

THE FOUNDING OF THE FIRST WOMEN'S INSTITUTE

(In honor of the Golden Jubilee of the founding of the Women's Institutes at Stoney Creek, Ontario, in 1897, the following account of that occasion, written by the late Elizabeth Bailey Price and published in Volume 1, Number 1 of "CANADIAN HOME AND COUNTRY" [March, 1939], is re-printed in full. Members and W.I. branches of long-established standing will know the story, but perhaps not the complete details; newer members and branches should know these facts that they may understand fully the ideals which prompted the founding of such an organization and which have caused it to become the greatest instrument for good in the hands of rural women of to-day.—M.I.A.)

A Mother's Crusade

Many years ago, in the city of Hamilton, Ontario, the first-born son of a young mother was snatched away from her by death at the age of 18 months. This longed-for baby had been born in a happy home, under comfortable circumstances. He had been a beautiful healthy baby.

"Why did I have to lose my baby?" was the question that throbbed through the brain of the grief-stricken mother.

And because this mother—the late Mrs. John Hoodless, wife of a prominent manufacturer and merchant of Hamilton—was an educated, thinking woman, she traced the cause of death of her little one to impure milk. With a greater heartbreak than ever she realized that if more care had been taken with his food she need not have lost her little son.

It is said that, as she stood beside the little white casket looking at the still baby face for the last time, she made a vow to devote her life to the work of bringing to other mothers information about the proper care and feeding of their children.

That was more than 40 years ago!

Being a wise and far-visionsed woman, she began her work for this ideal with the school curriculum. She started an agitation to have "Domestic Science" taught in Hamilton Public Schools. With the co-operation of her husband, who was the chairman of the Hamilton Board of Education, she finally succeeded.

This brought up the need for domestic science teachers. Again characteristic of this woman of action, she organized the School of Domestic Science and Art at Hamilton, securing finances by

private subscription and a small government grant. This school soon proved inadequate and she presented the problem to Sir William Macdonald, one of Prince Edward Island's most public-minded citizens, resulting in the building of Macdonald Institute at Guelph, where for many years girls, not only from Ontario, but every part of Canada, have taken courses in Home Economics. Today there hangs in the reception room of this beautiful college a life-sized portrait of Adelaide Hoodless, presented by the Women's Institutes of Ontario "in recognition of her great and loving service to humanity."

Since 1884 in Ontario there had existed Farmers' Institutes, functioning under the Provincial Department of Agriculture. Their purpose was the promotion of scientific methods in all branches of agriculture. This was done by sending agricultural experts to teach the farmers the latest methods of grain growing, dairying, stock raising, etc. Their success gave Mrs. Hoodless, who had been born and brought up on the farm, the idea that it was far more important for rural women to know about the proper feeding of children than for farmers to be taught animal husbandry.

Stoney Creek First Institute in the World

Mrs. A. E. Walker, Bartonville, Ontario, the immediate past president of the Women's Institutes of Canada and almost a charter member of the Mother Institute, has written a brief history of its founding. Mrs. Walker writes: "The first Women's Institute was organized February 19, 1897, in the little historic village of Stoney Creek, Saltfleet township, Wentworth County, Ontario. Prior to this for 13 years a Farmers' Institute had flourished, mainly through the efforts of Mr. J. H. Smith, the then public school inspector, and his able assistant, Mr. Erland Lee, a prominent broad-minded and public-spirited young farmer in Saltfleet, in the vicinity of Stoney Creek.

"In the autumn of 1896, Mr. Lee attended the Experimental Union at the Ontario Agricultural College, Guelph. While there he heard Mrs. Hoodless deliver a stirring address on 'Value and Need of Domestic Science in Public Schools'. Mr. Lee was much impressed, and resolved that at the first opportunity he would invite Mrs. Hoodless to address the women of Saltfleet.

Founding of the First Women's Institute

(Continued from page 1)

"The following January, when planning the programme for the Farmers' Institute meeting, he suggested that Mrs. Hoodless be invited to address the evening session, when the women would be present. The other members of the committee objected, so, unknown to them, he extended a personal invitation to her to be the speaker on this occasion.

"She accepted the invitation. She suggested in the course of her address that the women form an organization for women, similar to the Farmers' Institute for men, and pointed out its many benefits and advantages. Time was limited, the hour was late. There was no time for discussion, so the chairman asked how many would attend a similar meeting next Friday evening if Mrs. Hoodless would come to Stoney Creek. Thirty-five promised.

"During the week Mr. and Mrs. Lee were busy people, endeavouring to arouse the enthusiasm of the women to attend the meeting. When Mrs. Hoodless arrived in Stoney Creek, February 19, 1897, she found awaiting her in Squire's Hall 101 women and one man. Needless to say that man was Mr. Lee and he kindly acted as chairman for the evening.

HUMAN BEINGS VERSUS LIVESTOCK

"Again Mrs. Hoodless addressed the women—pointing out, if the men felt the need of an organization which enables them to grow better and larger crops of grain, hay, fruit, raise better livestock, an Institute for Women would be equally helpful to them in their work and much more necessary since women's work—homecraft and mothercraft—was much more important than men's in that it dealt with the home and the care of the loved ones dwelling therein—the care of human beings rather than livestock.

"The women sensing the importance and responsibility of their duty as homemakers decided to organize 'A Department of Domestic Economy in affiliation with the Farmers' Institute', to be called 'The Women's Department of Farmers' Institute of South Wentworth'. This name was changed at the next meeting to 'Women's Institute of Saltfleet', and later, when other institutes were organized in the township, to 'Stoney Creek Women's Institute.'"

And thus the first Women's Institute in the world was founded! Copying the objects of the first Institute from the original minute book, Mrs. Walker lists the following: domestic economy; architecture with special reference to heat, light, sanitation and ventilation; health, embracing psychology, hygiene, calisthenics and medicine; floriculture and horticulture; music and art; literature, education, sociology and legislation.

The names of the first officers were: president, Mrs. E. D. Smith; secretary, Miss Maggie Nash; treasurer, Mrs. J. H. McNeilley; directors, Mrs. F. M. Carpenter and Mrs. Erland Lee.

Mrs. Walker continues: "Mrs. Hoodless was made honorary president, and while we honor and respect her memory and recognize her as our very worthy founder, we cannot but feel the conditions for founding the organization were made possible largely through the efforts of a man—Mr. Erland Lee.

MEN HELPED WRITE CONSTITUTION

"Mr. Lee rendered further valuable assistance. With Senator E. D. Smith and Major F. M. Carpenter, he assisted the women in drafting the constitution and by-laws. The fact that this original Women's Institute had an elastic constitution made possible the development of this little society into one of world wide proportions and reflects great credit upon the ability, wisdom and vision of the men and women responsible for its framing.

"Nor did Mr. Lee's services end there. It was he who wrote on behalf of the organization to F. W. Hodson, superintendent of Farmers' Institutes, and to Hon. Mr. Dryden, Minister of Agriculture, asking for affiliation with the Farmers' Institutes and for government co-operation and support. Both these requests were granted and there is no doubt that this government assistance, although meagre at first, has contributed largely to the success of the organization.

"At the first regular meeting there were papers on: "Proper Feeding of Children" and "Art"; at the next meeting Dr. Mabel Henderson spoke on "The Child in Health and Disease". This was followed by discussion and a question drawer. At the next meeting there was a demonstration on "First Aid". At successive meetings papers, addresses and discussions dealt with the following subjects: "Sunshine in the Home", "Home Sanitation", "Child Culture" and "Homemaking versus Housekeeping". The Chataqua books on "Domestic Science" were read and discussed at regular meetings.

"Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Carpenter, Mrs. Lee and Mrs. McNeilley took turns at visiting Farmers' Institute meetings (when women were present) preaching, as it were, the gospel of W.I., to encourage the organization of Women's Institutes. They wrote articles relating to the movement for four agricultural magazines."

HAD MEN SUPERINTENDENTS 29 YEARS

The Women's Institutes were placed under the direction of Mr. Hodson, superintendent of Farmers' Institutes. It is interesting to note that for 29 years the Women's Institutes of Ontario had men superintendents, the others being Dr. George C. Creelman (afterwards president of the Ontario Agricultural College, Guelph) up to 1900, and the late George M. Putnam, a graduate of O.A.C., who held the position for more than 25 years. In 1934, he was succeeded by Miss Bess McDermand, graduate of Moulton College, Macdonald College, O.A.C., and post-graduate of Columbia University with several years extension work at Columbia and Cornell Universities, also a pioneer in W.I. work in Alberta. Upon her marriage to Mr. Guy Skinner, Storrs, Conn., last November, she resigned. Miss Mary A. Clarke, of the staff of Macdonald College, took over the duties of this office, January 1, 1939.

Again quoting Mrs. Walker:

"In 1899, the first government speaker and organizer came to Stoney Creek in the person of Miss Laura Rose (now Mrs. Stephen of Ottawa) then instructor in dairying at the O.A.C. For 35 years she lectured at the summer meetings in Ontario. She has organized Institutes in several provinces, and has been the first F.W.I.C. convener of agriculture. I doubt if any one person has contributed more to the development of the organization than Laura Rose Stephen. Our motto, 'For Home and Country', which was chosen on the advice of Mrs. Hoodless, was Mrs. Stephen's suggestion."

For a decade Women's Institutes grew and grew in Ontario. In 1906 the idea began to crop up in other provinces. New settlers took it to the West. A few years later the Maritimes were eager to try out this wonderful idea of co-operation of Governments and homemakers. By 1914 Women's Institutes modelled after the Ontario pattern had become deeply rooted in the soil of Canada.