

Great oaks from little acorns grow...



Next month we celebrate the 70th birthday of the WI in Britain and Home & Country will look back at the first institute in the Isle of Anglesey. To fill in the background, Heather Fogg tracked back to the movement's origins at the Erland Lee home in Stoney Creek, Ontario

'Stoney Creek!' I gasped. 'There's a sign saying Stoney Creek!'

'What's so special about Stoney Creek?' asked my Canadian cousin. I explained that the first WI meeting in the world had been held there, adding: 'I think there's some sort of museum at the Erland Lee home at Stoney Creek. Would it be possible to go and see it?'

My husband and I were on holiday in Canada and were being driven from Toronto to Niagara Falls. I dearly wanted to see the Falls but didn't want to miss the chance of visiting the Erland Lee home while I was so near. My obliging cousin took the next turning off the highway and we entered Stoney Creek. Now a lively, modern town of 37,000 people, it is very different from how it must have been back in 1897 when the WI was born.

Mr Erland Lee was a prominent, public spirited farmer who was also a qualified teacher. He was convinced of the need for a women's organisation after he heard a talk given by Mrs Adelaide Hoodless in which she stressed the need for opportunities for women to attend lectures and demonstrations in domestic science and homecraft. A Canadian farmer's daughter, her fourth baby had died, largely, she felt, because she hadn't known enough about hygiene and infant feeding. In 1897, Erland Lee invited her to speak at the Ladies' Night of the Farmers' Institute near his home. The following week, he and his wife arranged a meeting at Stoney Creek and the first WI was born.

Shortly afterwards, Erland and two other prominent men helped draft the original by-laws and constitution which were written out by Mrs Lee in a book on the walnut dining table in their house. She became one of the first directors of the Stoney Creek WI and suggested that the annual subscription should be only 25 cents per member so that all women could afford to join.

The Erland Lee home has a special place in WI history and the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario are very proud



The writer signing the visitors' book on 'Constitution Table'. The hostess, a wooden high chair and a 'baby bouncer', taken in one of the bedrooms. Part of the drawing room.

that in 1972 they were able to buy it—75 years after the first meeting. There have been many changes in women's lives since 1897: nowadays we take it for granted that education in hygiene and domestic science is available in schools and clinics, and that a health visitor will call to give advice and support after the birth of a new baby.

From Stoney Creek we drove up to the ridge of higher land that runs parallel to the shore of Lake Ontario and then east along a narrow, winding road, so different from the Canadian highways we had grown used to. We stopped at the top to admire the breathtaking view northwards over Stoney Creek to the great lake. Then we drove a little further along the ridge road through open farmland and came suddenly upon an isolated homestead. A plaque near the entrance to the short drive informed us that this imposing white house, nestling among the trees, was indeed the Erland Lee home. The farmer's wife must have been very lonely right out here in

those early days. How she must have welcomed the excitement and interest of people arriving for a WI meeting.

The first man to farm there put up a log cabin for his wife and family in 1792. His son built a wooden frame house in 1801. This is still in existence, forming the rear of the present homestead, so by Canadian standards it is a very old building indeed.

A smart front extension, also made of wood, was added in 1873, but this was much grander, with bay windows on either side of an ornate porch and a gable above with hand-carved maple boards along the edge. Very few houses of this age and type remain in Canada, and visitors are thrilled that the WI has made it possible for people to visit a period home furnished in the style of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

We were welcomed by the hostess at the side door and shown into a lovely farmhouse kitchen where the family would have congregated while the farmer's wife was busy with her

cooking. Fixed to the chimney of the stove was a contraption for drying herbs and there were also other domestic items such as stone hot water bottles.

Upstairs, the bedrooms were a delight. All the bedlinen and coverlets were beautifully stitched. The doors of the clothes closets (wardrobes) were left open so we could peep inside and view the home-sewn period garments hanging there. In one room there was a wooden high chair and a kind of baby swing—an early equivalent of a baby bouncer. Another room had been set up as a sewing room with a vintage sewing machine and some attractive samples of work.

Downstairs in the drawing room, the large walnut table was the centre of attraction. 'This is where Mrs Lee sat and wrote out the by-laws and constitution,' our hostess told us proudly, 'and here is the book itself.' Thanks to modern protective plastic covers, we were able to handle the book, turn the pages and study the words that had been so thoughtfully penned nearly 90 years ago. Then I, myself, sat at 'Constitution Table' and signed the visitors' book on behalf of Waterford WI, Hertfordshire, England.

Finally we were led to what looked like a barn in the grounds, a few yards from the house. Known as the Drive House, it contained examples of old agricultural implements. In the middle of the first floor, was an open space through which the big sledges were hauled from ground level at the end of the winter to be stored until the next snowy season. We went up the stairs and at the top saw a wonderful sight: the whole first floor was given over to a WI craft market. There was such a lot to choose from—it was like being at Olympia again!

After making a few irresistible purchases, it was time to say goodbye to our hostess. Before we left, she told us about the lovely picnics WIs have in the grounds of the homestead when they come to visit. I have a feeling that Mr and Mrs Erland Lee would be delighted! □

PHOTOS: PETER FOGG