

Institutes of Britain

How Like Our Own They Are!

A LITTLE pamphlet giving a survey of Women's Institute community work in West Sussex, England, shows how closely the Institutes of the Old Land and the New follow the same pattern in trying to meet the needs of their localities. This may be of rather special interest to us as we approach the A.C.W.W. conference. The story of the Sussex Institutes begins:

"No one is surprised nowadays to hear that the Women's Institute has persuaded the bus company to erect a shelter, made a protest about the drains, or presented a piano to the village hall. In fact it is not unusual during discussion of some village need to hear that 'the Women's Institute ought to get cracking on it'."

We read about these English Institutes building a village hall or procuring a disused building and providing repairs, redecoration and equipment, or presenting their hall with a piano, a clock, or chairs or stage curtains—in one case the curtain was made of patchwork.

Like our own Institutes, those in Britain often provide other local improvements. One branch got public telephone "kiosks" set up in the village; another obtained a pillar mail box. They agitate for better bus service and at least four bus shelters were put up by Institutes—one from "pie profits." Their reporter says: "Institutes seem to have gone one better than Sir William Beveridge; 'from the cradle to the grave—and beyond' might be their watchword . . . Infant welfare clinics have been started and staffed and catered for, and clinics supported. Many Institutes have cared for local burying grounds. Some have looked after their war memorial and one obtained a mortuary."

Recreation grounds and "playing fields" have had help toward their maintenance. Market stalls have been set up to distribute surplus produce. In a number of villages the local branch of the county library was started by the Institute and many branches are staffed by Institute members. Courses of Workers' Education Association lectures have been organized as well as lectures on handicrafts, bottling (canning), cookery, bee-keeping and gardening. Educational films have been shown for the whole community. The report says: "For recreation there are classes in country dancing and old time dances, weekly practices in modern dancing, play readings, keep-fit classes, a percussion band, May revels, whist drives and socials. An Institute choir has sometimes developed into a village choral society."

A popular piece of work recorded was the

compilation of village scrap books, comparable to our Tweedsmuir histories.

Like the Institutes of this country the British Institutes receive a tremendous number of appeals for charitable donations. The Sussex report says: "From early times Institutes have been prone to support all kinds of charitable causes . . . and they have often sent donations to charitable societies before considering the needs of their own movement." Then the report goes on to commend those Institutes that have supported and promoted the work of the local district nurse and that have contributed to local needs—making clothes for "the local poor," supplying Christmas gifts of food, clothing, toys and coal to needy families.

We might almost be reading a report of an Ontario Institute as we find these British women working with their young people, procuring athletic fields, tennis, cricket and other sports, organizing boys' and girls' "pig clubs" and classes in carpentry and cookery and sewing and folk dancing, helping the Girl Guides and the Scouts and Cub packs. The Institutes have started Youth Clubs and we read that "one determined Institute opened a youth hut after four years' controversy with the Parish Council."

The British Institutes, like our own, are also concerned with older people. The report says: "Old people have been cheered and helped in many ways. At the request of the Parish Council one Institute formed a committee to study their needs. Old folk are especially invited to Institute outings and entertainments. Entertainments and presents have also been given to those in local institutions; members of one Institute go to play whist with them; others pay regular visits to old patients in hospital."

Certainly when we meet our A.C.W.W. visitors from Britain we will find that we have a great deal in common in our Institute work.

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"The great causes of humanity are never defeated by the assaults of the devil, but by the slow, crushing, glacierlike mass of thousands of indifferent people."—Adam Smith, in "The Wealth of Nations."

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"We have been the best of friends in the way of whiffle-trees, butter tubs and pig killings — but never once looked up together at the sky."

—David Grayson