

Warton Echo

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The link that holds the community together

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By Keith Gilbert

Two area women involved in the Women's Institute, feel it is about time the true value of the W.I. is brought out in the open.

"It's time we demolished the old images...the old conceptions," that the general public feel about Women's Institutes, said Megan Ouderkirk, a District P.R.O. officer from Oliphant.

"When people think of the W.I. they think of bazaars and teas." Such is not the case according to Ouderkirk and Margaret Urbshott of Lion's Head, a Provincial Board Director.

The first W.I. was formed in Stoney Creek, Ontario in 1897.

Since then the women's group has spread internationally. In Ontario, it is the largest rural Women's organization in Ontario with over 1,000 branches and a membership of over 20,000.

"We want to reach people who do not know what it (the W.I.) is about," said Ouderkirk.

Just what does the W.I. do? People might be surprised by the answers. The size and scope of what the W.I.s have been and are involved in, is staggering.

The Federated Women's Institutes of Canada were instrumental in the passing of the law requiring the pasteurization

of milk. They were instrumental in getting garments labelled as to quality; putting music on the school curriculum; getting the legal marriage age sixteen years with parent's consent; making the law requiring breathalyzer and blood tests for motorists; dental and medical inspections in schools; making it necessary for persons handling food to have T.B. tests; having fowl graded for sale and many other advancements towards better health and education.

The objectives of the W.I. are simple:

1. To assist and encourage



women to become more knowledgeable and responsible citizens.

2. To promote and develop good family life skills.
3. To help discover, stimulate and develop leadership.
4. To help identify and resolve needs in the community.

Recent accomplishments include the only survey to deal specifically with child care in rural areas, the first organization to hold a series of workshops on the impact of Free Trade on the Rural Communities and a major environment campaign including the setting of recycling programs.

Again the list is endless.

But the true worth of the W.I. is not measured so much in international and national accomplishments but more in its service to small communities.

"It is a major part of small communities," said Urbshott. "That's where I learned to sew."

Ouderkirk agrees. She came to Canada as a war bride at the age of 22. Joining the W.I. saw her through some hard times adapting to her new roll as a wife and a new country.

"I learned to sew, cook, garden...I learned so much." Ouderkirk even took college courses sponsored by the W.I.

Both agree that membership in the W.I. is stable at this time but worry there could be losses in

membership through attrition.

Most new members join as young women. The age requirement is 16. However, Urbshott stated that a lot of young married women today have to go out and work to make ends meet, making it harder to attend meetings.

Warton W.I. recently folded but there are presently 10 strong and active clubs in the area; Adamsville, Bluebell, Colpoys, Ferndale-Swan Lake, Mar, Oliphant, Park Head, Purple Valley, Stokes Bay, and Zion.

As part of the Bruce North District, the groups donated 2,429 volunteer hours last year.

A brochure lists these opportunities for Women's Institute members:

WORK to improve homes and communities

LEARN by participation in planned programs, workshops and conferences

INITIATE educational programs and special projects for the benefit of the community

STUDY current issues and problems related to family and society.

INFORM governments and other decision makers of rural women's viewpoints

INFLUENCE action by presen-

ting briefs and submissions concerning current issues

SUPPORT projects in Ontario, in Canada and overseas

PROVIDE scholarships and bursaries

ENJOY the friendship of fellow members, making new friends and warmth of serving others

World-wide, the W.I. con-

tinues to be an integral lobby group, dedicated to making the world a better place to live in.

In the many small communities the W.I. serves, it remains a vital link, holding the community together.

Should you have any question involving the W.I. please feel free to call 534-3321 or 793-4527.