

# Women's Institute 'can't get no respect' But no issue too controversial

CALEDONIA — It's called the Federated Women's Institute and it's become the Rodney Dangerfield of women's organizations.

It was a few years ago when Margaret McKibbin called The Spectator to inform us that the institute was celebrating its 90th birthday.

"Call us back on your 100th," snapped the editor, before hanging up."

Boy, was he lucky. If Margaret could have reached through that phone she would have pounded some sense into his empty skull.

"I was darned upset," recalls the widowed grandmother. "We were getting no respect . . . and to think it all started here."

She's right. The Women's Institute — WI for short — has spread to 70 countries on five continents, but it was founded in Stoney Creek, Feb. 19, 1897.

"It was a man's idea," says Margaret, without a trace of embarrassment. "The men already had learning courses throughout the winter and it was Erland Lee who suggested women should have the same."

## Rural roads

Erland, along with his wife, Janet, travelled the rural roads in a horse-drawn buggy, convincing a handful of farm women that their time had come.

The goals would be simple — promote household science with special attention to sanitation, economy, the hygienic value of foods, and raising the general standard of health.

"That might sound a little odd in these times," says Margaret. "But we've progressed. I don't want people thinking that WI is living in the dark ages.

"We're right up to date and we've become involved in many national and international issues."

Margaret is a founding member of the Maggie Johnson branch of the WI. The branch started 30 years ago and it's named after the same Maggie who was made famous by her husband's song When You and I Were Young, Maggie.

On the 100th anniversary of Maggie's death, WI members held a quiet ceremony at her grave.

That was nice, but they would like us to know they have been involved in much heavier projects — like fighting pollution.



Mike Hanley

Margaret says it was WI pressure that brought Blue Boxes to Glanford.

She shows off a WI grocery sack that eliminates the need for plastic or paper shopping bags and she tells of their lug-a-mugs that replace plastic or foam coffee cups.

And, she adds, no issue is too controversial for the WI.

During a meeting in Guelph, their provincial president informed members of a letter she had dashed off to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, informing him that WI was in support of his stand in the Persian Gulf.

The meeting closed with members holding hands while singing the Hymn of all Nations — a song of peace.

"There were so many tears we had trouble singing."

Margaret summoned me to her Mount Hope farm this week to tell me about a March 27 workshop in Caledonia for members from Hamilton-Wentworth, Haldimand-Norfolk, Brant and Niagara. She said they will be tackling many issues including public relations.

## Learning process

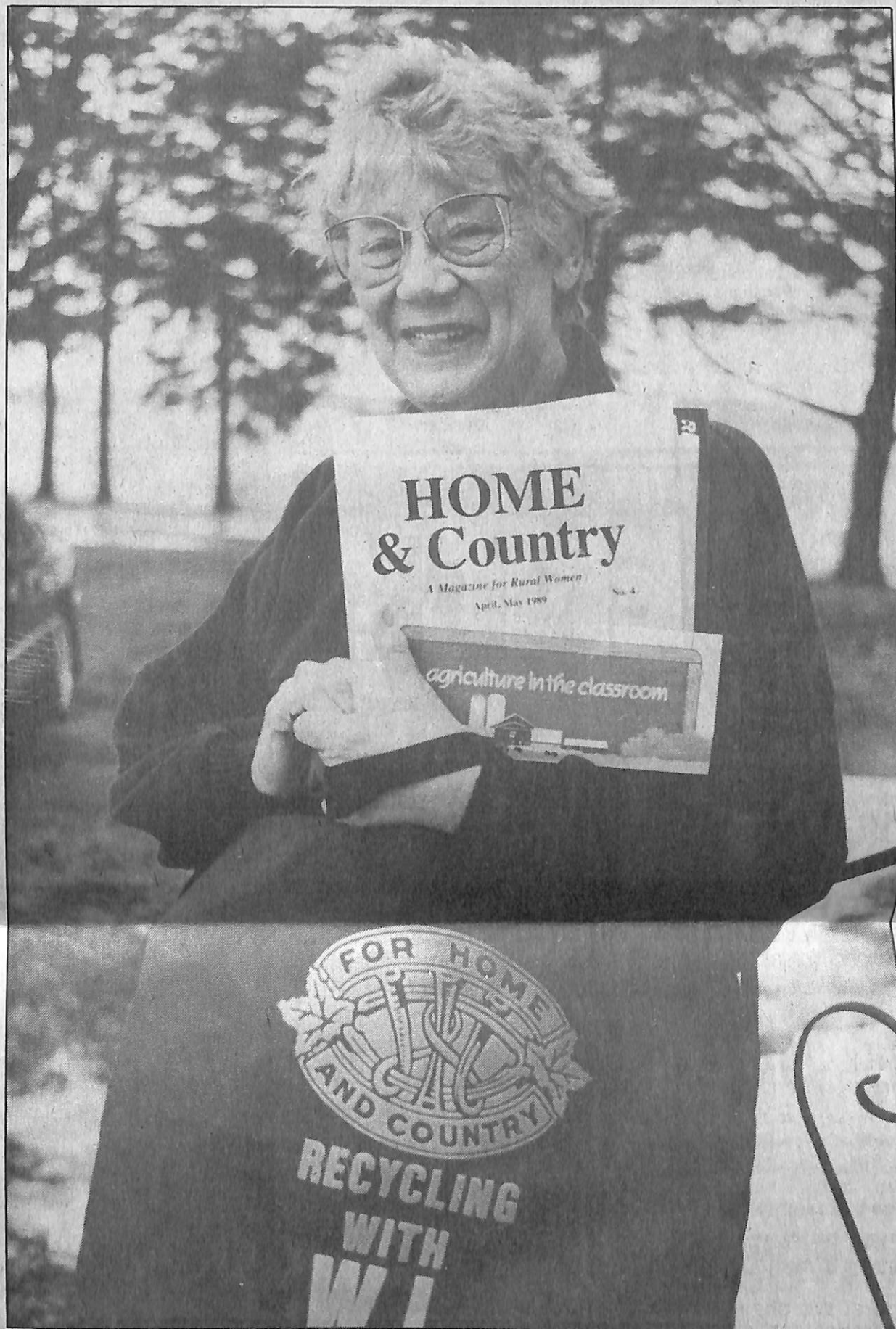
She said they will learn how to promote their organization through the media and how to use a booth to attract attention at fairs or shopping malls.

Margaret has a brochure that will give them tips on designing a booth and the importance of gearing their information to the potential audience.

It also includes a list of 15 'do nots' for a successful booth. The list includes warnings that members should not smoke in the booth, should not drink in the booth nor should they have bad breath.

Margaret is a public relations officer with WI and suggests it's time the women started blowing their own horn. She says a lack of positive publicity will lead to a lack of members.

"We do a lot of good things and



Margaret McKibbin shows off some of WI's most recent projects.

Mike Hanley, The Spectator

we've donated a lot of money to worthy causes, but we don't get any credit.

"There are people in this area who don't know what WI is and that's sad. We have to become better communicators.

"It's important that people know about us if we hope to attract new members."

For more information, write to the Federated Women's Institutes

of Ontario, Guelph Agriculture Centre, P/O Box 1030, Guelph, Ontario, N1H 6N1.

If you have a story idea from Haldimand-Norfolk, Brant or Niagara, call me collect at 526-3207.