

Grey County Archives celebrates first anniversary

Members of several community groups - especially Women's Institutes - were on hand Friday, July 6, to help celebrate the first anniversary of the Grey County Archives.

The Archives is a success story, with untold hours of work by community volunteers (more than 1,240 hours logged to help get the Archives up and running), and contributions by many individuals, groups and communities.

The Archives, in its temporary quarters in the former Glenelg municipal building, has approximately two-and-a-half tonnes of material which includes the records from 19 municipalities, 39 branches of Women's Institutes, and 48 private collections.

One of the highlights is the original manuscript of Richard Rorke's *Forty Years in the Forest*.

Hundreds of visitors from across Canada and around the world have visited the Archives, either in person or through internet inquiries.

The highly successful Women's Institute exhibit attracted more than 100 visitors alone.

The Archives has also provided material for academic researchers and people tracing their family history.

Although the Archives celebrates the rich and wonderful history of Grey County, it also provides meeting space for many community groups and serves as a host centre for a Community Access Program computer.

Among the dignitaries on hand to celebrate the occasion were Delton Becker, mayor of West Grey; Rodger Renton from the Heritage Alliance, an umbrella organization which worked on getting the Archives going; Barry Randall from Owen Sound Tourism, Bob Waind, Art Harvey and Donelda Hastie of the Grey County Women's Institute.

Heritage partners of the Archives are the Women's Institute, The Grey County Heritage Alliance, The Bruce



SCN Kerr photo

Piece of cake

Delton Becker, mayor of West Grey, presents volunteer Korleen Halbert with the first piece of cake at the first anniversary celebration of the Grey County Archives.

Grey Branch of the Ontario Genealogical Society, and the Grey County Historical Society.

The Archives will form a key part of the new Heritage

Centre to be built on the More property in Georgian Bluffs near Owen Sound. The centre is expected to become a major attraction for visitors.

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Women's Institute logs 104 years working for community

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COUNTY VOICES

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ception desk is apt to be a WI member. So is the group catering that rural funeral.

If community commitment is what you're looking for, these folks have been ahead of the pack for most of their lives.

But this mainstay of rural family life has changed since our grandmothers' day.

Back when they began 104 years ago, Women's Institute meetings were pretty much the only place outside of church where rural women could escape the isolation of farm life and educate each other about family health and current events.

These were all-in-one sup-

port and political forums, steeped in tea and home-baked cookies.

Their emphasis today on women's health and family information is as strong as ever. But there are fewer to hear — and to pass on — the message.

Cars have made physical isolation less of a problem, public information can be found at the click of a computer mouse and mothers racing home from work to ferry the young ones from hockey practice to music lessons aren't likely to attend a mid-week afternoon meeting with friends.

The London area has 70 Women's Institute groups totalling 1,114 members. The numbers were "probably double that" when Fran Hyatt first joined the group 28 years ago.

Hyatt is head of the Mt. Brydges branch and president of the London and Area WI, which includes Middlesex County and a sizable chunk of

the surrounding counties.

Their good works are prodigious — from April 2000 to April 2001, they logged 68,114 hours of volunteer time, up 8,000 from the year before.

"Women needed to be educated to make their homes and families educated and healthier."

Member Marg Eberle

They drive people to appointments, raise money to equip local hospitals and build wells in developing countries, run fitness programs for seniors and deliver meals to shut-ins.

They run day-long health and education sessions for women in their communities.

Women's Institutes thought globally and acted locally before environmental groups appropriated that phrase for

themselves.

"They're a wonderfully dedicated group of women," Hyatt says.

But fewer. And older.

Most members are 60-plus, Hyatt says. "I'm probably the second-youngest member in the branch and I'm no young chicken."

Although the district saw 29 new members join the ranks last year, they lost more than they gained.

So are these groups headed the way of the quilting bee and wringer washer?

"I think only time can tell that," she says.

Marg Eberle, of Highgate in Chatham-Kent, is more optimistic. Her branch gained four new members this year.

"The original goal was that women needed to be educated to make their homes and families educated and healthier and all that good stuff. And that's what we're still doing today," says Eberle, a director

for the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada and a former president of the provincial body.

"We're still basically an educational organization," she says.

"Part of our job (to entice new members) is to show what we have done and show that we are relevant."

She says it's a struggle to get members just to record their volunteer hours because they just don't want to boast.

"They don't advertise themselves. We're the best-kept secret in the world."

Without a lot of fanfare, these women are making a difference to each other and their communities.

When an organization is crucial to rural life is struggling to find members and support, it's no time for misplaced modesty.

Women's Institutes have more than earned the right to blow their own horns.