

# Lady Tweedsmuir's legacy

Whether it is a hang-over from the popular television series "Roots", or the maturing nature of a nation which this year marks its 125th anniversary, one thing is certain.

Interest in things historical, and in genealogy in particular, is running at an all-time high.

Elderly family members, people working at archives, in newspaper "morgues", or at public libraries are aware of the interest.

They get consulted on a regular basis by everyone from persons researching family trees, to historians doing pieces on cheese factories, sawmills, or what have you, to youngsters doing school essays.

But there's another excellent source of family and community history that is sometimes overlooked.

Since the 1930s Women's Institutes in Canada have been keeping histories of their localities. In most cases, these records are complete and many date back to the 1880s.

Marcie Johnston, president of the Britton WI, is typical of WI members who are responsible for their histories.

The Britton group recently held a work meeting on its "Tweedsmuir" history book.

Families in the community are being telephoned for an update on their farm, on house and barn improvements, or other changes, also changes in landscaping where applicable.

The Britton WI is also hoping to get an updated photo of families in its area for the history. Each member has been assigned lots and concessions on which to get updated information.

## BEGINNINGS

The WI history books are named in honor Lady Tweedsmuir, wife of Canada governor general from 1935-40 Lord Tweedsmuir, who was at least as well-known as the popular writer John Buchan.

Lady Tweedsmuir herself was a prolific author, writing well into her 80s. Her better-known works are "A Study of Wellington After Waterloo", and a biography of novelist Louisa May Alcott.

Lady Tweedsmuir in her native England was also a devoted Institute member and took a great interest in the Women's Institutes of Canada.

"It was at a meeting of the Athen's Women's Institute, now of Leeds East District, that Lady Tweedsmuir stressed the need for preserving the history of our Canadian people, customs and activities of our developing land," reports Mrs. Johnston. "This was in 1936."

Lady Tweedsmuir's interest was timely, Mrs. Johnston notes.

"Canada was a young country and pioneering was relatively close to people in many areas. Tales of trials and tribulations of earlier days were still being told to younger generations."

Lady Tweedsmuir's proposition to preserve local history was forwarded to the provincial board of the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario. It took some time, but the idea caught on.

In 1945, the provincial convenor, Mrs. L. Reesor, proposed in her report that WI branches begin "village" history books.

In that same year the FWIO magazine, Home and Country, published a list of suggestions for compiling "Tweedsmuir Village Histories". The list included subject matter and items to be covered and an order of contents.

Lady Tweedsmuir was delighted and responded with a "Forward" for the histories which is still placed in each Tweedsmuir history.

## FORWARD

Her "Forward", reads as follows:

"I am so glad to hear that the Women's Institutes of Ontario are going to compile village history books. Events move very fast nowadays; houses are pulled down, new roads are made, and the aspect of the countryside changes completely sometimes in a short time.

"It is a most useful and satisfying task for Women's Institute members to see that nothing valuable is lost or forgotten, and women should be on the alert always to guard the traditions of their homes, and to see that water color sketches and prints, poems and prose legends should find their way into these books.

"The oldest people in the village will tell us fascinating stories of what they remember, which the younger members can write down, thus making a bridge between them and events which happened before they were born.

"After all, it is the history of humanity which is continually interesting to us, and your village histories will be the basis of accurate facts much valued by historians of the future.

"I am proud to think that you have called them 'The Tweedsmuir Village Histories'."

According to Marcie Johnston, this "official launching" in 1945 of the Tweedsmuir histories of local communities "has become one of the most outstanding and valuable projects of the Women's Institutes".

The word "village" was later dropped from the title so all branches were free to compile their community histories, Mrs. Johnston added.

## SUBJECTS

The main subjects contained in Tweedsmuir Histories include:

The branch Institute and its contribution to the welfare and development of the community; general community history including the geography and topography of the locality, municipal government, all aspects of farming, homes, education, trade and commerce and recreation.

The histories also contain complete histories of individual farms and families, churches and their organizations, schools and libraries, industries past and present, war records of the community and other historical facts.

"Altogether, the community history is a comprehensive, factual collection of historical data and treasured pictures of a local community, provided by the people, of the people and for the people," Mrs. Johnston said.

Most of the histories, she added, have been researched back to the days of Crown lands.

At the 1957 annual meeting of the provincial board of the FWIO, Mrs. R. C. Walker of St. George was appointed the first provincial curator.

She conducted courses in the compilation of the histories, and a bylaw passed in 1962 made official the office of curator in WI branches, districts and areas throughout Ontario.

In a count taken back in 1972,

there were 1,300 Tweedsmuir History books in Ontario.

Mrs. Johnston said each time a new Institute is chartered, a Tweedsmuir History is begun and through dedication, research and hard work, the community is recorded as far back as possible.

She also noted that, thanks to the interest and expertise of former Perth County archivist James Anderson, Institutes are now using special glues and acid-free paper for their history books to ensure a good state of preservation.

"Jim Anderson also advised us not to use ordinary ballpoint pens," Mrs. Johnston said.

Because of the size of the Britton WI Tweedsmuir History, the Institute authorized Mrs. Johnston to purchase new history books — complete with acid-free pages, of course.

The keeping of the history is an exacting task.

"Information up to the present is a never-ending search for detail," Mrs. Johnston said.

However, given the value of the books, she says the result is worth the effort.

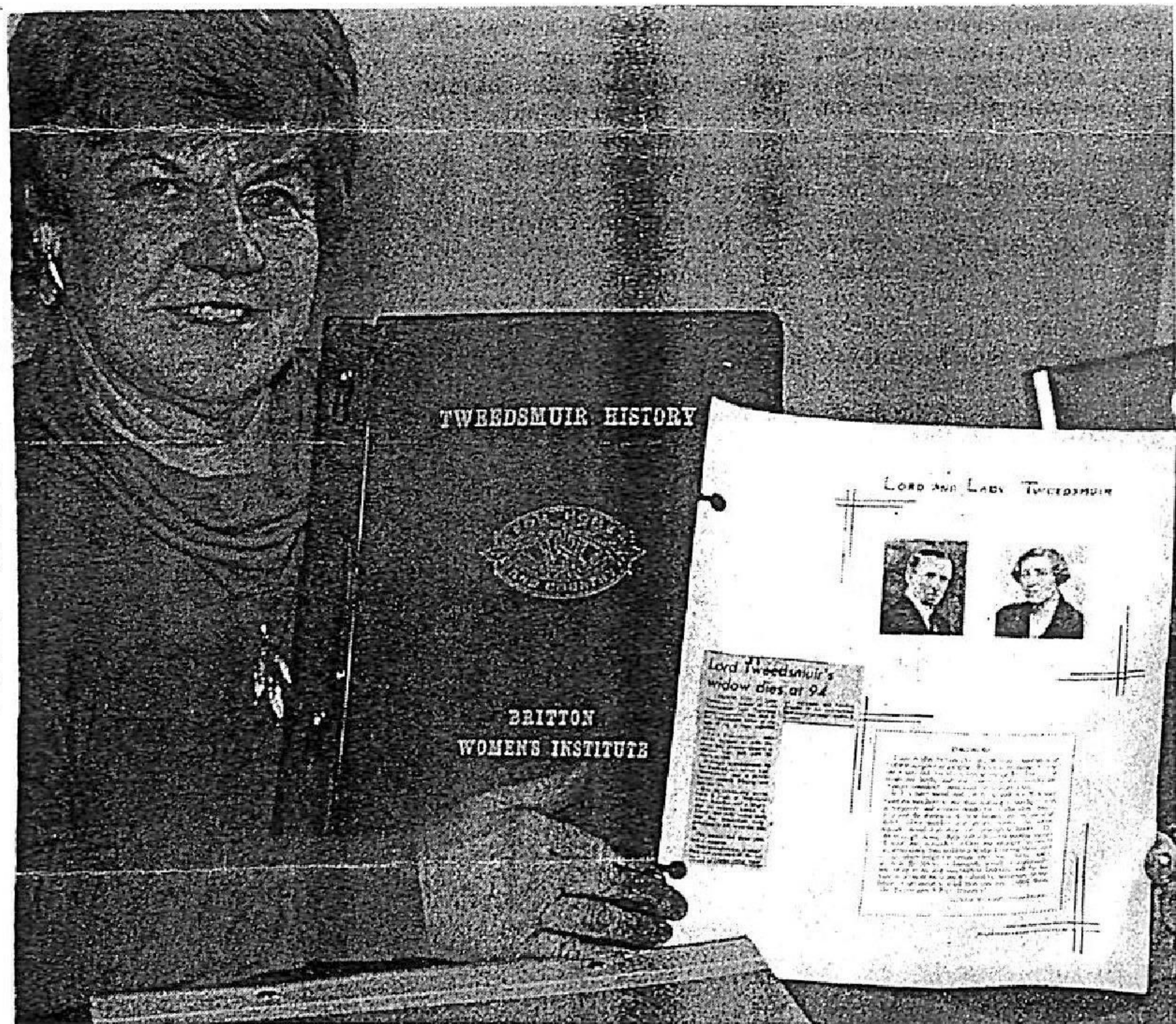
The histories, she said, are of interest to people researching family trees, to Heritage 4-H clubs, and to anyone interested in gaining a thorough knowledge of their community.

The spouses of Canadian governor generals, taken as a whole, might be considered as forgotten people. However, that cannot be said of Lady Tweedsmuir.

Her legacy of the importance of preserving community history is alive in the land — thanks to the dedication of generations of WI members.

Her ladyship had reason to be proud.

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RESERVING HISTORY—Marcie Johnston displays the large Tweedsmuir History of the Britton Women's Institute. The page on the right contains Lady Tweedsmuir's "Forward". In the foreground are the acid-free pages for a new history. (Banner Photo)