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**China Through
Canada's Peasant's
Eyes**

Page 6

**Using LSD to Treat
Alcoholism at the
Souris Valley Mental
Health Hospital**

Page 13

**A Cowboy from Wood
Mountain**

Page 31

China Through Canada's Peasant's Eyes: Evelyn Potter and the 1971 Delegation to China

By Keith Thor Carlson and Liang Zhao

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In these troubling times when certain countries are retrenching and turning inward and others are turning their backs on the world's most vulnerable citizens -- when we witness daily in social media the rise of bold ethnocentrism and bigotry -- and when in some circles ignorance and deceit are being paraded as virtues -- it can be refreshing to reflect upon the contributions of a woman who has worked to build understanding across social, economic, and political divides. Evelyn Potter of Biggar Saskatchewan is such a woman.

Featured here are a

small sampling of the more than 1,150 colour slides Evelyn took while visiting China



Evelyn Potter. Photo courtesy of Evelyn Potter.

in 1971 as the "peasant" representative on the first Canadian delegation to visit China after the opening of formal diplomatic relations. These images remind us not only the important role a Saskatchewan farmer played in building international good will, but just how important prairie wheat was, and remains, in underpinning Canada's relations with China. So while the photos are of China, the story is, in many ways, a Saskatchewan one.

Evelyn was born in 1926 and raised on



Donkey cart. Photo courtesy of Evelyn Potter.

a dairy farm near Guernsey Saskatchewan. She moved to Saskatoon as a teen to attend Sion Catholic School, and then married Douglas H. Potter. Together they worked Douglas's grandparents' homestead near Biggar. Like many other rural Saskatchewan women in the 1950s and 1960s, Evelyn was an active partner on the farm and also participated in community affairs and politics. Together the Potters joined the Saskatchewan Farmers Union where Evelyn quickly assumed a leadership role. First, she became District Women's Director, then Women's Vice-President, and finally Women's President. When Canada's three provincial farmers unions united to form the National Farmers Union (NFU), Evelyn was elected its first Women's President.¹ Later Evelyn represented the NFU internationally with the Associated Country Women of the World. Within Canada Potter championed the cause

of gender equality. She was instrumental in convincing the Saskatchewan legislature to pass the Matrimonial Property Rights Act of 1980.

Recalling the occasion of one of her earliest political speeches, Evelyn remembers that

"In the beginning when I got involved with the Farmers Union, men would go to the meetings and the women would

be in the kitchen making coffee. Women never took part in the business part of it. When I got elected that changed. One night I was at a meeting and there were two hundred and fifty men there – not a woman, except two women in the kitchen. I called those two out and said, 'You sit out here.' And I said to the men, 'I didn't know there were so many bachelors in this area,' (because their wives didn't come). It was quite a job to get through to women that they had a voice."

Opening Ties with China

Cold War tensions had completely isolated China from Canada and the rest of western world throughout the 1950s. Canadians today might not remember just how big a deal it was for Canada to begin trading with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Even less well remembered is the role that Prairie wheat and Saskatchewan farmers played in bridg-



John Diefenbaker and unknown farmer on tractor.



Chinese hosts with NFU President Roy Atkinson (far right).
Photo courtesy of Evelyn Potter.

ing the ideological gulf and opening the door for formal political recognition and official diplomatic relations.

Agricultural innovations in the 1950s and early 1960s caused western grain production to soar and global wheat prices to fall. Upon being elected Prime Minister, John Diefenbaker was faced with either leaving millions of bushels in grain elevators or finding new markets to alleviate the plight facing Canadian farmers. The People's Republic of China represented both an opportunity and a challenge.

The agricultural calamity in China associated with Chairman Mao's 1959 and 1960 efforts to retool the PRC's economy during the Great Leap Forward (between 20 and 50 million people died of starvation), along with a growing appreciation of the practicality of recognizing the legitimacy of the PRC as the official government of the world's most popu-

lous nation (as opposed to the Taiwanese government of Chiang Kai-shek in Formosa), motivated Diefenbaker to open the doors of trade. This distanced Canada from America's policy of isolating mainland China.

Whereas Canada made no exports to the PRC in 1953, and a mere \$1.4 million CDN worth in 1957 (\$11.68 million in 2018 dollars), in 1962 wheat exports to China soared to \$137.3 mil-

lion CDN (\$1.14 billion in 2018 dollars). And even when the late-1962 Chinese border skirmishes between China and Canada's Commonwealth ally India motivated the federal cabinet to cut all trade with China, Diefenbaker ensured that wheat was exempt. By 1963 China had become Canada's second largest overseas market for wheat. Today, Canada exports roughly \$20 billion CDN annually to China (with agricultural products topping the list) making the PRC Canada's second largest trading partner.

The 1971 Delegation

In 1971 second wave feminism was helping change Canada's social and political landscape, and as Women's President of the NFU, Evelyn Potter was at the front edge of that change. However, nothing in Potter's life had prepared her for the phone call from UBC Professor Ken Woodsworth inviting her to join in



Reaping rice. Photo courtesy of Evelyn Potter.

the first Canadian cultural exchange with the PRC. Woodsworth's unofficial delegation to promote cross-cultural understanding across the Cold War divide emerged in the wake of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's October 1970 decision to recognize the PRC.² (By way of contrast, the US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's secret mission to meet Premier Zhou Enlai only occurred the following year during Evelyn Potter's trip to China).

Chairman Mao Zedong's government endorsed the exchange, and supported Woodsworth's idea that the delegation consist of people from a wide spectrum of Canadian society. However, the Chinese government rejected the original list of Canadian delegates as incomplete. While it included university faculty, students, physicians, school teachers, journalists, engineers, librarians, lawyers, and secretaries, it did not include 'peasants.' Evelyn Potter (along with Roy



Female worker in Shanghai Diesel Engine Factory. Photo courtesy of Evelyn Potter.

Atkinson, the NFU's president) were asked to fill that gap.

Upon leaving for China in late June 1971 Evelyn told journalists that as a leader of a volunteer organization dedicated to preserving small-scale local farming, she was especially interested in learning "how the Chinese are so successful at involving people in similar organizations." Lamenting that "Canadian farm people are so

individualistic," it was the stories she had heard of "people working together" in Chinese communes that intrigued Evelyn most.

Woodsworth had been so efficient in organizing the delegation that they were actually scheduled to arrive in China months ahead of the Canadian government's official delegation. Concerned, Prime Minister Trudeau arranged for senior cabinet ministers to be on the same flight as Woodsworth's team and to disembark the plane first so they could be formally greeted by PRC representatives a few minutes ahead of the UBC-led delegation.

China Through Evelyn's Camera Lens

Urbanization in China proceeded relatively slowly between 1960 and 1978. In 1971 the PRC's urban population was approximately 147 million (only 17.26% of the total population of 852 million). Today,



Shanghai Factory Nursery. Photo courtesy of Evelyn Potter.



Carrying rice sheaves.

Photo courtesy of Evelyn Potter.

by way of contrast, roughly 60% of China's population of 1.4 billion people live in urban centres.

Potter photographed numerous historic sites, memorial institutes, markets, shops, factories, and schools. Through her camera lens we are provided images of public spaces like Tian'anmen Square where the government of the day had erected two giant square concrete columns depicting torches brazened with communist political slogans.

In stark contrast to what Evelyn and the other delegates had earlier read about the People's Republic of China in mainstream media, the delegates' impression upon returning was that China was "a land of happy, healthy, hard-work-

ing people imbued with selflessness, wholly devoted to the thoughts and teachings of Chairman Mao, and interested not in war but only in the development of their country." Of course the delegates recognized that what they saw during their visit had been carefully orchestrated by the Chinese government, but nonetheless they felt that the scenes were generally genuine, and the people sincere. Speaking to a journalist, Evelyn said that what struck her most was "how hard working" the Chinese people were, and the way

they pulled together to meet common goals. A reporter who interviewed Potter upon her return to Vancouver described the NFU's Women's President as having been especially impressed with how the Chinese had so quickly accomplished "self-sufficiency" in local food production.

Agriculture had been central to the Chinese economy for more than a millennium. But the war with Japan (1937-1945) and the Civil War (1927-1949) had devastated Chinese food production. The Great Leap Forward's efforts at rapid industrialization (1958-1962) further undermined the agricultural sector. When the delegates arrived in 1971 roughly 700 million people (82.7% of

the total population) lived in rural areas (compared to 40% today).

The People's Commune was the basic social/political unit in the Chinese countryside from 1958 to 1984. It was regarded by Mao as the ideological and economic focal point of China's new communist society. As a representative of the NFU, Potter had specifically requested being able to visit Communes. The images she took might appear stereotypical of the era, but Potter and Atkinson were genuinely impressed. As they noted to reporters on their return, "The main features of Chinese agriculture" were "the diversity of crops produced and the tremendous amount of human labor put into producing food because of the lack of machinery."

As a feminist and a proponent of the co-op movement what struck Potter most about



Tiananmen Square, 1970.

Photo courtesy of Evelyn Potter.

China was:

“the cooperative culture of the Communes; they really worked together.... Everybody worked; the young couples with young children had the grandparents look after the children (or they would have nurseries). They seemed so happy. Everyone carried a copy of Mao’s little red book.... I admired the grandparents looking after the children and allowing the others to go and work. They didn’t have very much materially, but just the closeness of group.”

Rural China caused Potter to both reflect upon the way technology had changed women’s farm work in Canada, and to redouble her efforts to change Canadian policies that were unfair to farm women. Potter believed that Chinese and Canadian farm women could learn from one another’s experiences:

“The Chinese women were working in the fields and to compare them to our women is difficult. Although a Canadian woman in 1971 might go out to garden at home, she didn’t labour in the fields the way Chinese women did. It was difficult to explain this to the Chinese. Our technology meant that we didn’t need to do that anymore. And they wondered about the childcare and schools that we had that freed women up... But that was relatively new in Canada.”

Along with the Communes, it was the Chinese education system that Evelyn found most interesting. Schooling had



Children playing tug-of-war. Photo courtesy of Evelyn Potter.

suffered greatly during the early stages of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. The Red Guard had persecuted and humiliated intellectuals and teachers to the extent that many universities stopped researching altogether. When the delegates arrived in 1971, education practices were returning to normalcy but retained elements designed to ensure that people in privileged positions respected those who worked with their hands. NFU president Roy Atkinson told Canadian reporters that he was “impressed by the fact that bureaucrats and professionals must spend time each year working on the farm or in the factory.”

As someone interested in motivating women and farmers to succeed, Potter was particularly inspired by the way Chinese students responded to sports competition.

“When the children were playing different games, like tug-of-war with a rope, it was

so strange. They were cheering for the losing side. I couldn’t figure it out. Finally, I asked an interpreter. He stated: ‘Well, the winning side doesn’t need any support, it’s the losers that need some encouragement.’”

Many of Potter’s photos show children wearing red scarfs, performing traditional music and dance, and participating in sports. They also show students in sessions learning Maoist political thought and reading from the then ubiquitous “little red book.”

Back in Canada

When Evelyn returned to Canada the government was interested in learning if her already well-known progressive leanings had become radicalized by the Chinese. She was interviewed several times by the RCMP, and for the rest of her life was subjected to more than her fair share of thorough security searches when she traveled by plane. Likewise, she reports that when traversing Canada working

for the NFU she grew accustomed to finding upon her return from meetings that her hotel room had been rummaged and searched.

But for Evelyn, the trip to China was less about the virtues of communism than it was an experience that reinforced her conviction that small-scale farmers from across the world faced common challenges. Upon her return, she travelled Canada in her capacity as Woman's President of the NFU, showing her slides, sharing what she had learned about China, and drawing lessons for Canadian farmers.

So committed was Evelyn to defending the rights of local producers that less than a month after returning to Canada from China she was forefront with Roy Atkinson at an NFU blockade of the Trans-Canada Highway in Prince Edward Island – a protest that successfully pressured Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau to meet face-to-face with NFU officials. And in 1976 Evelyn's work promoting local growers resulted in the NFU's publication *Nature Feeds Us*, a first-of-its-kind book examining not merely the health aspects of foods, but the profit and pricing structure of the food industry, marketing practices, and the impacts of chemical farming and growth stimulants. *Nature Feeds Us*



Evelyn Potter as Women's President.
Photo courtesy of Evelyn Potter.

broke fresh ground in what is now known as the food sovereignty movement.

Karl Marx famously wrote that philosophers have only interpreted the world, whereas the point is to change it. Through her dedication to trying to understand the underlying challenges facing small-scale producers, and especially women producers, Evelyn Potter did more than her fair share of interpreting, and changing, the world. The images she took in China as Canada's peasant representative in 1970 are indicative of the work she did throughout her life, for they reveal the value of what can be accomplished

when people seek to find what they have in common instead of identifying those things that set them apart. Evelyn Potter is a remarkable Saskatchewan woman whose life-long dedication to making the world a better place serves as a model for us all.

For those interested in seeing more of Evelyn's photos of her trip to China, and learning more about the remarkable 1971 delegation, the Diefenbaker Canada Centre on the UofS campus is preparing an exhibit that is expected to open in the Spring of 2019. The Diefenbaker Canada Centre can be contacted at dief.centre@usask.ca or 306-966-8384.

Endnotes

1. To be clear, Evelyn was not the first woman elected president of the NFU. Rather, the women of the NFU pushed to have a second separate Woman's President position created to compliment the organization's regular president, whom it was assumed would be a man – and indeed it was for many years to come. The first woman elected president of the NFU was Nettie Wiebe, and the year was 1995.
2. The same month as Le Front de Liberation du Quebec (FLQ) crisis in Quebec.

