fortunate in Ontario to be able to enjoy food from around the world as well as a wide variety of locally grown foods that vary across the province. Different foods are grown in the southern parts of the province compared to the eastern or northern parts of Ontario. Discuss which is which among students' preferences – what do they find locally and what comes from somewhere else.

Extension opportunity: In Canada, we have laws and regulations that growers must follow. They cover many things, such as protection of the soil, the use of fertilizers and pesticides, how animals are fed and cared for, how food can be transported and processed, and how seasonal workers who pick crops are treated. When you buy Canadian products, you know that the food and the farms it came from must follow rules and are inspected. Food that comes from other places may not have the same oversight.



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The Farmerettes and other farm workers were employed on farms all over Ontario. They took care of whatever grew on the farm, including fruit, vegetables, and livestock. What would they have grown where you live?

Background: With men from all occupations diverted to military service, farms all over the province needed workers. They picked fruit, weeded vegetables, stooked (cut and stacked) wheat, and tended pigs. Their crops included tomatoes, asparagus, peaches, strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, gooseberries, currants, cherries, apples, spinach, corn—anything, and everything produced on a farm.

Extension opportunity: Have students look for “Product of ON” signs next time they go grocery shopping with a family member. Maybe there is a community garden in their neighbourhood, or a neighbour with a passion for growing food. What have your students noticed growing around their homes and communities?

More information:

Map of Ontario Farmland | Oppidan Library

Ottawa Citizen | Ontario farms, Ontario, Map (www.pinterest.ca)

Map/Article (<https://GoodinEveryGrain.ca/yourfarmers/>)

Being part of the Ontario Farm Service Force was a meaningful endeavor. Ontario farmers still feel this way, that growing food for their neighbours is a noble and important job. If you were a farmer, do you think it would affect you if you knew the people who ate the food you produced? How would it affect you to know farmer who grew some of the food that you eat?

Background: People around the world face food insecurity because of poverty, war, drought or floods, land degradation, diversion of land away from producing food, and unstable economies. In Canada, we are fortunate to have fertile land and an agricultural community that is concerned with protecting the land (soil is not a renewable resource), farming sustainably, and mitigating climate change.*** Farmers understand their importance in our food security; they also understand that Canada is an important resource for other countries that have less secure food resources. It is hard to imagine a job that is more important!

Considering the area around a farm, it must feel good to know that you have helped people be healthy and to thrive. If you met the farmer that grew the wheat that made the crackers you bought at the store, would you feel like you are meeting a rock star?

*** See *Good in Every Grain* resources

More information:

Soil: <https://GoodinEveryGrain.ca/2022/04/07/farming-to-protect-the-soil/>

Sustainable farming: <https://GoodinEveryGrain.ca/2022/03/08/did-you-know-a-little-about-sustainable-farming-practices/>

Agriculture and climate change: <https://GoodinEveryGrain.ca/2019/08/27/agriculture-and-climate-change>



Enrich your Lessons with Agriculture and Food Literacy

Why teach agricultural and food literacy to students?

Agriculture is at the core of life. Agricultural literacy means understanding the relationship between growing plants and everything else – the environment, our food, the economy, and technology. Food literacy is the set of behaviours, skills, and understanding of food and how it affects us, nutritionally and emotionally. Food knowledge – understanding how food is grown and prepared – is part of food literacy.

Our very livelihood relies on food. Yet, many have little to no connection to our food, let alone understanding its journey to our tables. Knowing where our food comes from, its impact on our bodies, local communities, and the environment is essential in making educated choices about our food consumption.

Agricultural literacy helps us make the connection between food production and how we can be healthy. It involves the science of plant nutrients – water, fertilizer, and soil. Agriculture has a tremendous impact on the economy; Canada's agriculture and agri-food industries contribute more than \$100 billion to the country's economy annually. As such, agriculture affects, and is affected by, political concerns and social movements, including our understanding of, and the decisions made concerning, the environment.

Modern farming is as close to the earth as you can get but it is also a high-tech industry. It therefore offers a range of occupations, both in farming directly and in corollary endeavors that include scientific research, engineering, and multiple trades.

Applying the knowledge gained by learning about agriculture helps us understand the importance and impact of the food we eat. It gives us the ability to think critically about the plethora of information and misinformation available about healthy eating to identify credible nutrition information. It also helps us appreciate the diversity of food available to Canadians and encourages a willingness to experience new foods and enjoy the sense of community inherent to shared meals.



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Agriculture and Food Literacy Resources

Agricultural Literacy – Decoda Literacy Solutions; <https://decoda.ca/agricultural-literacy/>

Being agri-literate: Canadian Agricultural Literacy Month celebrates its 10th anniversary; www.agriculture.canada.ca

FANLit | Food Literacy; www.fanlit.org/

Food Literacy – Ontario Federation of Agriculture; <https://ofa.on.ca/issues/food-literacy/>

Food Literacy – Ontario Home Economics Association; www.ohea.on.ca

AgScape; www.agscape.ca/

Good in Every Grain; www.goodineverygrain.ca/

Soil: <https://GoodinEveryGrain.ca/2022/04/07/farming-to-protect-the-soil/>

Sustainable farming: <https://GoodinEveryGrain.ca/2022/03/08/did-you-know-a-little-about-sustainable-farming-practices/>

Agriculture and climate change: <https://GoodinEveryGrain.ca/2019/08/27/agriculture-and-climate-change>

Harvesting equipment: <https://goodineverygrain.ca/2020/08/13/photo-story-harvest-equipment/>



Farmerette and Canadian Heritage Resources:

- Farmerettes: "Get Out on the Farm" by Bonnie Sitter; <https://bonniesitterphotography.files.wordpress.com/2019/09/feature-farmerettes-layout-2.pdf>
- Canadian Youth – Growing up in wartime Canadian Youth – Growing up in Wartime – Historical Sheet – Second World War – History – Veterans Affairs Canada; <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/classroom/fact-sheets/youth>
- Canadian Heritage Matters: Farm Service in Canada During the Second World War – Farm Service in Canada During the Second World War – Canadian Heritage Matters; www.weebly.com
- Canadian War Museum; Farming and Food (Soldiers of the Soil, Farmerettes) The War Economy – Farming and Food | Canada and the First World War; www.warmuseum.ca
- Soldiers of the Soil poster Recruitment Posters – Soldiers of the Soil | Canada and the First World War; www.warmuseum.ca
- Food rationing: Canadians living with rationing in wartime | The Western Producer; <https://www.producer.com/farmliving/canadians-living-with-rationing-in-wartime/#:~:text=For%20the%20first%20few%20years%2C%20from%201939%20to,coffee%2C%20tea%2C%20butter%20and%20meat%20were%20also%20rationed>
- Food ration booklet; <https://wartimecanada.ca/node/499>
- Healthy Meals though rationed; <https://wartimecanada.ca/document/second-world-war/recipes/turning-ration-stamps-healthy-meals>
- Women at War: Women at War – Historical Sheet – Second World War – History – Veterans Affairs Canada; <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/classroom/fact-sheets/women>



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