

# The World's Biggest Women's Club— A Canadian Original

The Federated Women's Institute of Canada, which grew from 76 supporters in 1897 to a world-wide organization of 6,000,000 — was the brain-child of a rural Canadian housewife, Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless.

For one dollar a year and the will to dedicate herself to home, country, and the world beyond, any woman: grandmother, grand-daughter, tall, short, rich or poor, can join a Women's Institute. In Canada, where 95,000 members are spread across 5,300 rural communities, each group is both a social circle and a service club. Self-improvement is another reason for getting together.

Belonging means more than being "dedicated to home economics, citizenship, agriculture and cultural activities" as some of the WI handbooks put it. The various local groups have at one time or another done such things as pay a choir's entry fee to a music festival in New Brunswick, sponsor a craft course at Macdonald College in Quebec, meet Hungarian refugees landing at Gander, and welcome distraught Japanese-Canadian women to the Kootenay area in British Columbia after they had been removed from their homes on the coast in 1942.

There are few limitations to WI thinking. Being kind to lonely bachelors, learning better ways to sew, publishing a cook book, taking care of children, leading drives for local improvements—these are typical of their interests. Their energy often puts the so-called stronger sex to shame.

For 61 years, men have been heckling the work and devotion their wives and daughters give to their clubs. But usually, they live to swallow their words. There are signs of vague resentment in seeing women strike out on their own to get things done. Husbands may sometimes complain about having to baby-sit, make their own dinner or shell out for a special fund-raising bee, but still, there is reluctant praise for the girl's accomplishments.

Doing something besides dishes and housework is usually one good reason why the girls get so much kick out of their own club. Meeting other people, developing new interests, and finding self-fulfillment in good works are all good enough as an explanation for the loyalty each member has to the individual club and to the organization as a whole. Sleds, boats, horses, tractors, bicycles and planes have all been used at one time or another to get to an urgent meeting. Members have braved weathers that the most stalwart husband would refuse to face. Attendance at meetings is high.

And yet, this whole great venture was born of one woman's personal tragedy. The first Women's Institute in the world was founded by Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless, at the village of Stoney Creek, Ontario, on Feb. 19, 1897. Mrs. Hoodless had lost her eldest child, just eighteen months old, as the result of using impure milk. She tortured herself with the thought that she should have known better. Finally, she resolved to do everything in her power to help others avoid her mistake — to bring to all women the education necessary to prevent similar tragedies.

Mrs. Hoodless believed that the educational system in Ontario at that time was all wrong. Boys and girls received the same type of education despite the fact that their normal life work was so different. "Girls," said Mrs. Hoodless, "should be educated to fit them properly for the sphere of life for which they were destined, that of homemaking, and this should be done by teaching them domestic science in public schools."

The first meeting at Squires Hall, Stoney Creek, Ontario, was attended by 101 women and one man, a Mr. Lee, who acted as the chairman. Through their organization, the members hoped to improve the physical, intellectual and cultural conditions of their homes. It was much more than a mere gathering to exchange gossip and recipes. Recorded in the early minutes is this statement: "A nation cannot rise above the level of its homes. Therefore, we

women must work and study together to raise our homes to the highest possible level."

A movement so rich in its potential for doing good could not be confined to any single province or nation. It was discovered that rural women have



**MRS. KEITH RAND, Port Williams, N.S.**  
President of the Federated Women's Institutes  
of Canada

the same problems in other places than Stoney Creek. The idea spread quickly to the Canadian West, the Maritimes, Quebec and the United States. By 1913, nine provinces had Women's Institutes. (Newfoundland joined in 1951.) During World War I, the movement jumped to Britain and then to Belgium. There was a flood of enquiries from women in all parts of the world, wanting advice and assistance in organizing similar groups. The logical step was toward an international sisterhood of rural women. In 1933, The Associated Country Women of the World was formed at a conference in Stockholm, Sweden — under the direction of a Canadian, Mrs. Alfred Watt.

Now flourishing in twenty-seven countries with a membership of six million, it is the largest and most important women's organization in the world. With all the nations rapidly becoming close neighbours, the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada is a vital link in building comradeship, helpfulness and steadfastness in a world which shakes at the threat of an atom.