

From the "Grassroots"

An organization is only as progressive as the input received from its members. The annual reports from the Public Relations Officers contained many ideas for publicizing the meetings and the work of the Women's Institutes. They also contained suggestions for further action. This column is a summary of these annual reports and is, therefore, really written by the members.

Forms of Publicity

As well as sending media releases to newspapers, radio and television stations, Branches advertise meetings and special events in Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) newsletters, monthly township papers, local directories and store flyers. Some take advantage of the "upcoming events" columns in newspapers to announce meetings. They use posters on community and church bulletin boards and advertise news on cable or community television. Most members make use of the telephone, realizing that word of mouth is still the most effective way to publicize.

More emphasis needs to be placed on promoting the WI by arranging radio and television interviews. It is important that knowledgeable women are asked to represent the membership. WI can also be promoted by contacting the Lifestyles Editor of newspapers for interviews.

Branches and Districts have publicity booths at craft fairs, community days and plowing matches, as well as at mall displays and WI workshops. The FWIO display boards are well used at similar affairs, along with pamphlets provided by the provincial office.

Women's Institute information is placed in Welcome Wagon Baskets delivered to new people in communities. Many Branches have WI signs posted at the edges of their communities and outside their meeting halls to

advertise their meetings. Some fly the WI flag at their community hall or township office during WI week.

Another means of advertising that is becoming more common is the giving of *Home & Country* gift subscriptions to libraries, newspaper offices, hospitals, nursing homes and local politicians. Gift subscriptions are also given as gifts to guest speakers and as door prizes at workshops or craft sales. Giving WI articles, such as books, spoons, note paper, mugs and plates, as gifts continues to be a good promotional tool.

Branches have entered floats in parades. Members have fun working together and get to know each other. This activity publicizes the WI, and, in some cases, may win a prize!

One Public Relations Officer noted the importance of "showing the colours." For example, we identify certain items by their colour, green John Deere tractors or red stop signs. We can use the blue and gold colours of the Women's Institute in our clothes, in the decor of our meeting rooms, in our displays and banners and in our food. Relating colour to an organization is one way of identifying it easily.

How to Gain New Members and Keep Faithful Ones Interested

The WI needs to open meetings and workshops to all women in the community. This may be difficult if meetings are held in private homes, but often meetings take place in public halls where numbers are not a problem. Branches invite other Branches to meetings; they could invite other groups, such as OptiMrs and Rotary Clubs or local historical societies.

Some Branches hold a history night or a Tweedsmuir Tea for non-members and new neighbours. They use the opportunity to talk about Women's Institute and the Associated Country Women of the World. Remember, it is important to make guests feel welcome at these events; too much propaganda could discourage the listeners!

Make use of the many resources available in your community. Plan tours of local industries or institutions; speakers from local businesses or organizations can be most interesting. Communication with the local community is an important part of public relations. Presenting WI information to contacts from your community is one way of

publicizing the WI at the same time as arranging an interesting program.

Often neighbouring Branches forget about disbanded Branch members. Invite these people to meetings and give them copies of *Home & Country*. Former members might be interested in being "contributing members," if they cannot continue a Branch membership. Young mothers might be more likely to attend meetings if babysitting is made available. Often, morning coffee meetings are more convenient for young mothers than afternoon or evening meetings. Flexibility is an important asset to any Branch.

Flexibility in activities is just as important as flexibility in time. Fun nights - skits, humour, food, fellowship, silent auctions, card parties, cookie exchanges - are as important as educational meetings, parliamentary procedure and fund raising. Several reports mentioned having an information meeting using the 1994 video, "Challenges of a Changing World," which features former President Peggy Knapp. Make a video of your Branch activities and have fun promoting the WI at the same time.

Communication Among Levels

Some Public Relations Officers commented that provincial officers were not visible at local levels. How many Branches or Districts invite provincial officers from their area to meetings or to conduct workshops? Board Directors hold meetings for officers in their Subdivisions, but do Branches invite Board Directors to speak about what is happening at the provincial level?

Public relations is not simply the responsibility of the Public Relations Officer. The PRO does the formal presentation - the writing of reports, the organizing of displays or the arranging of interviews. However, each Women's Institute member publicizes the organization by what she says and how she acts. Each Branch, District and Area publicizes the WI by the programs and projects it offers. Are there any ideas in this column that you have not tried in your Branch? Do you have other proven activities that should be published? Let me know.

Mary Janes is the Public Relations Officer for the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario. She can be reached at 6868 Egremont Ed., RR 8, Watford ON N0M 2S0, (519)786-5511.

"Indebted to the Past"...continued from page 9

part of her research, she has explored numerous Tweedsmuir collections, taped over 100 hours of interviews with WI members and compiled boxes and boxes of information. She is using a "grass roots approach" to reflect the diversity of the organization. Dr. Ambrose has been a goodwill

ambassador for FWIO, presenting papers about the Women's Institute and its place in history.

Attendance at Convention '97 will be limited by the FWIC quota system. The Hamilton Convention Centre holds a maximum of 2100 people. Registration forms will be available from the provincial offices in February, 1996. These forms

may not be photocopied in order to fairly allot places to women from across Canada and around the world.

WI members attending A WI Centennial Celebration & FWIC Convention '97 will certainly take part in an historic and memorable event. It will be wonderful to see you there!