

WI today: Women Involved!

'Bad' press sparked good experience

Community Comments

By STEPHANIE ROBSON
of *The Observer*



A Canadian Press report this week says the Women's Institutes of Ontario, unable to attract younger women, are apparently on the way out as several branches with predominantly older women disband.

Many of the same sentiments were expressed in a column appearing in the spring edition of *Today's Country Woman*, a relatively new magazine featuring articles on women who are active in agriculture as well as farm safety and business.

The column is a new addition to the magazine and is called *Grunts — Views From A Male Chauvinist*, written by Jim Romahn, and although he is somewhat chauvinistic in his appraisal of the situation, his conclusions are quite accurate.

Both Mr. Romahn and the news service article point to failed attempts to attract younger women into their groups as the major cause of the downfall.

Said Marcie Johnston, of Listowel, Ont., provincial secretary of the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario: "Certain branches have not changed with the times to include modern programs like computers, women's pensions and wills. They don't keep current and haven't been progressive enough to invite new programs and members."

The rural-based organization was founded in 1897 by Agnes Hunter Hoodless, of Stoney Creek, Ont., with the purpose of raising levels of homemaking abilities, creating knowledgeable citizens and promoting good family living.

From what I can recall of my reading about Ms. Hoodless, she was quite liberated for her time and I'm sure would approve of modern changes being made to keep the organization she founded alive and viable.

Mrs. Johnston estimates the members of Institutes across the province range from 30 years to older than 90. And while the Charter of Rights and Freedoms prohibits discrimination based on age, it must be conceded that someone who is 90 is not as up-to-date on matters of family life and the needs of the modern rural woman as someone in their 30s.

There is room for both groups within the organization but concessions are necessary on both sides.

If the organization is to survive, senior members must open the door to their younger counterparts; it is the only way the organization will survive. But same younger members must not forget the past and the feelings and concerns of the aging members. They've built the organization to what it is today and provided the necessary foundation to continue that growth into tomorrow.

Being a newspaper columnist is not an easy job — but it sure can be an educational one!

Just ask Stephanie Robson, who writes a column entitled *Community Comments* as part of her duties as Family Editor at *The Observer* in Sarnia.

Until last summer, the Women's Institutes meant little to Mrs. Robson. Although she had edited numerous accounts of branch meetings sent in by WI members over the years, Mrs. Robson says she was not fully aware of the group's activities.

As so often happens, there was a bit of an image problem.

"I have to admit," Mrs. Robson told *Home & Country* recently, "that I had a somewhat distorted picture of the WI. From what I was reading, I thought everyone sat around drinking tea and socializing for most of the meeting. It was not until I attended a meeting that I realized just how much goes on when WI members assemble — that there are local, provincial, and sometimes national, achievements in the making."

The circumstances surrounding Mrs. Robson's decision to attend a WI meeting in her community are interesting, and both she and the Central Enniskillen WI in Lambton District learned much from the experience.

Communications between the Central Enniskillen branch and Mrs. Robson were not at their high point when the journalist published a column in the June 8, 1985 edition of *The Observer* in which she cited two press reports which stated the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario are dying out, due to their failure to attract younger members.

Specifically, Mrs. Robson referred to a CP wire story in which FWIO secretary Marcie Johnston as saying that *certain* branches "have not changed with the times to include modern programs like computers, women's pensions and wills."

"They don't keep current and haven't been progressive enough to invite new programs and members," Mrs. Johnston was quoted as saying.

The second press report referred to in Mrs. Robson's column was the "GRUNTS" column by Jim Romahn in the Spring 1985 issue of *Today's Country Woman*.

In the column (which features a male chauvinist pig seated before a typewriter), Mr. Romahn accused *some* Women's Institutes of acting "like sanctimonious stuffed blouses, reducing their chapters to know-it-all enclaves of critics sniping from the do-nothing sidelines. They busy themselves with tea and trivia, leaving their beleaguered brethren little choice but to seek solutions elsewhere."

Mr. Romahn suggested that young farm women should "join and rejuvenate" their Women's Institute "rather than balkanizing their institutional resources."

In her *Community Comments* column, Mrs. Robson also urged senior WI members to open their doors to their younger counterparts, saying, "it is the only way the organization will survive."

(A copy of her column appears on this page — and, by the way, don't blame Mrs. Robson for calling Mrs. Hunter Hoodless "Agnes" instead of "Adele." The CP story, from which Mrs. Robson was quoting, clearly stated the founder of WI was "Agnes" Hunter Hoodless.)

Anyway, the story might have ended there for readers of *The Observer* had it not been for Clara Powers, president of Lambton Centre District, who was quick to pick up her phone and invite Mrs. Robson to a WI meeting.

The result was the article, on the facing page, which appeared in the August 26, 1985 edition of *The Observer*. As you will soon discover, the experience of actually *watching* a branch in action greatly improved the journalist's knowledge and understanding of FWIO.

The branch was also wise enough to ask the journalist, who edits accounts of their meetings, for suggestions as to how the organization could improve its image locally.

"I told them to toot their own horn a little more — to let the public know about all the things they are doing that are relevant to society today," Mrs. Robson told *Home & Country*.