



Helen Sutherland thanks her lucky stars she took her husband's suggestion that she join the Women's Institute. Now president of the Nelson branch of the Halton District Women's Institute, she describes these rural

women she has associated with for the past 10 years as friendly and flexible.

(Photo by Peter McCusker)

# 'City gal' at home with rural roots of Women's Institute

By BARB JOY

When her husband suggested she join the Women's Institute, Helen Sutherland was ready to "do something different." Her 10-year association with the friendly, "special type" of women has given her lasting enjoyment.

Sutherland is now president — and one of two members from Oakville — of the Nelson branch of the Halton Region Women's Institute, comprising 12 branches in all. Afternoon monthly meetings, held in members' homes, feature speakers and demonstrations. A novel roll call at the beginning of the meetings calls on its 31 members to participate in various ways. In September, for instance, they were asked to state their beefs; in March, the intriguing subject was: "If you were in business for yourself, would you hire yourself?" Other meetings had them showing and discussing an antique item or a craft from another country.

Although the Women's Institute is mainly a rural group and Sutherland is a self-described "city gal," she doesn't feel at all out of place, she said. She can comfortably applaud the "talented women" who crochet, knit, make jams and jellies. In quilt-making, she even plies a needle as best she can.

## SUCCESSFUL LOBBIES

But there's much more to the Women's Institute than crafts and domesticity. From the branches to the districts and up to the provincial level go resolutions that ultimately find their way to government desks. The Women's Institutes have involved themselves in many issues. For example, they opposed Sunday shopping, spoke up for standardization of seat belts and for more wholesome entertainment on evening television. They petitioned the government to take a second look at removing the small rural post offices that, over the years, had become the only meeting places of the country folk. They even got sliced bread on the shelves of grocery stores.

They succeeded in removing the occupation of "widow" removed from electoral polls and replaced with "homemaker" to protect widows from harassment. And they convinced officials the Zimmerman bridge in North Burlington should be replaced to save those living in the area the long, circuitous route to the main road.

Sutherland's contractor husband, Donald, first discovered the Women's Institute when



restoring the front porch of the Erland Lee Museum in Stoney Creek that houses the artifacts and documents of the organization. He knew his wife would fit in well with these down-to-earth women who were members of a movement founded by a fearless, concerned and well-read lady, Adelaide Hunter Hoodless. The death of her fourth child from drinking impure milk, and the consequent discovery that other children had suffered the same fate, set Hoodless on a campaign against the distribution of contaminated milk in Hamilton.

## DOMESTIC STUDIES

This ultimately led to the introduction of Domestic Science courses for Hamilton school-girls to teach them the best methods of running a home. As well, she was later active in the establishment of the Macdonald Institute at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph and Macdonald College in Ste. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec, for the teaching of domestic science. In 1897, as an officer of the National Council of Women, Hoodless helped Lady Aberdeen, wife of the Governor-General, found the Victorian Order of Nurses.

One February night in 1897, this distinguished lady spoke at the Ladies' Night of the Saltfleet Township Farmers' Institute at the invitation of its secretary, Erland Lee. In public speeches, she had taken male farmers to task for failing farm women and their children in particular areas of life. While addressing an almost all-male agricultural conference in Guelph, Hoodless had charged that men fed their pigs and cattle more scientifically than they fed their families.

And so it was that at the Saltfleet meeting she suggested that, if men could create an organization to help them raise cattle and pigs and grow better crops of hay, perhaps women should have one to help them with their work. To the rural women at the meeting who had little opportunity to socialize, this idea was en-

thusiastically embraced. An association was formed with a very long name and with Hoodless as honorary president.

The Institute's goals included increasing women's knowledge about healthy foods, clothing, fuels and "more scientific care and training of children with a view to raising the general standard of the health and morals of our people."

## HEALTH CONCERNS

Besides the relatively recent accomplishments cited above, the Institute's history has been almost top-heavy with them. In its earlier years, it was responsible for getting health inspections of children into public schools which later led to provincial government funding of public health services in schools. Many public libraries were set up by the Women's Institute in the community. War years saw members raising over \$5 million to alleviate the suffering of fighting men overseas, including financing a hospital ship in World War I and paying for field kitchens and a recreation room at Camp Borden in World War II.

Scholarships, dental care in schools, and many other contributions too numerous to mention are all part of the association's history. An important one is the Tweedsmuir Histories compiled by the branches, each branch relating the history of local farms, buildings, and places of interest.

Since 1919, The Women's Institute has had a natural liaison with the provincial Ministry of Agriculture and Food. In the same year, a federal body was formed. Today, The Women's Institute is represented in the Associated Country Women of the World. Through these latter two organizations, the provincial institutes found an avenue for service, best described in a speech by Dr. Ethel Chapman celebrating the 50th anniversary of the provincial federation:

"You have sent a tractor to a village in Greece, sewing machines to the widows of Korea, home demonstration equipment to Ceylon. You have helped with the Freedom from Hunger and the Save the Children crusades; have had a part in starting Women's Institutes among the Indian and Eskimo women of the Northwest Territories . . . In your national or international undertakings you provide a way for the individual member to have a part in a piece of social service far beyond her own community."