

Rural finance's freedom fighter

SHE's been called "Saint Frances of Bombah", described as the "skinny drought lady" and ironically been awarded "Man of the Year" in agriculture. But they're all terms of endearment for Fran Rowe, a woman who has spent almost three decades fighting farmers' financial woes.

Armed with an economics degree, an inquisitive nature and sheer determination, Mrs Rowe set about fighting the injustices thrust among farmers in the mid 1980s at a time when interest rates skyrocketed and farming families were facing foreclosure from financial institutions.

Not to take away from its previous incarnation, the Rural Financial Counselling Service NSW has come a long way from its humble beginnings when Mrs Rowe started her volunteer service and single handedly spent a year darting across the dusty dirt roads of NSW helping farmers deal with their financial problems.

Mrs Rowe and husband, Peter, were faced with the same circumstances as other farmers – they had fallen victim to financial deregulation following the purchase of their property, "Bombah", at Bobadah in central NSW in October 1984.

The Rowes had borrowed \$190,000 at 12 per cent interest to buy 2420 hectares.

By 1985 their interest rate had spiralled to 23.75pc.

"We purchased the property because we had approval from the bank for an overdraft facility and early in the new year they sent a letter stating no further assistance would be granted," Mrs Rowe said.

"It was an incredible shock because all our planning was based on the overdraft facility." It was a traumatic time, she recalled, with no help readily available and stigmas were being thrust among isolated farmers that if "your were suffering financial difficulty you were inefficient".

"We had drought, followed by flood, financial deregulation, commodity prices crashed, the wool market collapsed and interest rates rose as banks who had lent aggressively were out to get their money back," Mrs Rowe said.

"My motivation came from the empathy I felt for farmers for those injustices.

"They didn't know where to turn to – and neither did I.

"I knew that farmers really wanted to

understand their finances – they knew hard work from dawn to dusk wasn't going to cut it anymore.

"They just had to realise the bank manager was there to sell money and get it back in – he wasn't your friend."

At a Livestock and Grain Producers Association meeting at Tottenham in 1985, Mrs Rowe stood up and indicated it wasn't inefficiency from the farmers' end to blame, but rather the inflated interest rates they were paying that were "inefficient".

While it seemed like her words fell on deaf ears during the meeting, the hushed conversations outside the meeting from financially desperate farmers and the phone ringing off the hook the following day told her she'd hit the mark.

"I knew that farmers really wanted to understand their finances – they knew hard work from dawn to dusk wasn't going to cut it."

Overnight she became a rural financial counsellor.

Her files grew daily with each case detailing how farmers were struggling to understand their financial position and negotiation processes with the financial institutions.

A year into her voluntary service – which came at a cost to the Rowes' own hip pocket at a time when they too were cash strapped – the then Federal Primary Industries Minister, John Kerin, recognised the need for the service and from November 1986 it became a funded body.

"We needed to ensure farmers did understand their position and it was clear a lot of people would have to leave agriculture, but it was a decision that should be their own, once they understood their financial position and the adjustment process involved."

In Mrs Rowe's district alone there were 45 call-up notices in 1986 – a frantic time of negotiations with the banks.

During this process Mrs Rowe learnt how to read contracts and understand legislation from which she found many were flawed.

After alerting this to the then State Minister for Consumer Affairs, Deirdre Grusovin, a rural credit inquiry was called which travelled



Service survived, thrived

FOR Fran Rowe – a woman who says she likes to "win" – her career has had its lows and highs.

The farm evictions and hardships of the 1980s were a particularly traumatic time – a time Mrs Rowe still struggles to reflect on.

"There were suicides around that time and even to this day in our role it is still hard to separate the emotional from the financial when you are dealing with farmers."

Mrs Rowe said the families evicted from their farms at that time had to live with decisions that were forced upon them.

"It wrecked their lives," she said.

"We now only have a few properties voluntarily surrendered each year which allows the farmer to move on.

"For me to be able to help farmers make their own rational decisions based on informed knowledge and negotiate a settlement with the bank which allows them to look forward and feel they are a constructive member of society is a great outcome."

While Mrs Rowe admits she loves figures and

around NSW interviewing farmers and finally found "all is not right with rural credit".

"Rural credit providers were ripping farmers off with many contracts found to have unlawful interest calculations imposed on farmers who were being taken advantage of," Mrs Rowe said.

"If we could demonstrate that credit providers were taking more interest than the contract stated, then the interest would become void. It drew great attention to rural credit."

Mrs Rowe, now "was thinking like a banker", and knew that her negotiations with banks on behalf of farmers had to be commercial arrangements for them to succeed.

"The farmers came to me after sitting on tractors and headers all day dreaming up outlandish schemes.

"All I had to do was tweak their ideas to create a commercial offer to put to the banks and move into negotiations."

analysis, she said involvement on committees such as the NSW Rural Assistance Authority and the Agriculture and Food Policy Reference Group helped take her away from the case-by-case details and keep the bigger picture in check.

She's adamant "there are always great people in any organisation to deal with – even if it's the bank".

"You hang up and go again until you strike the right person."

Today, the national Rural Financial Counselling Service has 90 services with 13 operating from regional NSW.

They receive core funding from the Commonwealth Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry and the service is also financially supported by the NSW Government.

It's a far cry from the days when Mrs Rowe worked from a typewriter twined together by a shoe lace and belted around the countryside voluntarily seven days a week fighting the good fight for farmers.

Borne out of this process was the 1994 Farm Debt Mediation Act which formalised the negotiation and settlement process.

In the meantime, Mrs Rowe had also found there was help available from the NSW Rural Assistance Authority which offered interest rate subsidies.

"Even the banks didn't know about the service and it certainly wasn't well advertised."

So she began hosting seminars about the service and as a result was invited onto the NSW Rural Assistance Authority board in 1989.

She was later appointed chair (the first female) and continues to serve in that position.

While Mrs Rowe is modest about her achievements (which include being nominated as the 2010 Australian of The Year) there is one honour she is openly proud of – her Ronald Anderson Memorial Man of the Year in Agriculture, awarded by the National Press Club in 1989.

I Cara Jeffery

