

Preservation of priceless artifacts a concern at Erland Lee Home Museum

Lee Home was the birthplace of the Women's Institute

By JO URBANOVITCH
News staff

Due to problems with funding, the main goal at Erland Lee Home museum is preventative maintenance of artifacts, rather than restoration. Even though one might feel the whole point of a museum is to preserve and restore a society's valuable heritage, only one percent of the total budget at Erland Lee Museum is spent on restoration.

"This is because after salaries and maintenance, there is very little money left," said Michael Gammell, the museum's curator.

A non-profit organization, the Institute relies almost totally on self-generated revenue, including admissions and funding from the Federal Women's Institutes of Ontario.

"We do receive some funding from museum operating grants through the Government of Ontario and Canada," added Mr. Gammell.

Unfortunately, what they do receive is not enough to enable the museum to do a lot of much needed restoration work. The curator has had to resort to inexpensive and innovative means to restore the museum itself as well as its valuable contents. While this says a lot about Mr. Gammell and his love of heritage, it is not exactly ideal to have to make tough choices about what to preserve and what not to preserve.

"Most of the museum's collection has been donated. What tends to happen is only the items directly related to the Lee family are selected for restoration and, in fact, many of these and other items of equal importance are neglected," said Mr.

Gammell.

It may be well-known that two of the main culprits of preservation work are light and humidity; however, the worst culprit is touch.

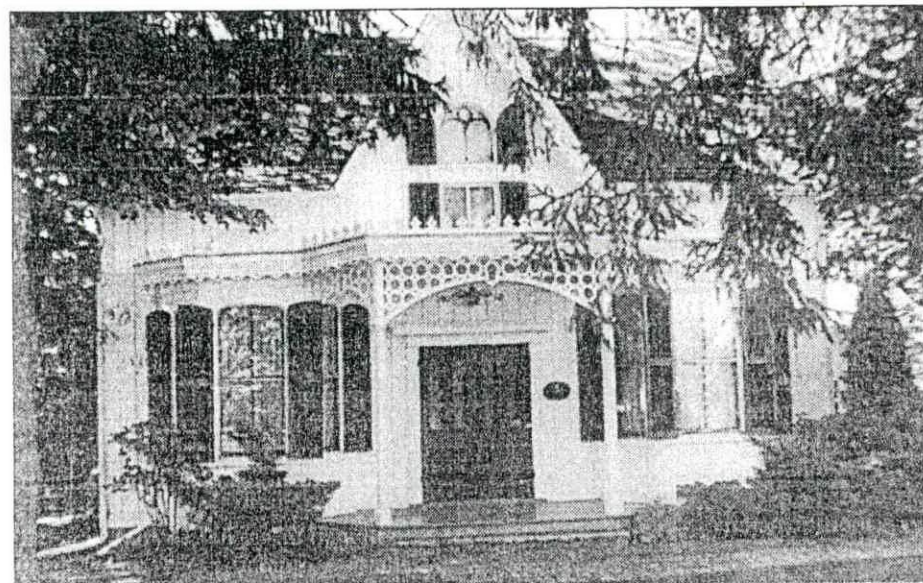
"This is why there are signs throughout the museum asking that visitors not handle the pieces," Mr. Gammell explained.

As tempting as it may be to run your hands over the marvelous old wooden furniture, or to touch the lovely linens in the upstairs wardrobes, skin oils are very damaging to artifacts. And, since the cost to restore one single piece usually runs in the hundreds of dollars range, it is best not to give in to temptation.

Another bit of preservation/restoration trivia is the fact that it is always best not to change a piece in any way - even if the planned change might be an improvement - better to leave it flawed than to commit a restoration faux pas.

The Women's Institute was founded in 1897 by Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless and Erland Lee. The original aim of the Institute was to give farm women a basic education, predominantly functional information related to the domestic sciences. Erland Lee and his wife Janet, who was one of the first five kindergarten teachers in Hamilton-Wentworth, took Hoodless's idea of creating an educational society, did the leg work, brought the women together and organized the Institute. Today, there are 10,000 members and approximately 300 branches in Ontario, comprised of a mainly elderly membership.

Because the original goals of the Institute have now been met, members today are able to focus on community concerns such as recycling, teaching seniors to enjoy and understand computers, as well as participating in more global issues like setting up educational systems for third world women. (The world wide association is known as the ACWW - Associated Country

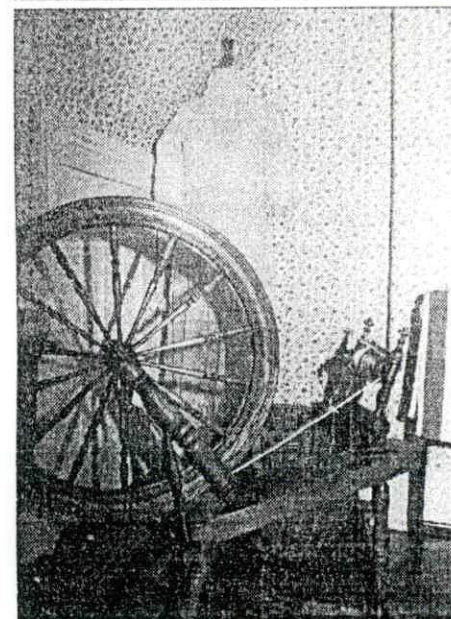


Women of the World.) Above, the Erland Lee Home Museum. Below, artifacts from the sewing room.

The Drive House, part of the Lee Home Museum, was built in 1873. This is the building which housed the Lee family's carriages and sleighs. Currently, there is a two-seater sleigh, a donation to the museum, suspended from a pulley system which was used to "house" the vehicles in the upper part of the Drive House when they weren't in use.

Except for the main beams, the inside of the Drive House was totally restored in 1996. There are many interesting exhibits in this building, including a grape press similar to the one Abram Lee would have used to make wine for household consumption; a cream separator; a fanning mill, which was used to separate the shaft from the seed in grain; and several rare books of quilt blocks.

Today the Drive House is also used as a venue for special events. For information regarding donations, membership, tours, upcoming events or contributions, please call 905-662-2691.



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SOCIETY

Womens' Institutes started in Stoney Creek

By STEPHEN BEECROFT
News staff

When a prosperous Saltfleet farmer called Erland Lee and his wife, Janet, attended a lecture in 1866, the result was an organization that nobody dreamt of in those days.

Traditionally, the woman stayed at home and looked after things, but the lecture at Guelph Agricultural College was by Adelaide Hoodless. She was talking about educating girls and, in the course of her lecture, she suggested women should have an organization of their own similar to the Farmers' Institutes.

The Lees started canvassing the area and a meeting held at Squire's Hall the following February had 100 women in attendance - and one man, Mr. Lee.

Squire's Hall, now 6 King St. E., was for many years the head office for the Stoney Creek News.

Maybe that's one reason why the Stoney Creek News has always supported the WI, now a world-wide organization.

"We knew it all started here, but people were vague about its origins," said Jean Craig, who owned and edited the paper in the 1950s. "Everybody who didn't live in Stoney Creek thought the founder had been Adelaide Hoodless."

So the Stoney Creek News kept putting out special editions for the Womens' Institutes said Kit McDermott, who was a partner of Ms. Craig.

"The WI was always hiding their light under a bushel," she said. "At the News, we kept getting people from Australia, New Zealand, Britain...everywhere. They'd come and say they wanted to learn more about Stoney Creek, which was the birthplace of the Institute."

By the 1950s, there were only five original members left, said Ms. Craig. One of them was Maud Glidden, a freelancer for the Stoney Creek News. She had joined the W.I. when she was 14-years-old.

Ms. Craig decided the News would take up the cause. She would go to the Womens' Institute archives in Ottawa and "get some of the real information".

"Kit and I picked up the reins," said Ms. Craig. "That's why I copied down the original minutes in longhand. That proved how the W.I. had started. And we continued to go out to bat for them."

Nowadays, of course, the story of the beginnings of the Womens' Institute is well-known and well publicized.

But nobody really knows what would have happened if the Stoney Creek News hadn't gone to bat for them in the 1950s.

Of course, it was a win-win situation. Ms. Craig's trip to the archives paid off commercially, too.

"I forget how many issues we printed for the Women's Institute," said Ms. McDermott. "The first one was sold out in no time, because all the people kept writing for them from all over the world."



PHOTO SALTFLLEET THEN & NOW
Mrs. E.D. Smith (nee Christina A. Armstrong) was the first president of the Women's Institute founded in Stoney Creek, February 1897.