



Manitoba Agriculture Minister Ralph Eichler in conversation with Glenda Burnett of MNP's farm management consultant group.

PHOTO BY WES KEATING

*Backbone of community*

# Farm wives too modest about the role they play

by WES KEATING

Most farm wives do not realize the pivotal role they play in the operation of the family farm and just as many are too modest to take any credit for its success, according to an Alberta author who was a guest speaker at Winkler recently.

A city girl who married an Alberta farmer some years ago set about to change that perception and is well on her way, with the publication of two books on the subject.

Billi J Miller told a Winkler farm women's conference in November that her first book, *Farmwives in Profile*, was published in 2016 and was a four and a half year labour of love. Celebrating 17 "traditional farm wives" ranging in age from 55 to 90, the book combined sage advice, anecdotes, favorite recipes and, of course, photographs.

The list of women Miller interviewed for her first book was by no means exhaustive, she said, and was a sampling of farm wives in her community and nearby.

Moving from the city to the farm 20 minutes southwest of Lloydminster, Alberta, Miller had been amazed at all the women did to keep community together. These women epitomized the true meaning of the word community, from welcoming new members, hosting showers, and baking for community events to enthusiastically carrying out the limitless tasks at home, from raising kids, helping out at baling time, going to town to pick up parts or delivering hot meals to hungry farmers in the field. These women were the pillars of the community, while modestly claiming they "hadn't done anything special."

Miller said she found that she had landed in a place where neighbors were friends with deep roots. A girl friend had once told her she needed those roots.

"I fell in love with the farm life."

Miller says her husband Dean never had any doubts about what he wanted to do, and after a year of long distance telephone calls and his driving two hours to take her on a date, she made up her mind to join him on the 100-year-old farm.

She started looking for a job in the Lloydminster area and was lucky to get the only government job available. They were married October 23, 2010.

Often asked if she ever misses life in the city, Miller's answer is a resounding, "Never."

"I was looking for a real home and I found it."

Miller shared an emotional story of an unhappy childhood with her Winkler farm women's audience. She moved out of home by the time she was in Grade 11 and there was a final end to a rocky relationship with her often-divorced mother when she was in her 20s.

Miller said the point of sharing this part of her life, was to acknowledge that everyone has pain in their lives and the resilient character of the farm wife should be an inspiration to both family and community. Deep roots and everyone knowing everyone else in a close knit community means neighbors are there for each other.

*It was always family first, farm first.  
All farm women take their unique skills  
and fit them to their role on the farm.*

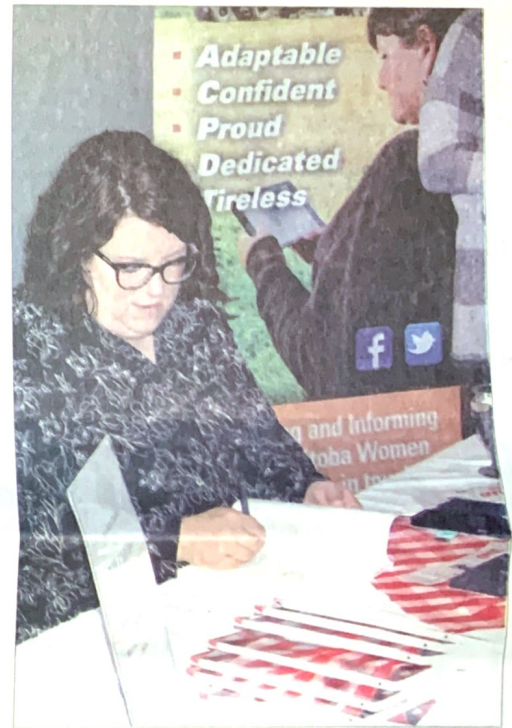
- Billi J Miller

One of the neighbors Miller interviewed for her first book was 93 and had known five generations of Millers. Seventy-three years of farming and five generations of friendship demonstrates the permanence of the farm neighborhood)

For the first couple of years, Miller said she watched how others did it and managed to bring something new to the neighborhood when their first child was born.

"Our daughter, Madeline, was the first girl in the Miller family in 60 years.

It was 2012 when Miller decided to make a complete break with her off farm job and urban life and did not return to her government post after maternity leave.



Alberta author Billi J Miller signs books at the Manitoba Farm Women's Conference in Winkler.

PHOTO BY WES KEATING

She was looking for something to do and started a photography business. Taking pictures in the neighborhood gave people a new perspective on the farming scene.

Dean told her that before she came there were never any pictures of farmers at work for that just wasn't something anyone took time to do.

It was photography that led the former government worker to her writing career. Along with the photos of farm wives and rural landscapes came the stories of the women who were the backbone of the community. In the introduction of *Farmwives in Profile* Miller says when he approached each of these 17 women to be part of the project, their humility and unassuming natures shone. "I haven't done anything special, I'm just a





PHOTO BY WES KEATING

Conference committee member Marilyn Bouw of Anola chats with Billi J Miller after a morning session for the keynote speaker.

farmwife", or "I've just done what all the others before me had done" was a common reply. Anyone reading the book, will not agree

Miller shared one of her favorite interviews in a slide presentation to her Winkler audience.

"Edith Paul was 84 at the time of the writing and she was famous for her donuts. One of her grandchildren complained that she must have kept back an ingredient or two when she passed down the recipe, because their donuts never tasted like Grandmother's." In response to a question about whether there was something she would have liked to have changed or something she had changed in her years of the farm, Edith replied, "Yes I changed a lot of diapers.

Like the rest of the women interviewed in the book, in the advice department, Edith said farm couples have to work together and try to agree what goes on. At the same time they have to be realistic and willing to compromise. There will be disagreements because everyone

has an opinion.

Miller said that even though there was a generational difference in the farmwives she interviewed for her two books, there was a theme and motivation that remained constant.

The issues may have been different but the motivation was the same, she said.

"It was always family first, farm first. All farm women take their unique skills and fit them to their role on the farm."

Signing books in the lobby between sessions, Miller said she was planning on writing a third book and possibly a fourth.

In good humor and with the stoicism of the farm wife she has become, Millers says they almost didn't get a crop off this year and she had better get out and sell some books before she has think about going back to work for the government.

If you would like to order, Miller says information is available online at [billi@billijmiller.com](mailto:billi@billijmiller.com).