

## **NFU women led the push for progressive social legislation**

International Women's Year in 1975 was a watershed year for the women of the NFU, according to Jean Leahy, who served as NFU Women's President from 1975 to 1979.

"The recognition of women internationally gave us an opportunity to tackle an issue of importance for farm women," she told the NFU convention in Ottawa. "We chose matrimonial property legislation."

Leahy said at that time, many farm women across Canada realized that there was no law to state that farm women had any right to share in the farm in the event of a divorce or legal separation. "The previous year there had been two court cases that woke us all up. In two separate cases, the women involved had contributed greatly to the farm operation, but ended up with nothing."

NFU women held workshops across the country to devise fairer legislation. The proposal that was eventually sent to every provincial government advocated an equal sharing of property acquired during the marriage. "Every legislature eventually enacted new matrimonial property legislation," said Leahy. "They didn't adopt all our ideas, but there were great improvements."

She said even within the NFU, the idea made some members uncomfortable at the time. "Many women realized they did not have their names on any property," she said. "So there were some arguments. But as always, there was a farm union member, in this case, George Hickie of Saskatchewan, who would say just the right thing. He said: 'I always assumed that Mary owned half the farm. I'm sick to think that if something happened to me, she may have to fight for it.' So the changes were welcomed."

She said NFU women in the 1970s also pushed for legislation to allow farm women to contribute to the Canada Pension Plan. "That is now a godsend in retirement for older women."

She said the big challenge now is to protect Canada's universal public health care system. "We must insist that the federal government force the provinces to abide by the Canada Health Act," she stated. "We owe it to those who worked so hard to set this up, not to let it be destroyed." She said as early as 1913, women in the Saskatchewan Grain Growers Association advocated that the government implement a universal public health care system.