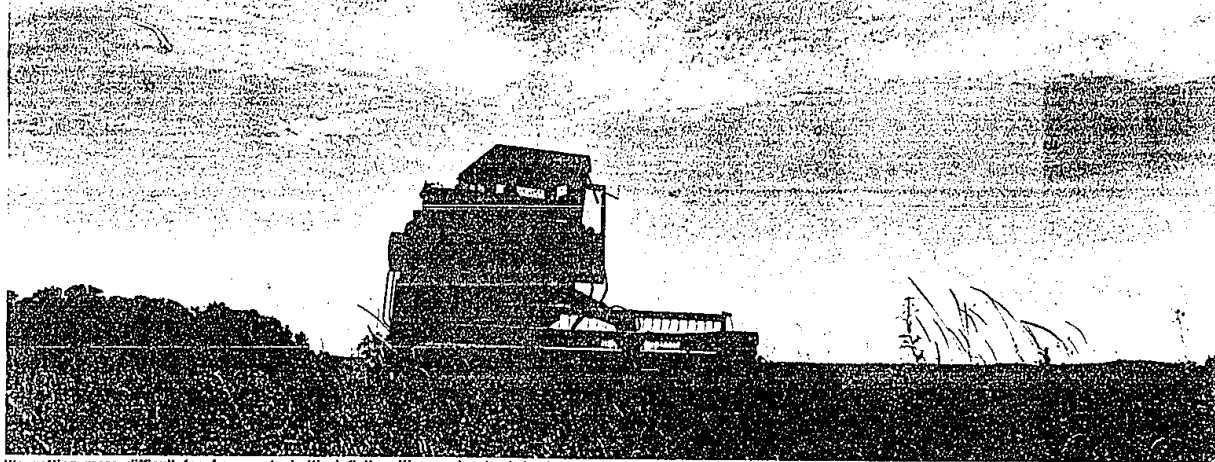




It's getting more difficult for farmers to battle inflation. Women involved in farming have an added problem. They're fighting for acceptance by banking and equipment manufacturers as equal partners in farming.

Farm women fight for equality in business

By Louise Okrutsky
staff writer

On the farm, the hand that rocks the cradle also steers the tractor. The voice that tells bedtime stories speaks up on financial matters.

After generations of helping operate the family farm, women want recognition for their managerial expertise and economic clout.

Their insistence has prompted Ford Tractor in Troy to institute a national agricultural women's council comprised of representatives from 10 leading farm organizations. Admittedly the firm was swayed in its decision by national statistics showing that 61 percent of farm wives handle the budgeting and financing of the family business. About 58 percent share land purchases or sales decisions and 46 percent participate in major equipment purchase decisions. About 55 percent are considered to be one of the main operators of a farm.

"We plan to do a lot of listening because these women are important customers. We recognize that they play a key role in making decisions including the purchase of tractors and equipment," said J.N. Chuchman, marketing manager for Ford Tractor's North American Sales Operations.

For their part, the women want Ford to sponsor seminars on such topics as financial planning and tax shelters. Most thought the first meeting, conducted last week in Troy, helped them realize that other women share their problems and goals.

KAY HENLEY'S day on the farm she operates with her husband begins at 5 a.m. By the time midnight rolls around she's not only grappled with household chores and taught 7th-12th grade science classes, she's also helped her husband irrigate trees and feed the beef cattle — often after dark.

Yet, when she buys machinery or equipment for their Tahlequah, Okla., farm, salesmen don't treat her as a serious customer.

"Equipment dealers ought to talk to women. I do all the buying. They ought to give us credit. I hate to go in to buy a part and be patronized. When that happens I tell them, 'Here's the serial number, I've cross-referenced it. I want this.' I won't tell you what else I say to them," Henley said.

A "vocal" member of the National Farmers Union for the past 22 years, Henley serves as president of the Tahlequah Cowbelles and of the Community House Extension Club for farm wives. She is secretary of the Kappa Kappa Iota Teachers Association.

"My main hope for (the Ford council) is to let the public know for many, no matter what size the farm might be, that it isn't confined to the male species. People should be more aware of that," she said.

Getting taken seriously seems to be a real problem. Women aren't given credit for their buying power or their decision making power," said Sandra Denes of North Ridgeville, Ohio.

"We're not going to apply to borrow money for new equipment if I don't sign my name to the papers, too," Denes said.

She and her husband, Tom, operate a 500-acre farm which produces corn, soybeans and hay. To help make ends meet, her husband manages a race horse farm.

Raising two children and pregnant with the couple's third, Denes said, "I can't sit on a tractor for five hours but there are other things I can do to help run the farm."

She remains active in farm organizations. Besides being the treasurer of the Lorain County Farm Bureau's board of directors, she has been a county delegate to the Ohio Farm Bureau's annual meeting.

Before and for a short time after the birth of her first child, Denes worked as a legal secretary for the Lorain County Prosecutor's Office. "I loved it. I discovered that my baby-sitter's methods were not my own child raising practices. He was 10 months old and it was near Christmas and she was putting him in a playpen. It's something I

wouldn't do. But I don't regret going back to work, because if I hadn't I'd always wonder about it." When she worked in the city, she'd help bale hay on weekends.

"It's a joint effort. We're trying to make it any way we can. It's just hard. We're trying to get into farming at a hard time."

Federal and state regulations are "pretty good" attempts to help farmers. "You can't please everybody," she said.

Like other women at the conference she wants to see farmers get more money for produce and cattle. "I don't know if that's a role for government. I would like it to encourage fair trade," she said.

"Everyone is used to cheap food," said June Billington of Altus, Okla. "People who resent the fact they have to pay for food don't appreciate that in America 16 percent of our earnings are spent on food. Food is a necessity. We

spend more on other things like clothing than on food.

"I'M ALSO very proud the American farmer and the ability of four percent of the population to produce food for the rest," said Billington, a member of the National Wheat Growers Association. She has served on the Oklahoma Governor's Advisory Council for Food and Agriculture and on the Governor's Advisory Council for Rail Transportation.

"Three times in the 1970s, we had a grain embargo. Our group goes here and there to promote our products overseas. And then the government embargoes these products," she said.

"If they'd only realize how much we support the national economy. We're consumers. 'Farmers don't save their money,' agreed Judith Lewis of Piedmont, Kan. "They put back whatever they earn into their operation. They buy things."



DAVID FRANK/staff photographer

June Billington is a member of the National Wheat Growers Association. She's served on the Oklahoma Governor's Advisory Council for Food and Agriculture.

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