

Back to the Basics

Women's Institute placing more emphasis on life skills training

by BILL CODD

Cambridge District Reporter

The Women's Institute movement Canada is dedicated to the education of rural women in homemaking and family life skills.

And that dedication has been renewed with a new teaching program that will get under way within the organization this coming fall and winter.

Maxine Innes Halborough, one of two leadership workshop organizers under the new program, says two courses will be offered during the winter months — bread baking, and landscaping a home.

surer.

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As with earlier educational workshops — then organized through the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food — the new workshops, sponsored by the institute, will help rural women to become more skilled in the support roles they play on the farm.

Manuals are currently in production for the courses, she said, and leadership workshops should begin in September to prepare local instructors, who

will conduct the actual member workshops.

"It's a two-year pilot project, and unlike the earlier courses when OMAF paid for the material, there will be a \$3 charge per course for materials."

The fee will cover the cost of producing the manual, as well as incidental supplies consumed in the instruction.

Geraldine Campbell of Ridgetown, public relations coordinator for the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario, the provincial umbrella organization, said when OMAF stopped organizing the old courses, the institute ended up dropping all but the organizational courses — for things like how to run a successful meeting, or how to be a good treasurer. "We've always been dedicated to teaching women life skills. It's just that we got away from the grass roots subjects."

The pilot project is to determine how well the membership takes to the idea of paying for a course, she said. The pilot will also start the process of producing formal course material for future.

"Our goal is to not just offer one or two courses each year, like we did in the past," said Campbell. "What we want to be able to do is ask the women in a group what course they would like to have, and to supply that course."

The new course material — similar to the old OMAF material — is being prepared by former OMAF home economists, Maxine Innes Halborough of Mount Forest, and Barb Klages of Hanover.

The courses at the local group



level will be based on a one-day workshop on each subject, although some groups could opt to teach over two or three evenings.

Campbell said the courses, which are open to anyone, not only W.I. members, are designed to also attract non-members into joining.

"But there's no pressure on anyone to join.

"In fact, we could even offer to train leaders from other organizations to teach their own

groups. Our main objective is to teach the life skills.

"If we gain members, that's great as well."

Educational support isn't the only area of help offered by the Women's Institute.

Campbell said the Canadian organization is in the midst of compiling a survey of rural child care needs for all areas of the country.

"They've conducted surveys in individual provinces before," she said, "but this is the first time the whole country has been surveyed."

When completed, Campbell said some local groups could dedicate themselves to lobbying other local organizations to provide child care services. Other institutes could actually conduct a program, themselves.

The motivation behind the child care thrust is a report by OMAF Rural Organization Specialist Marlene Werry from Durham West.

"In the 10 years from 1977 to 1986," said Werry, "80 children under the age of 15 were killed in Ontario farm accidents.

"Thirty-nine were under the age of five.

"Why? Because a farmer's workplace is not a safe playground for children.

In 1987, Barbara Evans and Corine Croxall, members of the Bethesda-Reach Women's Institute in Durham West, began researching child care needs

among local farm families. And the survey showed that there was a need.

The program was launched early in 1989.

"The Women's Institute places emphasis on marketing the service, and on the concept of on-farm child care," said Werry. "Some farm families still believe accidents 'can't happen to us.'"

"With increasing mechanization and stress levels, the farm is not a safe playground for children."

Campbell said about a dozen institute-sponsored child care programs are currently in operation around the province, and the survey could result in others being started.

Other courses of action could be to assist other groups in organizing child care programs, or in setting up drop-in centres, such as one recently started in Waterloo County, north of Cambridge.

A report on the national survey is to be out shortly.

From its fledgling beginnings in Stoney Creek, a Hamilton suburb, in 1897, the Women's Institute has grown to include some 20,000 women in Ontario, and 43,000 throughout Canada.

Anyone wanting more information should contact their local office of the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food.