

'Mrs. President' Fills Life With Music, Cooking, Farm Women

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LEBANON (Lebanon Co.) — With a tip of his hat and a slight nod, an employee stops what he is doing to respectfully greet Catherine Schott.

"Mrs. President," he murmurs.

Catherine gives a hearty laugh and explains to a visitor, "That's what they've been calling me ever since I became president of Farm Women."

As head of the 2,459 membership of the Society of Farm Women of Pennsylvania, Catherine has the distinction of being the first woman from Lebanon County to head the organization during its 86-year history.

It's a honor that Catherine values with a bit of trepidation. She said, "I have a concern that I will be able to do the job well. But I have my committees to rely upon. I couldn't fill the office without them."

For a person who was signed up for membership without her permission, Catherine certainly has become a model leader. To understand how she became a member without permission, one needs to understand the background.

Catherine did not grow up on a farm, but she vowed since six years of age that she would marry a farmer. In high school, she met Leonard Schott.

"We met in band. He played the flute, and I played the oboe," she said.

Leonard was shy and was immediately charmed by Catherine's vivaciousness — a trait she continues to exhibit to this day.

When Leonard asked her to attend the Pennsylvania Farm Show to watch him exhibit pigs and heifers, Catherine was hooked with both the farmer and the intricacies of farm-related activities.

After high school graduation, Leonard, foreseeing that he would be drafted, joined the army. It was the couple's intention to wait until his service term ended and be married.

In those days, membership to Farm Women was limited because so many wanted to join. A limit was set upon membership

dependent upon the number that could comfortably fit inside a home where meetings were held.

Leonard's mother was a charter member of Lebanon Society 7. She requested that the 28-member limit be changed so that her future daughter-in-law could join. The members agreed. The only hitch was that Catherine knew nothing about it until members welcomed her when they saw her at church.

From this incident, Catherine feared that her mother-in-law might be controlling, but according to Catherine, "She wasn't at all. She just liked Farm Women so much she was certain I would too."

She was right.

Later her mother-in-law said, "I knew you'd be good for our group."

She proved that right also. Catherine has served numerous offices in the local, county, and state levels.

The couple married before Leonard had finished his tour with the army, and Catherine joined him in Pittsburgh where he was stationed.

"We'd come home (Lebanon County) Friday afternoon to cut the hay, make the hay on Saturday, load it on wagons, and pull into the barn," Catherine said. The following weeks the couple again rushed home to unload the hay.

When the couple were first married, Catherine did not know how to cook. Both her mother and grandmother were accomplished cooks who were in charge of cooking for fire companies and other community affairs. "Both of them were frugal and didn't want to waste a drop of food," Catherine said. "They didn't want to take a chance on me."

When the couple rented an apartment in Pittsburgh from an Italian woman, she was overheard to say, "Foolish American girl — she got married and can't cook."

The landlady took the responsibility to teach Catherine cooking basics.

"I learned to clean chickens and everything," Catherine said. It was a foundation that laid the groundwork for Catherine becoming one of the best known cooks in Lebanon County — but more on that later.

When the couple moved back to Lebanon County, their lifestyle continue to be a bit hectic. They did not live on the family farm, so every morning Catherine packed a lunch and their newborn baby to go with Leonard and help on the farm all day.

The couple eventually had three children, who are now married and have given the Schotts seven grandchildren.

In 1968, Leonard and Catherine moved to the farm. They changed from dairy to crop farming, but in 1971, a serious injury forced Leonard to give up farming.

In recent years, the Schotts sold the home farm to their daughter and her husband.

"I missed the farm more than Leonard did," Catherine said of one of the most difficult transitions of her life. Easing the separation is the fact that they live in a house surrounded by fields from the 110 acres they retained.

Leonard no longer crop farms but rents the ground and is in tractor sales for Keller Brothers.

In 1976, something happened that had an influence on the direction Catherine's focus was about to take. That year the 1976 wagon train came through Quentin, where Catherine grew up.

"You must help," Catherine's mother said of the food preparation needed for the community celebration.

"I told my mom, 'Never in my life will I do this (on a regular basis),'"

Catherine discovered she enjoyed preparing the food, which included killing 50 chickens to make pot pie.

"But I wouldn't admit it to my mother," Catherine said.

More and more she began helping her mother with community fundraisers. She soon became known as the "hamboat lady," because hamboats became a popular fundraiser in the area.

After years of volunteer cooking, Catherine was asked in 1992 if she'd like to get paid for it. Now she manages the kitchen at the Lebanon County Expo Center. The site is used weekly to host events for many different groups in addition to agriculture-related events. About 16 women help Catherine with food preparation and serving. Most of these are of retirement age. Leonard refers to them as "not retired, just retreated." He also is often asked to assist with the food preparation.

It's Lebanon Fair week that draws the largest crowd, and for that Catherine volunteers her time. For eight days she puts in 10-15-hour days to prepare breakfast, lunch, and dinner for about 10,000 people. During that week, three tons potatoes, 800 pounds of pork barbecue, 1,200 pounds hamburger patties, 40,000 drinks, and 6,000 sodas are served.

"It's easier for me to cook for 200 than for two," Catherine said. "I love my job and meeting all the people."

Catherine has another love in her life — music. As a young girl, the school chorus director told her that she has a good voice and offered to give her voice lessons.

"We formed the first girl's barbershop quartet — at least in this area," Catherine said. She sang bass.

She has been singing ever since. Although she has a wide range, she generally sings the soprano solos, such as she did for the state Farm Women's

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"It's easier for me to cook for 200 than two," said Catherine Schott, president of the Society of Farm Women of Pennsylvania. As kitchen manager of the Lebanon County Expo Center, Schott is well known for her superb cooking and for her vivaciousness.



Catherine collects angel and pig figurines, but her most cherished collection of teacups and saucers is stored in this family heirloom china closet.



Although they are no longer active farmers, Catherine and Leonard Schott enjoy the view surrounding their little house that overlooks 110 acres of their farmland.



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