

The Lees of Stoney Creek: Legacy of a great history

JULY/85

By Mary Miller
Special to the News

James Lee was a British Soldier, who fought in the American War of Independence. After being discharged, he married and returned to England. However, it was not long before he returned to America, settling in Maryland.

James became unhappy with life in America, and emigrated to Canada where free Crown Grants were being offered from King George III to British Soldiers. Along with many other United Empire Loyalists, they settled in the Niagara Peninsula.

KILLED BY AXEHEAD

James and his wife, Hannah, were granted 200 acres on the escarpment on Ridge Road at the top of Stoney Creek mountain. The land was covered with evergreens, hemlocks and towering maples. They cleared the fields and grew crops of oats, wheat, corn, along with large gardens. Until the fields produced, they lived on herbs, wild flesh, ground nuts and fish.

They built a log cabin with clay floors and a fireplace. Mrs. Lee planted Crown Imperial Lily, Sweet Mary, Myrtle and Snowball bushes, which they had brought with them. The beautiful virgin pine on the land, provided lumber for furniture and the wooden pegs to hold it together. James was killed by a flying axehead in the hands of his son, while building the first frame house in Saltfleet Township.

John, the eldest son of James and Hannah, married Mary Moore. On their wedding day, James presented to his new daughter-in-law the deed in her name to Crown Land, Lot 17, Concession 4, Ridge Road, later known as the Edgemont Farm.

John and Mary also built a log cabin on their property. This was later replaced with a frame building, which forms the nucleus for the hostess apartment in the back of the present Erland Lee (Museum) Home. The large pine cupboard in the Pioneer Kitchen

was built by James from virgin pine from the property.

CHILLED MILK, CHURNED BUTTER

Besides the house, there was a smoke house, where home-killed meat was cured over burning maple logs. There was an outdoor bake oven and an ice house. Ice was cut by "bees" from the lake and nearby ponds. They chilled their milk, churned their own butter - some for sale and some for their own use.

Life was difficult in the early 1800s. Wheat had to be ground by hand. Education was provided by dedicated men. Books were scarce; quills were used for pens and red ink was made from the juice of strawberries. Spiritual needs were provided by a "circuit rider" who preached sermons to people who may have walked 20 to 30 miles to hear him.

Abram D'Arcy Lee, son of John and Mary, and his wife (Jemima Pew) took over the farm. They built the front part of the house (presently the Lee Museum) which is of gothic architecture. Boards were placed upright, and joints were covered with narrow boards or battens. It has green shutters, two bay windows and the gables are decorated with unusual maple verge boards. The boards were hand-carved from home-grown lumber by a 14-year-old carpenter's apprentice. Young Mr. Moore's original pattern resembles a paper chain of maple leaves, and the job took him an entire summer to complete.

FIRST COMMERCIAL GRAPERY

Abram had the first commercial grapery on the mountain. The vines were originally brought from Switzerland, and the grapes were sold to the E.D. Smith Company. Maple trees were tapped and sap boiled in open kettles to make the once famous "Lee's Maple Syrup". The Lees were known for their fine herds of jersey cattle, and Abram was instrumental in starting Vinemount Creamery. He also started the first insurance company in the area, and gathered people together to build the first church. They were also known for their R.I. Greening apples, which were exported to England.

Erland (now fourth generation) eventually inherited the family farm. He married Janet Robertson Chisholm. They had five children - Marjorie, Hilda, Gordon Frank and Alice.

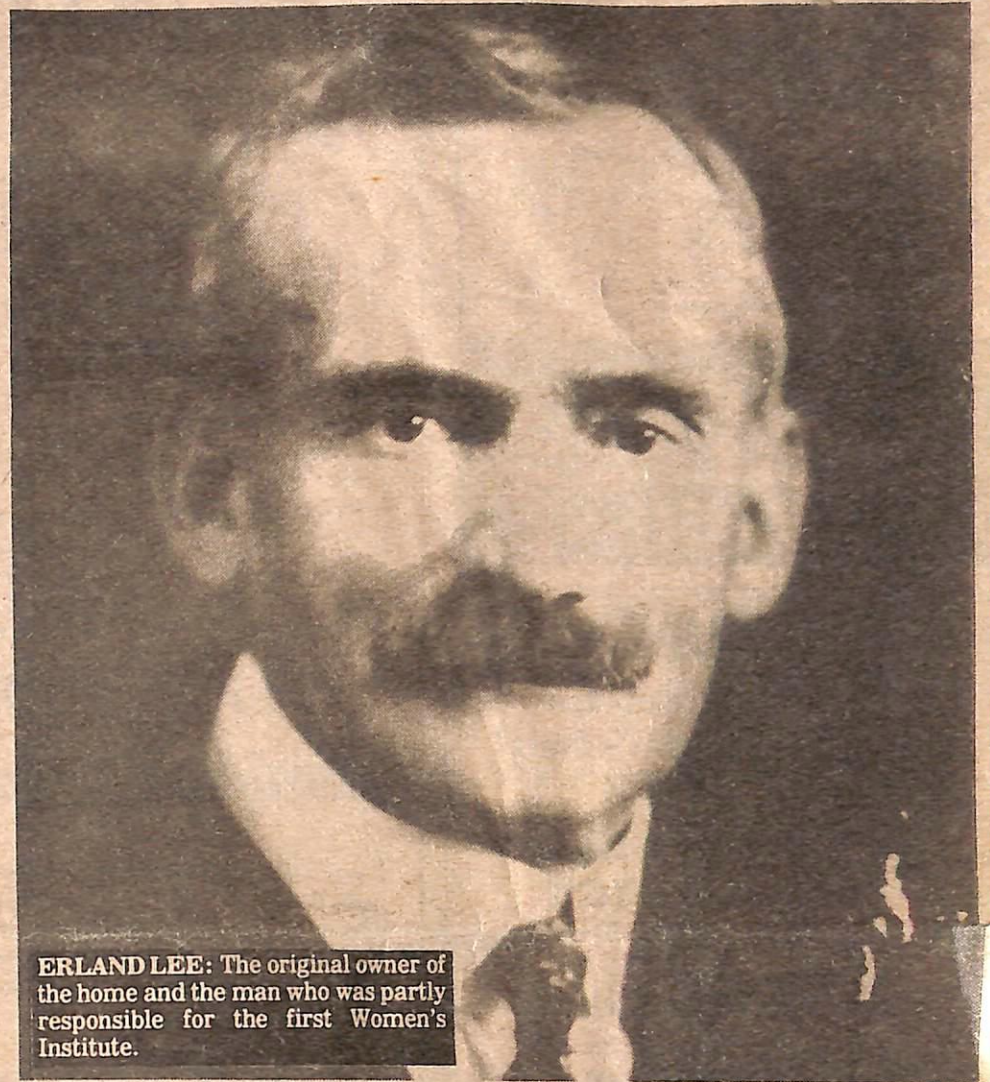
PUREBRED JERSEY CATTLE

Erland was a prominent public spirited, broad minded farmer and followed his ancestors in mixed farming, with purebred jersey cattle, fancy dairy butter, maple syrup and fruit. He became a school teacher and was a charter member of the Farmer's Institute and for 19 years he was secretary of this organization. He also was secretary - treasurer of Saltfleet Agricultural Society for a number of years and Saltfleet Township Clerk for nearly 20 years.

In 1896 Erland Lee attended a meeting of the Farmer's Institute at Guelph, Ont., where Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless was featured as guest speaker. Mrs. Hoodless had suffered the loss of her infant son through contaminated milk. Inspired by her enthusiasm, Erland felt there was a need for a similar women's organization and invited Mrs. Hoodless to address a meeting. Erland and Janet Lee travelled the roads of Saltfleet Township encouraging all women to attend this meeting in Squire's Hall, Stoney Creek. There were 101 women and one man in attendance at the meeting.

FIRST WOMEN'S INSTITUTE IN WORLD

Thus it was on Feb. 19, 1897 the first Women's Institute in the world was form-



ERLAND LEE: The original owner of the home and the man who was partly responsible for the first Women's Institute.

ed. One week later, a meeting was held in the Lee Home on Ridge Road, when a constitution was formulated under the supervision of Colonel F.M. Carpenter and Senator E.D. Smith, and was hand-penned by Janet Lee, while sitting at the now famous Dining Room Table. This table remains a focal point for all visitors. Mrs. E.D. Smith became the first president of the first Women's Institute.

The Women's Institute from the thoughtfulness of Erland Lee, spread across Ontario, across Canada, and now assists women in some 69 countries as the Associated Country Women of the World.

On May 28, 1961 a memorial plaque on a rugged granite boulder in front of the Lee Home, was unveiled. It reads "In memory of ERLAND LEE and his wife JANET who pioneered the first Women's Institute - now world wide - at Stoney Creek Feb. 19, 1897 and to commemorate their home with table on which the Constitution was drawn up. Erected by the District of South Wentworth Women's Institute."

Through the efforts of the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario an historic plaque was unveiled and dedicated at the Erland Lee Home by the Historic Sites Board of Ontario on Oct. 1, 1967.

PURCHASE OF HOME

For many years it had been the hope of Ontario Women's Institute Members that the Lee Homestead could be purchased, and in 1964 a recommendation was presented to the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario from the Districts of Wentworth South and Wentworth North, that "the home be purchased and preserved for its historic value to the Women's Institute provincially, nationally and internationally."

A committee was formed with Mrs. Russell Wise, Board Director of Puslinch, as chairman; Mrs. Allen Dickenson, Board

Director of Mount Hope, as secretary; and Mrs. Lilah Lymburner, President of the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario, as president. After much exploratory work and evaluation, an option of purchase was taken in Oct. 1969, with expiry date June 15, 1972.

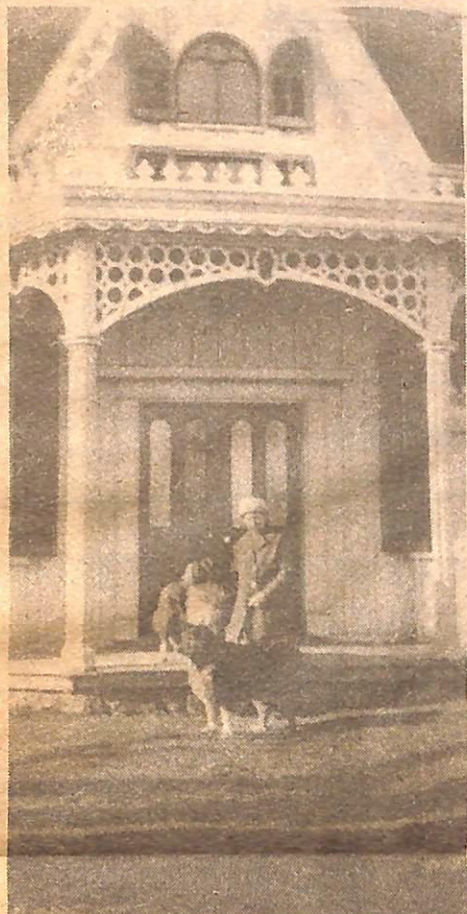
The next three years were busy ones for all members, but the efforts were rewarded with the purchase of the property on June 15, 1972. At the time of purchase, the remaining parcel of the original farm was owned by the now fifth generation - Frank Lee (at this point deceased) and his wife, the former Katharine Isc. Matheson. The property was purchased with a view to perpetuate the name of Erland Lee - co-founder of the first Women's Institute in the World - to encourage visitors to view the Erland Lee (Museum) Home furnished in the 1800 period representing life and activities of a farm family.

MUSEUM OPENED IN '73

The Museum was officially opened in Aug. 1973.

Throughout the whole house visitors may view the many beautiful antiques and artifacts. The lovely wide pine flooring has been refinished and all rooms papered in the 1850 era. The front verandah has been restored; the drive house renovated to accommodate meetings, and during special events demonstrators present their exhibits and crafts. There are picnic tables in the grassed area with a small kitchenette attached to the washrooms for use and convenience of visitors.

Mary Miller is chairman of the Erland Lee Home committee. Phone 662-2691 for details of tours and visits to the historic homestead on Ridge Road.



THE LADY AND HER DOGS: Mrs. Erland Lee is shown in this old picture in front of the house, with dogs Major and Pompey. The picture shows the original front doors of the historic home.