

# Ontario women's efforts recognized

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The women's institute movement, which started in Ontario in 1897, has blossomed into a world-wide organization today due to the work and commitment of women.

June is women's institute month in Ontario - a time to reflect on the history of the movement and the role it continues to play in the St. Thomas area.

The first women's institute was formed in the Stoney Creek, Ont. area by Erland Lee and his wife Janet, after Mr. Lee heard Adelaide Hoodless, of St. George, Ont., speak.

Mrs. Hoodless' infant son had died as a result of drinking unpasteurized milk and she began a one-woman campaign for safer homes. She began in the Hamilton, Ont. area.

"Mrs. Hoodless was considered a great speaker," said Betty Van Patter, public relations officer for the East Elgin District Women's Institutes. "It was she who had the spark in her speeches to motivate other women to form this organization to promote better homes and a better country."

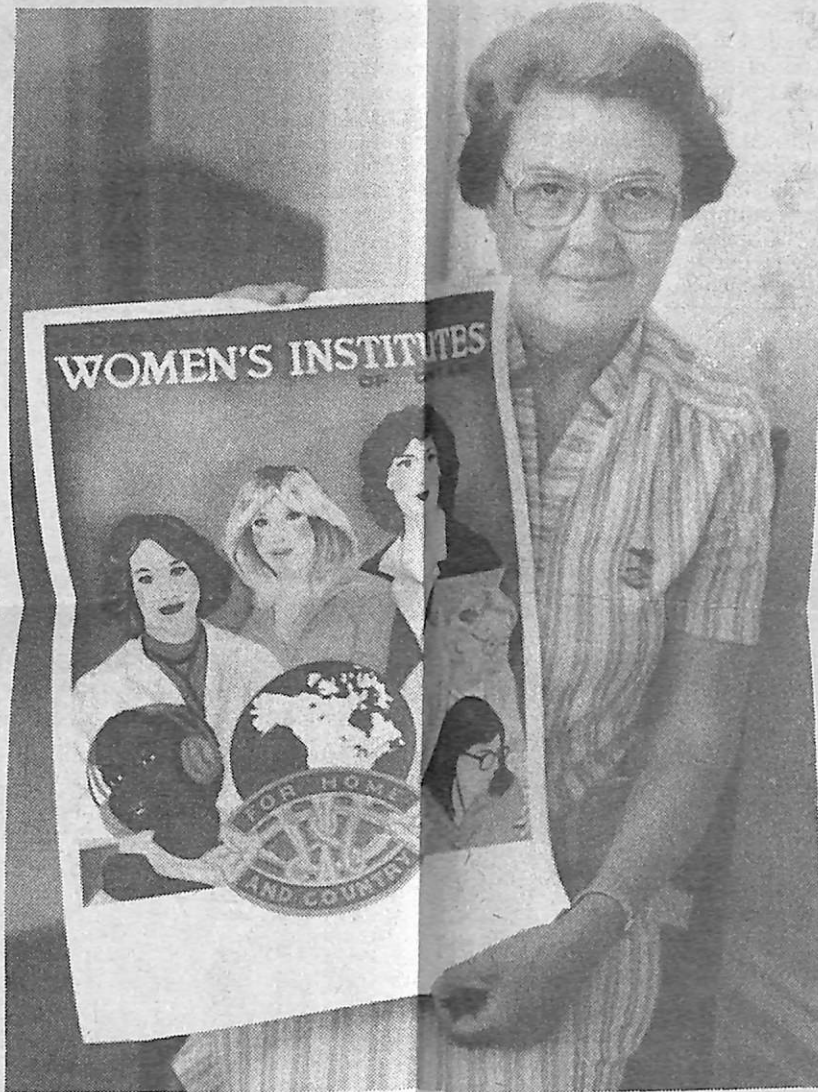
Mrs. Hoodless' crusade for the domestic sciences was a life-long one which she was extremely committed to.

"Erland felt there was a need for a women's organization after hearing Mrs. Hoodless speak and he and his wife, Janet travelled the countryside in the Saltfleet Township area encouraging women to attend a meeting. Those who attended eventually formed the first women's institute," said Mrs. Van Patter.

The Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario (FWIO) now owns the Lee home which is now a museum.

Ontario is divided into districts which are comprised of various branches. There are currently 22 active branches in Elgin County with over 400 members.

Elgin County is divided into two districts - Elgin East, with nine branches, and Elgin West, with 13



**PROMOTES WOMEN** - Betty Van Patter, public relations officer for Elgin East District Women's Institute, holds the latest poster for women's institutes in Ontario which promotes the organization. The movement started in Ontario in 1897 has since grown into a worldwide organization. June is women's institute month in Ontario.

(T-J Photo)

branches. St. Thomas serves as the cut-off between the two.

Mrs. Van Patter, who has been a in-

stitute member for over 35 years, said the programming has changed over the years to keep up with the times.

"We still focus on agriculture, Canadian industries, citizenship and legislation, education and cultural affairs, family and consumer affairs and international affairs, but the programs have all been updated," she said.

Despite the many changes over the years, the objectives have always stayed the same. They are to assist and encourage women to become more knowledgeable and responsible citizens, to promote good family life skills, to promote leadership, and to identify and resolve needs in the community.

In keeping with the times, women's institutes in this area have emphasized the need for waste management and recycling and are now extending that focus to include women and the environment. Another focus is rural childcare.

Members spend countless volunteer hours, leading 4H clubs, working on county farm safety associations, working with rural fairs and agriculture in the classroom.

"People have this image of a group of women sitting around sipping tea all afternoon. Now there's nothing wrong with that, but what they don't realize is that we are usually talking about current affairs and the needs within our own community," said Mrs. Van Patter.

She admits the number of women actively involved with women's institutes has dropped over the years as more women enter the workforce.

"I understand by the time a woman finishes work, doing her housework, making supper and taking care of the children, she may not feel like attending a meeting. So if we're going to get women to come to these meetings, the programming has to be really good," she said.

The majority of women involved in the women's institute organization are between the ages of 50 and 70 and most don't work outside the home.

Women's institutes in Ontario have donated over \$800,000 in the past year to a number of different causes - quite an accomplishment, considering the organization is not a money-making one.

Each year, the branches in Elgin County present a scholarship award to a graduating high school student. This year's recipient is Stephanie Jenkins, 18, of Belmont. She will be presented with her award at the annual strawberry social to be held June 14 at the Elgin County Pioneer Museum.

A display on Women's Institutes can be seen at the St. Thomas Public Library throughout the month of June.