

# Where it all began

## Museum site birthplace of Women's Institute

by BILL CODD

**H**AMILTON — One of the best-kept historical secrets in Ontario is a pristinely restored 200-year-old farm house-cum-museum just east of Hamilton — with a spectacular view overlooking the Niagara Escarpment and the entire western end of Lake Ontario.

It's the birthplace of the 93-year-old worldwide Women's Institute movement — that bastion of rural education, dedicated to teaching farm women the life skills needed to run a rural household.

The museum is well worth a visit — and it's within spitting distance of the main roads leading to Niagara Falls. It's open almost every day of the year. And admission is free, although there is a donation box near the entrance.

The beautifully restored estate is the farm home of Erland and Janet Lee, co-founders of the Women's Institute movement back in 1897. And it was on the dining room table in the home that Mrs. Lee penned the institute's constitution.

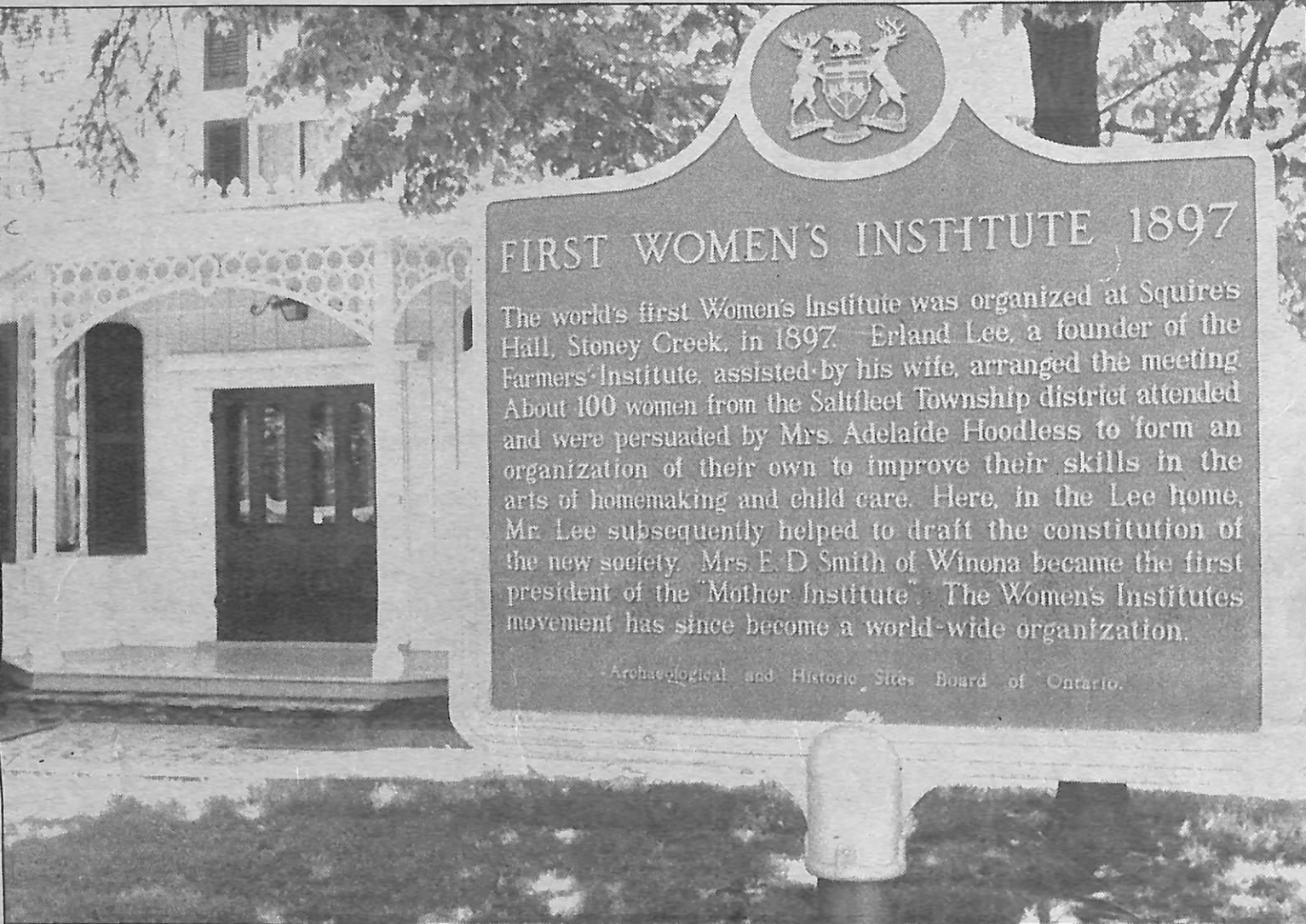
The institute's story — and that of Erland and Janet Lee — is also the story of basic social change in rural Canada — and around the world as chapters were formed abroad.

The Lee's ancestors — United Empire Loyalists — had migrated from Maryland to this rural district, now less than three miles east of the Hamilton city limits, back in 1792. And by the time the Lee family finally sold the homestead and barns to the provincial Women's Institute organization in 1972, some six generations of Lees had lived there.

Erland Lee — part of the fourth generation — was a school teacher with enough other careers on the go to fill all of the free time of lesser individuals, without searching for new organizations to start from scratch.

Born in 1864, he received a certificate in agriculture from the then Agriculture and Arts Association of Ontario. He was a charter member of the newly-formed Farmers' Institute and served as secretary of that organization for some 19 years.

He was also secretary-treasurer of the local Saltfleet



Between 3,000 and 4,000 people a year discover the Erland Lee Museum overlooking the Niagara Escarpment just east of Hamilton. The home is the birthplace of the world-wide Women's Insti-

tute movement. And it was on the home's dining room table that the institute's bylaws and constitution were written.

Staff photo by Bill Codd

Township Agricultural Society, and served as Saltfleet Township clerk for 20 years.

Erland was a publicly-spirited individual and prominent in the community. He was also a progressively-minded farmer, overseeing a mixed farming operation with purebred Jersey cattle. He also made dairy butter, processed and marketed maple syrup, and grew and sold fruit.

**H**e married Janet, who was also a teacher, and who was chosen by the city of Hamilton to take a special course in Toronto so she could help establish a kindergarten system in Hamilton's schools.

In the autumn of 1896, Erland attended a meeting of the Farmers' Experimental Union at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph, and listened to an address by local social activist, Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless of Hamilton. And it was the subject of that address that inspired Erland to form a new educational organization for women, patterned somewhat after the male-oriented Farmers' Institute.

Mrs. Hoodless had had a 14-month-old baby son die from contaminated milk. And when the comment was made that farmers knew more about farming and raising crops, than farm women knew about running a household and raising a family, Mrs. Hoodless dedicated herself to change all that.

She lobbied for social change and life skills education wherever she could.

With her words fresh in his mind, Erland invited Mrs. Hoodless to speak at Ladies' Night at the Saltfleet Farmers' Institute. And the following week Erland and Janet were travelling the backroads of the township by horse and buggy, encouraging as many women as possible to attend a meeting at Squires' Hall in Stoney Creek.

There were 101 women at that meeting on a cold, crisp Feb. 19, 1897. And the Women's Institute movement was born.

Throughout the years, the original thrust of the organization has remained — to educate rural women in home and family skills. And a history of that quest is documented at the mu-

seum.

Hilda Beachin, public relations co-ordinator for the committee that oversees operation of the museum, says some 3,000 to 4,000 visitors — mostly institute women on a pilgrimage to the organization's roots, tour the facility each year. And a major portion come from foreign countries.

"It seems most of them come to Canada to visit the museum, and end up bringing local members who haven't bothered to come, themselves."

**U**nfortunately, she says, the museum remains largely unknown to those outside the organization.

"We've never really advertised it in the past," says Beachin. "Our members are all aware of it. And it's our members that mostly are the ones that come."

But that may be changing.

"There's a move at the provincial level that the museum start opening Sundays, and for more advertising. We're planning some new brochures, and we'll be attempting to make people more aware of the mu-

seum's location."

Beachin said that the more people who can be drawn to the museum and can be shown what the Women's Institute movement is all about, the more people who could be drawn to join one of the hundreds of local groups across Canada.

In the last year, she says, the museum board has built a large parking lot and new washrooms behind the home. And picnic tables were added in a park-like setting nearby.

"It's a great place to come and have a picnic. Or to just come in and look around," said Beachin.

The Erland Lee Museum is located on Ridge Road, on the edge of the Niagara Escarpment overlooking the town of Stoney Creek just east of Hamilton. It is less than three miles from the Queen Elizabeth Way and Highway 8, below the escarpment, and from Highway 20 to the west and south.

The home is located at the top of the Dewitt Road mountain access road, or about three miles east of Highway 20.