

The Institute

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Canadian-born group now all around the world

BY KATE BARLOW
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STONEY CREEK — Ethel McIntosh doesn't rely on written histories about the early days of the Women's Institute.

All she has to do is cast her mind — still crystal clear at 93 — back to her teenage years in Saltfleet and recollections of Erland and Janet Lee.

The Lees, along with Hamiltonian Adelaide Hoodless, founded the world's largest rural women's movement.

This year, the Women's Institute, fondly known as the Institute or the WI, celebrates its 100th anniversary with six million members in more than 80 countries.

McIntosh can recall tobogganing with the Lees' children.

As a teenager, she was accompanied home after dark from the radial railway stop by Erland Lee who lived at the crest of the escarpment in what is now the Erland Lee (Museum) Home.

"He was a great man," she says.

Her grandmother was a charter member of the institute and quite likely at the first meeting in Squires Hall on King Street East on that cold February night in 1897.

To ensure a good turnout, the Lees drove their horse-drawn cutter up and down muddy Saltfleet roads, persuading women to come and hear Hoodless speak on the need for domestic science education for rural women.

Her impassioned speech was born of tragedy.

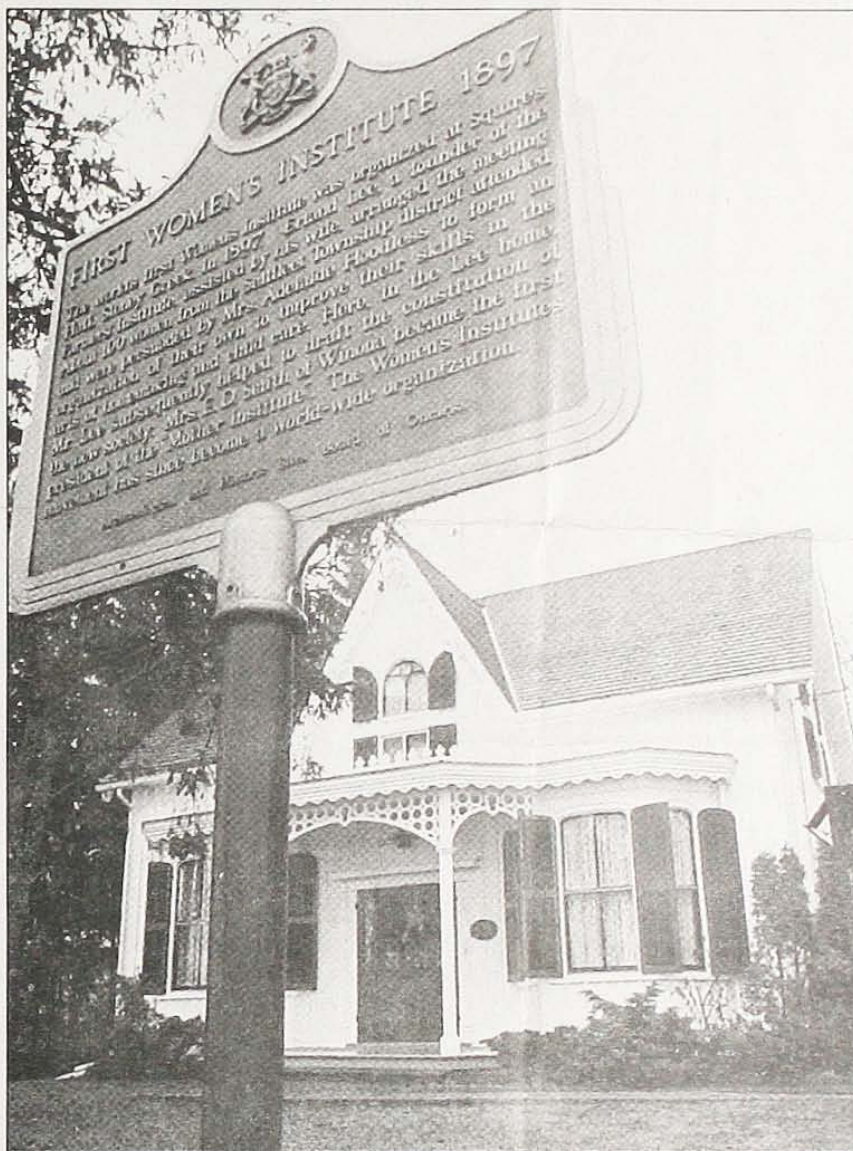
Eight years earlier, her 14-month-old son had died from drinking impure milk. The grief-stricken young mother was convinced that "women's work, homecraft and mothercraft, is much more important than men's since it deals with the home and the care of the loved ones who dwell therein."

Exactly 101 women, plus Erland Lee, attended that first meeting. Six days later, on Feb. 25, his wife wrote by hand the constitution and bylaws of the Women's Institute of Saltfleet while seated at the walnut dining table in her Ridge Road home.

McIntosh can't remember when she followed her mother and grandmother's example and joined the first Women's Institute, now known as the Stoney Creek Charter Women's Institute.

"It's still important," she says.

The average age of current institute members in Canada is 72, but that doesn't mean there isn't still a strong



Southam photo

The home of Women's Institute founders Erland and Janet Lee is now a museum.

commitment to families' well being, says a member who bucks the age trend.

Wendy MacDougal is 39 and a member of the Carluke branch.

Like McIntosh, her grandmother and mother were members, but MacDougal became involved while pursuing her master's degree in education at Brock University.

She decided to study the impact of friendship on women's health and the institute seemed a perfect model.

"They're a pretty incredible bunch of ladies. They've accomplished so much and continue to concern themselves with issues," she says.

She found that members from the

early years believe they possess the internal resources to learn anything they need.

"That they can go out, figure it out and come back and share it with each other," says MacDougal.

"This concept of sharing, this concept of community is what I think makes the impact on their health."

For some years, women's institute branches throughout the province funded pre-natal care.

"And they raised that money through quilting bees, knitting bees," she said. "They've always been a group that's very practical."

That still holds true today, says MacDougal. Although members tend to be

elderly, there is still a commitment to family issues such as drug abuse or pornography on the Internet.

About two years ago, the institute sent a resolution to the minister of education calling for reintroduction of domestic science in schools for both sexes.

Institute statistics indicate the province's 15,000 members logged three-quarters of a million volunteer hours in 1995. And through the national organization each branch is allied with the Associated Country Women of the World, representing more than 376 country women's clubs and societies in 64 countries.

The WI also has input to the United Nations through this organization.

Edna Ward of Jerseyville is area president of about 85 branches in the Hamilton Convention Area, which includes Haldimand-Norfolk and Brant.

One of the institute's most pressing problems, she said, is getting the message to women about its accomplishments and what it has to offer.

It's especially important to get the message to young women, says Ward. "We're not good at blowing our own trumpet. People think we're a tea and cake institute and we're not."

Recently it presented a brief to the government about the effects on rural communities of closing small hospitals and cutting ambulance services.

To take the organization into the next millennium, each branch will work to help create safer and healthier communities, either through a local project or by lobbying governments on important issues.

The facts

The Women's Institutes of Ontario were instrumental in getting:

- Pasteurization of milk.
- Bread wrapped.
- White lines painted down the centre of provincial highways.
- Stop signs at railway crossings.
- Legal marriage age raised to 16 years with parent's consent.
- Mandatory traffic halts when school buses are stopped.
- Breathalyser and blood tests for motorists.
- Sex education in schools.
- Poison containers clearly marked.
- Banning the sale of mineral-based detergents.