

# The Women's Institutes — after the first 100 years

*In its centenary, the Women's Institutes are celebrating its past, present, and future in Canada and around the world*

By Colleen Armstrong

**I**n February, 1997, Women's Institute (WI) members across Canada celebrated its 100th anniversary. The celebration will continue at the WI Centennial Celebration & FWIC Convention '97, to be held at the Hamilton Convention Centre, June 17-22.

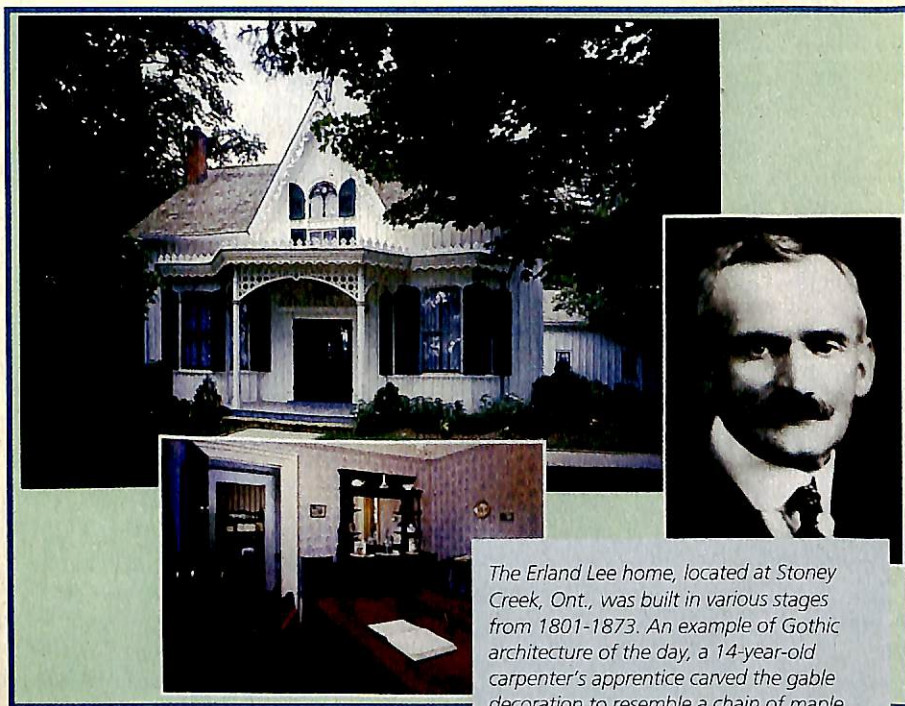
Over 2,000 delegates from all over the world are expected to attend the conference, which has the theme "Indebted to the Past; Committed to the Future". Key speakers will include astronaut Roberta Bondar, futurist Norman Rebin, Linda Ambrose, assistant professor of history at Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ont. (author of *For Home and Country: The Centennial History of the Women's Institutes in Ontario*), and Rosalie Wysocki, who specializes in personal motivation, leadership skills, communication, positive attitudes, and team building.

Delegates will visit the homes of the founders of the WI, located in St. George and Stoney Creek, Ont., currently owned and operated as museums by the organization (see photos).

## The past

The WI is celebrating a rather busy 100 years. Back in 1897, rural women lived in isolation and without any organized groups of their own. Fifteen years later, there were WI branches in every province in Canada, and by 1919, the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada was established to co-ordinate the provincial organizations. Today, the organization, which prides itself on diversity, not only has over 7 million members in about 70 countries, but has 7 representatives active in various agencies of the United Nations.

It all started with Adelaide Hoodless. This Ontario woman really got the



*The Erland Lee home, located at Stoney Creek, Ont., was built in various stages from 1801-1873. An example of Gothic architecture of the day, a 14-year-old carpenter's apprentice carved the gable decoration to resemble a chain of maple leaves. Purchased by the WI in 1975, the homestead is operated as a museum*

ball rolling after her 18-month-old son died from drinking impure milk. She wanted to establish a forum where women could meet and learn modern domestic science, and where they could become more actively involved in their communities.

As a result of her campaigning, 101 women and one man attended an initial informational meeting. Hard on the heels of that get-together, 35 women met to form the Women's Institute of Saltfleet Township (later Stoney Creek WI). Hoodless, along with Janet and Erland Lee, put together its first constitution, which outlined several important program areas — domestic economy, architecture, health, horticulture, music and art, literature, education, sociology, and legislation.

Madge Watt was another important figure in the WI internationally. She was responsible for its rapid spread through the United Kingdom and from

there to Australia and New Zealand. Her dream was to set up a worldwide association of rural women.

By 1933, her dream was a reality. The Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW) had representatives in 26 countries across the continents of Europe, Asia, Africa, and North America.

Add to the mix Lady Tweedsmuir, who also played a major role. Wife of the Governor-General of Canada between 1935 and 1940, she encouraged rural communities to document their local histories. "Your village histories," she told members, "will be the basis of accurate facts much valued by historians of the future." She also established an ongoing awards program by providing 3 silver cups to be given in the fields of local history, handicrafts, and literature.