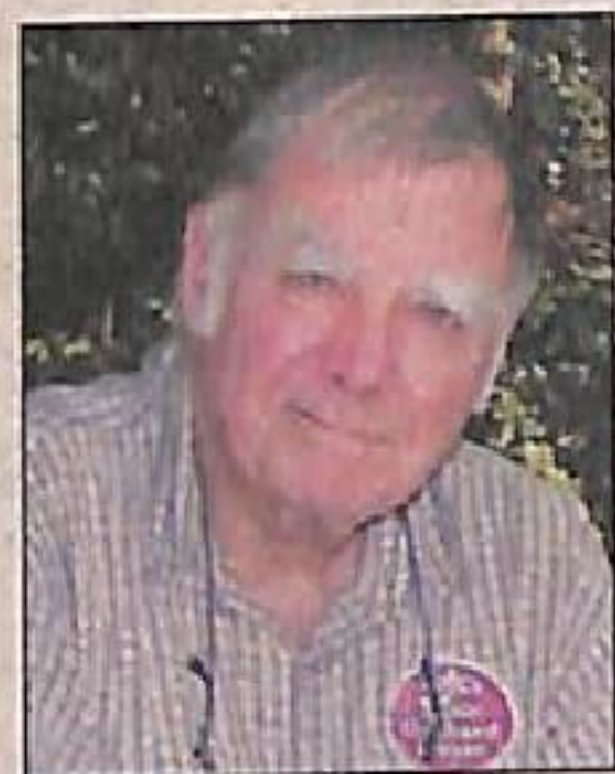


# Women's Institutes have proud history in Muskoka

## Around Muskoka Lakes

By Jack Hutton

Bala's oldest resident, Edna Templeton, joined her sisters of the Women's Institute to attend a lunch honouring the proud history of the organization in Glen Orchard and Muskoka.



Templeton, who turns 96 in June, is a big part of that history. In the 1950s, she was president of the Muskoka WI district, supervising 13 local branches, a string of 4-H clubs and WI-run classes that taught sewing, millinery and other skills.

On Monday, May 2, Templeton was by far the senior WI members who met at the historic Women's Institute building in Glen Orchard. Times have changed for the WI, once one of Canada's most influential rural organizations. The Glen Orchard WI branch, now down to six members, may soon be disbanding, leaving the Windermere branch as the last left in west Muskoka. A branch in Dwight will be the nearest WI neighbour.

The history of Women's Institutes goes back to a Hamilton woman, Adelaide Hoodless, whose son died in 1889 after drinking impure milk. Determined to improve education for young wives like herself, Hoodless helped launch the first Women's Institute at Stoney Creek in 1897.

In 1903, Hoodless invited a small group of women near Port Carling to the Lake Rosseau island cottage

owned by she and her husband. That began a century of WI activity all across Muskoka.

In Bala, WI members like Templeton were the moving force behind the building of the Bala Community Centre in the 1950s. With the help of the local Lion's group and other organizations, the WI raised enough money to build the community centre before handing it over to the town for \$1.

Three cheers for all the women of the WI who have done so much!

The highlight of the past month in west Muskoka has to be the first production hosted by the New Actors' Colony Theatre on April 9 at the Bala Community Centre. Two main actors mesmerized an audience of 108 people, but for locals the real star of the fast-moving comedy, *Shakespeare on Trial*, was Bala resident Dan Goforth, summoned out of the audience without warning to play the part of Romeo in the final minutes.

The real test of the theatre company will come later this summer when live theatre will be offered five nights a week at the Community Centre, starting Wed., July 13. Eight gifted young actors begin nine-hour daily rehearsals June 28, for four plays plus other productions still to be announced.

The question remains, will audiences keep coming?

Toronto actor John Holden faced a similar challenge when he founded Canada's first professional summer theatre company in Bala in 1934. The Actor's Colony Theatre company lasted nine seasons until its venue, the Victory Hall, burned in late 1942. It succeeded because of overwhelming Muskoka support, and I'm betting the same thing will happen again.



Edna Templeton (seated) is joined by members at an annual meeting of the Muskoka district of the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario.

Photograph: Jack Hutton