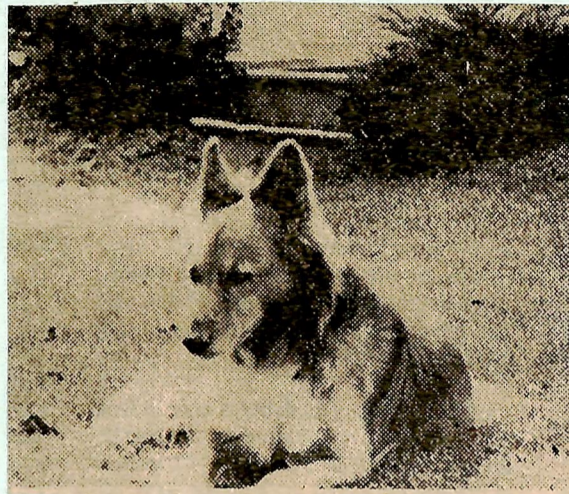


Erland Lee

*This was Mrs. Lee's faithful friend, taken resting in front of his Master's home, known as The Erland Lee Home.
Hamilton Spectator*



Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless

— 1973 —
Compiled and Copied By: Mrs. L. Masterson

There's a man in the WI's past

By SUZANNE KILPATRICK
of The Hamilton Spectator

STONEY CREEK—Was it a man or a woman who founded the world's largest women's rural organization?

Should Adelaide Hoodless or Erland Lee get the honors for starting the first Women's Institute here in 1897?

It depends, it seems, on who tells the story.

But the dispute, lasting all these years, still goes on as members prepare to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Stoney Creek branch on Feb. 19.

The dispute appears to be a question of women's rights — an ironic fact since the world-wide organization — the Associated Country Women of the World — certainly cannot be classified as a group fighting for women's rights.

In actual fact, Mrs. Hoodless and Mr. Lee both played major roles in the founding of the first WI. To the more peace-loving WI members they are known as the co-founders. But Lee supporters and Hoodless supporters remain adamant.

Whether one or the other was the founder or they were co-founders, it all amounts to a fine point of interpretation. The story of the founding goes like this.

In 1897, the South Wentworth Farmers' Institute was a flourishing society. Each year the institute held a ladies' night when the only concession was to have a bit of music on the program, a vocal solo and a piano instrumental. The provincial department of agriculture supplied male speakers on request.

When the program committee met that year, Mr. Lee, the secretary, boldly suggested they invite a woman to speak at ladies' night.

The woman in question was Mrs. Hoodless of Hamilton, who had lost a two-year-old son through feeding of impure milk. She claimed she had been improperly informed and because of the tragedy she strived to have domestic science taught to girls in schools. Her cause had led her to speak at a farmers' meeting at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph where Mr. Lee heard her.

Although Mr. Lee was determined to

have Mrs. Hoodless speak at the ladies' night, his institute colleagues would not hear of it. A woman's place, they argued, was in the home — not on a public platform.

And so it was agreed at the committee meeting to have their regular government speaker address them.

The program for ladies' night was left to Mr. Lee.

He then extended a personal invitation to Mrs. Hoodless to speak at the meeting.

As chairman for the evening, Mr. Lee's plot was successful. He managed to liberate the women and stage a coup on his chauvinist colleagues.

But if there were red faces in the crowd that night the reddest must have belonged to the government speaker who preceded Mrs. Hoodless with his topic — the Feeding of Calves. During her speech she said there was a need for women to be informed on the care and feeding of infants.

It is at this point in the story that opinions differ.

Miss Marjorie Lee of Hamilton (Mr. Lee's daughter), who wrote a history on the founding, claims her father was so impressed by Mrs. Hoodless' comment on the need for women to be informed that after he thanked her, he asked how many women would attend if he called a meeting to organize a Women's Institute. All 30 women present stood, Miss Lee's report says.

However, Mrs. J. McKinley Morden, 95, the only living charter member, now a resident in a Burlington nursing home, claims this is not true.

Mrs. Morden, who was 20 when she attended the ladies' night meeting, says Mrs. Hoodless suggested it would be a good idea if the women had an organization like the Farmers' Institute. This suggestion was made during her speech, Mrs. Morden says.

However, Mrs. Morden concedes that the dispute is "silly and foolish" because they both were involved in it. "It's the 100 women who attended the first meeting of the WI who should get the credit. If those women hadn't taken hold of it there wouldn't have been a Women's Institute today. They are the ones who made it a success."

In any case, an organizational meeting was scheduled for Feb. 19 with Mrs. Hoodless as guest speaker. Mr. Lee and his wife became the first public relations people for the WI by spreading the word of the coming meeting, driving around the area in a cutter.

The men, however, still opposed the idea of women organizing. Comments of the day were: "Oh, well, let them start, it won't last long without a man to run it."

The organizational meeting was held with 100 women and Mr. Lee attending. He was named chairman with Mrs. Hoodless as honorary president. Mrs. E. D. Smith of Winona was president; Miss Margaret Nash, Stoney Creek, secretary, and Mrs. John McNeilly, Stoney Creek, treasurer.

The constitution, similar to that of the Farmers' Institute, was written by Mr. and Mrs. Lee over the objections of husbands who said the WI would cost money. "Let's put the fee at 25 cents a year," Mrs. Lee said. Over another sneering remark—"Let them try it. All women fight and it will break up," Mrs. Lee said: "We'll start with the Lord's Prayer. That should put us in a good frame of mind."

At the first meeting the organization was called the Women's Department of the Farmers' Institute of South Wentworth. But at the next meeting it was changed to the Women's Institute of Saltfleet Township; Then finally, when branch institutes were organized in the township, the original group became the Stoney Creek Women's Institute.

Mrs. Hoodless was invited to speak to the WI many times. On one occasion, she and her husband were invited for the presentation of the new pins inscribed with the motto: For Home and Country. Mr. Hoodless was asked to present the first pin to his wife as a mark of the WI's esteem "for the woman who gave other women courage to speak in public."

Since that time when rural women were liberated and encouraged to meet (their only other outing was church on Sundays), the WI has spread to 64

countries around the world and claims six and a half million members.

Whether branch institutes in other parts of Canada and throughout the world hail Mrs. Hoodless or Mr. Lee as the founder is unknown. But as recently as December last year, an advertisement placed in a Toronto newspaper in connection with the founding of a department store there, proclaimed Mrs. Hoodless as the WI founder.

Mrs. Lloyd Daw, president of the Stoney Creek, WI, promptly wrote a letter to the chief copy writer of the store informing her of the mistake and received a letter of apology with due respect to Mr. Lee.

More recognition is coming to Mr. Lee by the recent announcement that the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario have raised the required \$40,000 to purchase the 99-year-old Lee homestead here. The FWIO hopes to own it by June.

There may be difference in opinion concerning the founder but there is little difference in the organization today from when it was founded. The only outstanding change is more participation in community affairs.

But whether the WI is relevant in today's lifestyle is another question. Founded as an organization for rural women, it no longer fits into that category in its founding place. Stoney Creek has been a town since 1956, with a current population of 8,193. Here most of its WI members are senior citizens; the youngest—the president—is 52.

Both the president — Mrs. Daw — and Mrs. Lorna Rogers, past president of the Stoney Creek WI, say it gets harder every year to maintain the WI. Unless they can effect a merger between their WI and the neighboring WI in Saltfleet Township, they say the Stoney Creek WI may fold. Too many other organizations in the town and the need for younger members are the problems.

Mrs. Morden claims the WI is still relevant in some areas. "It could fold in some Ontario places but not in the rural areas."

The future of the Stoney Creek WI? "As long as I'm living I'll never let it die," says a determined Mrs. Rogers.