

# WI today: Women Involved!

## They showed this reporter!

BY STEPHANIE ROBSON  
The Observer

We're going to show you  
As well as we can  
How the world sees the women  
Who make up our clan  
Women's Institute members  
Are normal, you know,  
But the way the world sees us  
Is not always so.  
There's a terrible image  
We must put to rest  
That we're all nearing ninety  
And way past our best  
We're seen as the grandmas  
Who drink lots of tea  
And talk of the way  
That the world used to be.

OIL CITY — Written by a former Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario board director, the poem is called *We're Going To Show You* . . . and that's just what members of Central Enniskillen Women's Institute did to this reporter for daring to suggest WIs are "on the way out".

"We do have some older members but we're certainly not dying out," said Clara Powers, a member of Central Enniskillen branch and president of Lambton Centre District.

As district president, Mrs. Powers represents 11 WI branches in Lambton county; she is one of three district presidents in Lambton and each represents a comparable number of branches.

Of the 11 branches in her district, Mrs. Powers' home branch, Central Enniskillen covers one of the largest areas (a radius of 40 kilometres) and has a membership of approximately 28. The newest branch in the district is Sunny Brooke, based in the Alvinston area and chartered in 1983.

Mrs. Powers said the issue that has been made of WIs having difficulty in recruiting newer and younger members has "irritated" many in the organization.

"We do have members who are in Twilight Haven but we also have younger people; women whose families are to the point where they have the time to give to the Institute."



Proud to represent a group that stands "For Home and Country" are (from left) Christa Woods, Central Enniskillen president; Evelyn Freer, secretary-treasurer; and Clara Powers, Lambton Centre District president. (Photo courtesy of The Observer.)

The first Women's Institute in the world was organized at Stoney Creek, Ont., on Feb. 19, 1897 and throughout its 88-year-history, a primary emphasis has been placed on "family".

One of the objectives of WI is to "help women acquire sound and approved homemaking skills" while the handbook of Federated Women's Institute of Ontario states that each branch is responsible for establishing an "education program for the homemakers of the community." It continues: "Its enterprises should make the community a better place in which to live and to promote happy, wholesome social life."

In attending a meeting of the Central Enniskillen branch, you're surprised, however, to find the conversations and discussions do not focus on gossipy triviality but on the best way to assist chronic care patients at CEE Hospital, in Petrolia; on the fall 4-H program (many WI members are 4-H leaders); on how the Institute can be improved (the roll call of the day).

Evelyn Freer, secretary-treasurer of Central Enniskillen branch, explained that each meeting has a theme, chosen from a designated standing committee of the organization. These standing committees common to all Women's Institute, include: agriculture and Canadian industries, citizenship and world affairs, education and cultural activities, resolutions

and Tweedsmuir history (a project of WI designed to preserve the history of Canadian people, places, customs and activities and of the local branches.)

Based on the theme, it is then up to the committee in charge of the meeting to develop the program, Mrs. Freer said.

"The program is designed to meet the needs and interest of the particular branch and its membership," she said.

For a meeting on citizenship and world affairs, as an example, Birkhall branch plans to have as guest speaker a customs clerk while Moore Centre branch has made arrangements for a travelogue on China.

But what of the membership? Will Women's Institutes survive the 1980s and changing times?

Members of Central Enniskillen branch range in age from their 30s to 91. Among the younger members, the feeling is that the Institutes must recruit younger members; though they offer no suggestions of how to accomplish that.

Mrs. Powers says the solution lies with the younger people themselves.

"We can introduce the Institutes to them but that's all," Mrs. Powers said.

"They have to see for themselves the point of the Institutes and then set their priorities."