

Women's Institutes Eighty-Five Years Later



Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless,
Co-Founder



Mrs. E. D.
Smith, first
President



Mr. Erland
Lee,
Co-Founder



Mrs. Chas.
Macoun, first
FWIO
Secretary



Mrs. Wm.
Todd, first
FWIO
President

February 19, 1897 was a day that made history. One hundred and one women and one man, Mr. Lee, were the newsmakers at the turn of the century.

February 19, 1982, will mark the 85th Anniversary of the founding of the first Women's Institute in the world.

The family was the core-reason for founding Women's Institutes, and remains so, to this day.

Women's Institute members for the last 85 years have stood by the concept of strengthening the family unit and encouraged women to go beyond their homes and farms to help one another think as individuals.

The formation of local branches quickly snow-balled in Ontario and it wasn't long before the work spread into other Provinces in the Dominion. Men have played an important role in the Women's Institute, especially, in the first thirty years. Although it is questionable if any WI members would have enjoyed the benefits of the organization over the last 85 years without the support of their husbands.

In Ontario, back as far as 1896, Mr. Erland Lee heard Adelaide Hoodless speak, and herein lies the key to the formation of Women's Institutes. Just as the family unit, back at the turn of the century, depended on the mother and father for guidance, the Women's Institute would not have been organized without a woman (Adelaide Hoodless), who had a desire to tell the community about her problem and concern, and a gentleman (Erland Lee), who recognized the importance of the situation and encouraged a gathering of women, where she would have a receptive audience.

In our 85th year, Ontario WI's are encouraging members of FWIC and the Constituent Societies belonging to that group, to recognize and accept the fact, that the first WI in the world had co-founders, Mrs. Hoodless and Erland Lee. This will be on the agenda at the 1982 National Convention and Ontario members are hopeful bias will not shade the decision.

With the formation of Branches throughout Canada, it was inevitable that the Women's Institutes were destined for overseas. The Ontario born and educated Madge Robertson, moved to British Columbia, married Alfred Watt, and became a dedicated member of the Metchosin WI. After his death, she and her sons moved to England just before World War I. After war was declared, Mrs. Watt could see that rural women, if organized, could play an important part in planting garden plots from which the vegetables could feed the local residents. With the assistance of two influential men, a WI was organized in Flanfair, Wales, in 1915.

The Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario have spear-headed projects, such as, assuming ownership of the Erland Lee (Museum) Home, where history was made when the original Constitution was written. Thousands of dollars have been invested in the educational projects for the youth, not only in Ontario, but overseas, too. Assisting women in third-world countries has been beyond question, an important facet of the WI work, where strong support was given, along with other Constituent Societies, to the Associated Country Women of the World, projects.

Now in 1982, where do we stand as an organization in our community? History will record, in the beginning, the WI and the Church, were the organizational strengths in rural areas of Ontario. Today, we compete with a host of other local organizations, as well as leisure-time activities, such as we've never experienced before. Our role has become more difficult, so it becomes much more important to define our goals and objectives.

We cherish the past, but we cannot live on previous accomplishments. All those important roles we have played over the past 85 years were not in vain. However, in the 1980's, our reasons for being, our objectives for existence, must be motivated toward the needs of the present-day woman.

A re-thinking of direction and a re-defining of structure may be the answer.

Margaret Zoeller

from Fall 1982 Home & Country.