

# Grassroots Approach to Historical Research

By Janine Roelens-Grant

When I first met Linda Ambrose in 1986, she was working on her M.A. in History from the University of Waterloo. She was also expecting her first child. When our paths crossed again in 1992, she had two daughters and her Ph.D. in History from Waterloo. Now it takes a special kind of person to undertake a family and a post-graduate education at the same time. Indeed, those who have met Linda in her capacity as Researcher/Writer of the FWIO Centennial History Book have experienced first-hand her infectious enthusiasm and passion for her work.



Dr. Linda Ambrose is pictured above poring over research documents held at the Museum in Callander in the Parry Sound North District.

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Linda recently relayed a few interesting facts about the research so far:

- over 100 hours of taped interviews have been collected;
- well over 600 Branches replied to the questionnaire - that's enough to fill six bankers' boxes!;
- and, for the first time ever, a complete list of all the WI Branches that have ever existed in Ontario is being compiled - it contains over 2,000 Branches!!

“Many, many, many women, including Board members, Tweedsmuir Curators, District Officers and Branch members have co-operated with my requests,” she added. “[They have] rolled out the red carpet, given me bed and breakfast, read more old minute books than they care to remember, rushed off to get photocopies for me, and just generally kept my enthusiasm levels very high. I appreciate each and every one of them.”

In the past year Linda has undertaken an intense schedule of travel and research. “It has been very rewarding,” she said, “and has given me a wonderful re-education on the geography and local history of so many different parts of Ontario. I want to thank the FWIO for sponsoring my travel to these destinations. It has really been the experience of a lifetime to travel so extensively and research so intensively. This is not something which an independent researcher could ever do because it depended upon the efforts and enthusiasm of the Board, Area, District and Branch members.”

From the time she began her contract with the FWIO in January 1993, Linda systematically set out to research the history of a century of Women's Institutes activities in Ontario. After spending a year as a postdoctoral fellow in the History Department at the University of Guelph, her research is now complete. The following list outlines the scope of some of her activities to date:

- drafting a projected table of contents for the book;
- exploring and organizing the historical sources and photographs housed at the FWIO office;
- arranging for those records to go to the University of Guelph Archives for safekeeping;
- contacting Branches via the questionnaire sent out in February 1993;
- creating a database of Branch organization and disbandment for a proposed appendix to the book;
- researching the Ontario Government sessional papers and Reports of the Minister of Agriculture;
- exploring numerous Tweedsmuir Collections;
- examining records at the Provincial Archives in Toronto and the National Archives in Ottawa;
- consulting with rural historians;
- conducting interviews and local research throughout Ontario;
- and, of course, continued reading and notetaking from collected sources and incoming correspondence.

Now that the research is completed, Linda will take a much lower profile among the membership of the Women's Institutes; she will be preoccupied with the process of writing the manuscript. “I am grateful for the experience,” she said, “and will do my best to reflect the diversity of your organization and the grassroots approach in the book I will write for you.” Linda also reported that she will be doing this from her new home in Sudbury, where she and her family have recently moved from Waterloo.

Linda's report to the August Board confirmed that she had accepted a position in the History Department at Laurentian University as Assistant Professor. “This is a tenure track job,” she explained, “meaning that rather than scooting around from one contract job to the next, I will be here at Laurentian for many years to come. I will be teaching Canadian History, Women's History and Ontario History. So as you can see, this is a job which brings my research interests together very nicely.”

And when she's not engrossed in her historical research Linda spends her spare time exploring the lakes and hiking trails in and around Sudbury, knitting sweaters for her girls, and planning next year's organic garden with her husband, Rob.

Any Women's Institute member wanting to contact Dr. Linda Ambrose can reach her at the History Department, c/o Laurentian University, Ramsey Lake Rd., Sudbury, Ontario, P3E 2C6, (705)675-1151, ext 4190.