

A Glimpse of Ceylon

A.C.W.W. Meeting Place in 1956

BECAUSE the next A.C.W.W. conference will be held in Ceylon in December 1956, and because F.W.I.O. has undertaken as a project this year, under a U.N.E.S.C.O. plan, to equip women's work centres in four villages in Ceylon, we felt that Ontario Institute women would be interested in the following notes gathered from the Ceylon Institutes' Annual Report. (Incidentally, as explained in Ina Hodgins' report of the F.W.I.O. Board Meeting in our last issue, the equipment Ontario is providing for the work centres in Ceylon will include sewing machines, cooking ranges and canning equipment for teaching Ceylonese women better housekeeping methods.)

To begin with, the Women's Institute in Ceylon is called the Lanka Mahila Samiti. There are Samitis working in 850 centres and having a membership of 50,000 women. The organization, like our Women's Institute, is non-sectarian and non-political. Their Report says, "We try to keep outside party politics but this does not prevent the members from taking an active interest in all political questions of civic importance where the woman's view-point is essential. One of our aims is to educate the village woman to shoulder her civic responsibilities." The over-all objective of the organization is "to uplift the standards and culture of the people in rural areas."

Training Rural Leaders: The education of rural women is carried on through voluntary leaders, mostly village girls who train for this work in a central training school. These girls take a course in "the theory and practice of Rural Development." Then they go out to the remote villages to fulfill their pledge that they will work "to brighten the darkness of poverty and ignorance in rural Ceylon."

Health Work: The Samitis work with health authorities for the prevention of disease and better health conditions. They have been asked to report any cases of tuberculosis in the villages and because of this, many people have had early treatment for the disease.

Agriculture and Food Production: Largely through the efforts of the Samitis in villages where the women are so organized, nearly every home has a garden full of vegetables and fruit trees, and the family has a little extra income from the sale of surplus produce. The handicap of having small holdings has been overcome by co-operative cultivation.

Tree Planting Campaign: When the Government was planning a tree-planting campaign, the Samitis, through their national president, offered full co-operation—their program had always included the growing of trees for shade, home beautification and for food. In the Government's campaign they were right in the forefront. One woman

planted 200 Jak trees, 100 bread fruit, 100 papaw, 200 lime, 200 pepper and 600 Imbul trees. Another Samiti member planted 5,000 trees.

Flood Relief: When floods ravaged a part of the countryside, the president asked the Samitis for help, and relief supplies of food and clothing poured in from groups all over the country.

Cultural Activities: Interest in Folk songs, Folk Dancing, Music, Drama and Art is cultivated. A resolution passed at a recent conference asked that research be done in these fields and that the information gathered be published with a view to preserving and fostering Sinhalese Culture and Sinhalese Decorative Art.

Family Planning: Another resolution urged that the Samiti should take steps to see that rural mothers get advice on family planning through clinics conducted by Medical Officers of Health.

Co-operative Activities: It was also resolved at this conference that the Co-operative Department be asked to establish co-operative activities in every Samiti.

Cottage Crafts: Believing that the Cottage Crafts of Ceylon, if developed on the right lines, will find a place in the world markets, the National Samiti Association not only provides technical advice through trained workers, but helps to improve old methods of production. The Association has also called on the Government to introduce higher duty on all imported handicrafts that compete with local products and to prohibit entirely the importation of basketware.

Exchange Programs

Ceylon has been active in the exchange of programs with Women's Institutes in other parts of the world. We find this in their Annual Report:

"Not every woman has the chance to see the world, but every member of the constituent societies can have the world brought to her doorstep by Exchange Programs. This was introduced into Ceylon recently by Mrs. F. B. De Mel at Padegoda, a village in the Kalutara district. The members of a Women's Institute in Iowa had sent them gay American clothes, recipes for country fare, their crafts and periodicals. The village hall was transformed into an American country home, and the members donned the gay garments of their American friends. Colourful posters prominently displayed showed the life of the American country women, and the dishes made from American recipes gave an idea of the food they ate in that part of the world.

"In a country home far away in Madrid, Iowa, a Ceylon scene was being constructed,