

First Woman President

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13 districts with 1,042 members in the county. According to Balmer it's an organization farmers cannot afford to be without.

"If we didn't have this Association, we wouldn't have any total farm package," she said. "Every agricultural problem and concern should come through the Farmers Association, which is part of the larger Pennsylvania Farmers' Association (PFA). Politicians aren't influenced much by one farmer's viewpoint, but when farmers have group representation, we get things done. It always carries more weight with politicians when they know that PFA has 23,000 members."

Additionally, you can get the \$75 annual dues back in one shot by using any one of the many benefits," Balmer said.

Annual dues on VISA cards obtained through the Association are waived. Insurance rates are cheaper and eyeglasses and other prescriptions may be purchased at 60 percent reductions. Purchase of tires and batteries result in kick-back money for the Association.

But more important than financial benefits is the influence the Association wields by lobbying for farmers' causes.

"Anyone interested in farming should have someone represent them in government. We (farmers) don't have time to go to the government. Our dues go to a lobbyist and he represents us the way we (farmers) tell him to."

Balmer said, "For example, the other year we lost the 9½ cent gas refund. PFA lobbied to get it back and did. Just two weeks ago, PFA

called a meeting with the Pa. Milk Marketing Board to get additional money for drought expenses so farmers can take that extra money to buy feed to keep herds going. They got the money. They've lobbied to have lower-priced licenses for farm trucks instead of paying commercial rates."

Balmer desires to see more unity among farmers. She said, "Farmers' biggest problem is that we don't work together. We are too independent. We should have the world eating out of our hand. We shouldn't have financially depressed farmers."

Farmers, she believes, should get more for their products by organizing, figuring the cost with a decent profit added on top, and refuse to sell it at a lower price.

"The agri-business world won't make it happen, we must," she said. "We can't keep getting rid of farmers; otherwise, we'll see here (in the U.S.) the same thing that is happening in Russia with empty store shelves."

She said, "I've been farming for 29 years, and we have less pay margin now than 25 years ago. In 1978 a farmer's pay for one dozen eggs was 12 cents below the wholesale cost. In today's market, farmers get 29 cents below the wholesale cost of eggs. We got squeezed out of the profit margin."

She does not see an easy solution to this problem. "I can't see it changing unless we farmers change. If we farmers don't stand up for ourselves, the younger generation won't be able to farm."

With the farm economy as it is, she sees that the big guy isn't forced out of business but the little

farmers are. "But it's the little farmers that made America great," she said. "Largeness deteriorates quality on everything."

When does a farm become "too big?"

Jane admits it is a bit difficult to draw the line as she believes it depends on circumstances. "I've thought about it often. It depends on the size of the family, and the farm operation needed to support that family."

"Farm prices were low for Granddad, but the profit margin was high. Insurance takes its toll on farmers. Today we struggle to get \$3 per bushel of corn. In 1982, farmers got \$4. Yet seed corn and fertilizer prices have risen since then."

According to Balmer, these costs have resulted in less than \$200 profit per acre of corn compared with \$2,000 plus per acre of tobacco. "Tobacco pays the best in farming but it is labor intensive."

Although most farmers call tobacco raising hard work, Balmer does not. "I call it fun. Fun because we have a good time doing the work. It's a family affair to plant, cut, and strip. We can communicate while we work because we don't have the loud hum of machinery. And, of course, if it pays, it makes it so much more fun."

Balmer would like to see a credit union established for farmers. She said, "Years ago people didn't put their money in the bank. They would lend it to someone. It was a tremendous help to farmers starting out. Now, people don't trust each other. They trust the bank, but the bank doesn't trust us. We should have a credit union for farmers or some lending force that would work with farmers, that would be understanding of drought



"If we farmers don't do something, the next generation won't be able to farm," said Balmer who is shown with her three-year-old granddaughter, Vanessa.

effects."

If Balmer had her way, politicians would spend at least six weeks working on a farm to learn first hand the problems farmers face. "You can't learn farming from a book. It takes firsthand experience," she said.

Several years ago, a college student who was pursuing an agricultural degree, begged Balmer to let her work on the farm for the summer.

"She learned really fast about the frustrations of machinery breakdowns and price cutbacks," Balmer said. Balmer was quick to inform the student of the costs involved in every aspect of farming. When eggs dropped two cents a dozen, Balmer explained how

that seemingly small cut drastically affected the overall profit.

"Why do you people do this?" the girl asked. "Why do you farm?"

Balmer's reply was simple: "I love it. I had two loves, one (husband) was taken away now I love farming even more than before."

Balmer has these words of advice for other farmers: "If farmers want to keep farmers farming, they should belong to the Farmers' Association."

The Lancaster County Farmers Association's goal is to have 1,094 members by the end of this year. For those who would like to know more about the Lancaster County Farmers' Association, call (717) 653-5916 or the county Extension office at (717) 394-6851.

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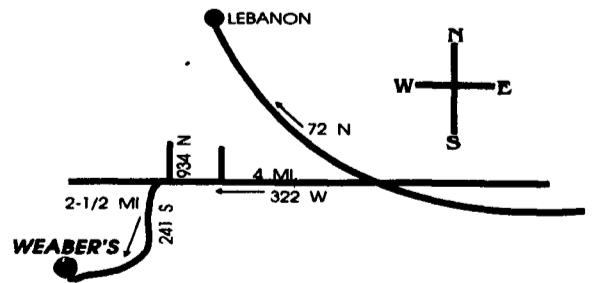
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