

Profile:

Noblitt says friendships are the binding force of the WI

By Janine Roelens-Grant

Bernice Noblitt grew up in Waskatenau, Alberta, sixty miles from Edmonton. Her parents moved to Alberta in 1909, shortly after it became a province. Bernice explained that her mother was very interested in the Women's Institute when it was formed a few years later because there just weren't any other organizations out there for women.

"There were five girls in my family," she said, "and we would take turns going to the meetings with mother. The Women's Institute was the only source of information for pioneer women. Mother was able to get literature on all kinds of household needs - cooking, preserving, curing meats. She even got seedlings one year to plant as windbreaks."

"I remember there was a knitting machine; one knitting machine for the community that was passed around. Mother would knit big heavy stockings and in the winter she would put feet on them." And she added, "They were coarse as all get out!"

"All through my life the Women's Institute was an accepted fact of life," proclaimed Bernice; although she didn't actually join until after she married and moved to Ontario. Her husband, Harvey, was a Mining Engineer and Metallurgist and they lived in mining camps for the first four years of their marriage. But after they settled in Combermere, south of Barry's Bay, Bernice joined her first WI Branch.

When asked about recollections of her first Women's Institute meeting, she remembered travelling over a rickety, old bridge over the Madawaska River en route to the meeting, and then suggesting that earning funds towards its repair would be a worthwhile WI project.

Today, Bernice lives in Gloucester, a bedroom community of Ottawa. She said

that the WI Branch she belonged to for many years in this area was the only organization that helped form any semblance of a community. The feeling of community was lost, she said, when the Branch disbanded. But Bernice remains an active member of the nearby Leitrim WI.

When Bernice states that the WI has been her life, she means it. She has been intensely involved at all levels of the Women's Institute. Some of the positions she has held include: Branch and District President; Board Director for the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario (FWIO); President of FWIO; President of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada (FWIC); and, council member of the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW).

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Bernice recalls that at the time she was elected to the FWIO Board, Eastern Ontario lacked a real interest in matters provincial. She worked hard to enthuse Branches, she said, but it was when she became FWIO President that Women's Institutes in Eastern Ontario took up a "renewed interest." "I think I can take credit for that," she stated.

For the Year of the Child, the FWIC felt that it was a good idea to document all of the laws as they pertain to children. It involved two years of research and the result was a document an inch thick. "It was a monumental task," commented Bernice. "I feel this is one of my really big contributions to the WI."



Bernice Noblitt

As a model of her "action through education" philosophy that she espouses, Bernice has prepared and presented a number of briefs to the Federal Government, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Royal Commissions.

Bernice described her experiences at the FWIC level as broadening. "Doors opened all around me because of the position I held," she said. "And the travel," she added, "was a real education in itself."

Her community involvement and work with the Women's Institute has brought her a number of honours over the years: Life Memberships at the Branch, District, provincial, national and world levels; the establishment of the Bernice B. Noblitt Award, given annually to the winner of a craft, painting and creative writing contest; the Queen's Medal in 1977; and, the Order of Ontario in 1988.

Bernice has great faith in the future of the Women's Institute. Throughout its history, she explained, the Women's Institute has served when it was needed; the list of the FWIO resolutions attest to this fact. "It's objectives," she concluded, "are applicable at any time in history; we are homemakers, and there will always be homemakers."

"But when all is said and done," she said, "the greatest value of the Women's Institutes at any level is the friendships that one makes. I think that is its binding force."