

TWEEDSMUIR HISTORY

Here is the official response on who started the WI

Dear editor:

I have been following with interest the letters you have printed concerning the Women's Institute since Jennifer Walker's article 'Women's Institute makes a commitment to communities' on December 12, 1995.

Shirely Orr (Jan. 2, 1996) is correct in her statement that the Women's Institute was not established primarily as a social organization. It started as an educational forum for rural women, to help them become better informed about the latest scientific developments concerning the care of their families and homes. It still is an organization for personal growth and community action. The movement spread very quickly in the early years because it provided a social outing as well, in a day when women had neither the transportation nor the numerous activities to attend that now exist.

It is true that older members have much to offer the Women's Institute. Branches that have a mix of older and younger women tend to be more active in the daily life of the community and tend to provide more fun and fellowship as well as educational activities. Harts Rigg's branch in Madoc (Denelda Foley, Jan. 16, 1996) has all the advantages of such a mix. With the launch of the Safe and Healthy Communities focus last year, it is to be hoped that members will share their expertise and knowledge with other community groups to make a positive difference in today's world.

The Jan. 23 letter from Beverley McCreary states that Erland Lee, not Adelaide Hoodless, was the founder of the Women's Institute. The Women's Institute credits Erland Lee and Adelaide Hunter Hoodless as the founders, or co-founders, of the WI movement. Cheryl Macdonald, in her biography *Adelaide Hoodless: Domestic Crusader* (Dundurn Press, 1984) states that Erland Lee, president of the Farmers' Institute of South Wentworth, heard Hoodless speak about women and education in the area of domestic sciences at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph. Impressed by her progressive ideas, he invited her to speak to Ladies' Night at the Farmers' Institute in February, 1897.

She was so well received that she was invited back to speak the following week, to a crowd of 101 women and one man. At this second meeting, on Feb. 19, she proposed the formation of a "women's department of domestic economy" in affiliation with the Farmers' Institute. This organization became known as the Women's Institute of Saltfleet. Adelaide Hoodless was made honorary president.

Lee's wife, Janet, was one of the first Directors of the new organization. She wrote the original WI constitution and by-laws on her dining room table. This table is one of the artifacts at the Erland Lee (Museum) Home at Stoney Creek, which is owned and maintained by the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario. Lee went on to help the WI obtain government cooperation, support and affiliation with the Department of Agriculture, the same as the Farmers' Institute.

Adelaide Hoodless became an activist after the death of her son who died from drinking impure milk. She was instrumental in the formation of National Council of Women, the Young Women's Christian Association and the Victorian Order of Nurses. It was largely through her efforts that McDonald Institute at the University of Guelph and the School of Household Science at McDonald College at Ste Anne de Bellevue, Quebec, received their initial funding.

The Federated Women's Institutes of Canada owns and operates the Adelaide Hunter Hoodless Homestead, now a museum, but originally the home where she lived from her birth in 1857 to her marriage in 1881. Of interest as well is the fact that the Women's Institute is open to all people over the age of 16. Although not many men are members, men play an active part in many Women's Institute activities. In order to recognize the important role they play, several years ago the Erland Lee Award was established. Two awards are presented every triennium to male Ontario residents who give of their talents to promote the aims and objectives of the Women's Institute and who encourage the progress of the WI as a modern organization for women.

As the Women's Institute approaches the centennial of the formation of the first branch in 1897, a great deal of attention is being paid to our past history, to our accomplishments and to our future direction. As we look to the future we also pay tribute to our founders, Adelaide Hoodless and Erland Lee.

Mary Janes, Public Relations, Marg Harris, FWIO President

Burnstown Women's Institute

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