

# Whither the WI?

It's hard—thankfully—to imagine a time when an organization devoted solely to helping farm women better manage their households was considered highly progressive. But since the first Women's Institute was established in 1897, the organization has grown beyond those narrow origins, providing friendship, education and a political voice for Canada's rural women.

Adelaide Hoodless, the wife of a furniture manufacturer in Hamilton, Ontario, became a crusader for food safety after her 14-month-old son died, likely from drinking tainted milk. She galvanized women to form organizations along the lines of existing Farmers' Institutes, which introduced farmers to scientific agriculture techniques. The WI idea found immediate support and in no time spread to all parts of rural Canada.

Well, that's the official line. In *Organizing Rural Women*, her book on the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario, Margaret Kechnie, a professor of women's studies at Laurentian University, notes that it was a man who organized the first meeting of what

## Celebrating the uniquely Canadian, uniquely rural Women's Institute.

would become the first-ever Women's Institute in Stoney Creek, near Hamilton, in 1897, and invited Hoodless to

for education and self-improvement along with charity and community work.

Those objectives continue today, although aging demographics and the decline of the family farm have taken their toll. Membership has fallen to about 13,000—down from 43,000 in 1987—in 1,303 branches, but women all over the country still gather in community halls and church basements under its banner.

"I look forward to whatever we're going to learn," says retired teacher Jean Cox, who belongs to the WI in Minden, Ontario, about two hours north of Toronto. "It's great fellowship."

One of the Minden group's 18 members, each of whom is responsible

for a subject area such as history, agriculture or education, presents a paper or invites a guest speaker to the monthly

meeting. The group also raises money for community endeavours and, like branches everywhere, keeps something called a Tweedsmuir book, full of clippings and notes on local happenings and family histories.

The WI may seem like a quaint relic to modern rural women as accustomed to driving a tractor as they are to pickling beets, but Canada would be a different place without the Institute, says Barbara Sheardown, executive director of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada. "I think it's made a huge impact, helping educate women and give them a role in their community," she says. Besides providing tremendous growth and networking opportunities for rural women—at one time, WI members could go on government-sponsored training and come back to share their knowledge locally—Sheardown points to resolutions passed by the national body on issues such as childhood poverty and food labelling. "I think they've had a real influence."

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A montage of memories from the WI (courtesy Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario).

speak. Kechnie adds that Hoodless was mainly plumping for her cherished dream of a school to train domestic science teachers and that it was men, mainly working for the province's department of agriculture, who kept the WI concept alive when it nearly sputtered out.

Whatever the case, the WI eventually caught on, and there were Institutes in all provinces by 1913. Unlike the temperance and church organizations to which many of them already belonged, the WI provided rural women with opportunities

## The British Connection

Canada exported the idea of the Women's Institute to the United Kingdom, where it still has more than 205,000 members. The first branch was established in Wales in 1915 with the intent of encouraging rural women to grow and preserve food to help ease wartime shortages. In 2000, a Yorkshire branch shattered the WI's old-fashioned image with the publication of a fund-raising charity calendar featuring 12 of its members posed nude with only the odd strategically placed floral arrangement or strand of pearls. Their story was made into the film "Calendar Girls," (see page 18). British groups often visit the headquarters of Canada's WI, which is housed in the homestead of founder Adelaide Hoodless. "It's kind of like a shrine for them—they're very excited to see it," says executive director Barbara Sheardown.