

## WI's beginnings

*Ontario Farm Women April 1985*

In 1857, a "woman with a vision" was born. She was a moving force in creating home economics courses in Ontario schools; took part in expanding the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) on a national level; served on the International Council of Women; and was chosen as most distinguished woman of the year by a British publication.

However, in rural Ontario and the small communities and backroads across the world, she is remembered as the founder of Women's Institute.

The woman is Adelaide Hunter Hoodless, raised a farm girl in Brant County. She was married and had four children, but the last child, John Harold, died at 18 months from drinking contaminated milk. This prompted Hoodless to launch a campaign to educate farm and urban women alike on the hygienic value of food and to raise the standard of life for farm people.

Hoodless initially met with the farm women who would help create the first Women's Institute group through Erland Lee, a young farmer and secretary of the Farmer's Institute of Saltfleet Township. He had heard Hoodless speak at the Agricultural College at Guelph and requested her to give a talk at a farm meeting in his own township.

She did so, and in a subsequent meeting inspired the farm women of that area to form the first Women's Institute in the world. The date was February 19, 1897. According to a biography on Hoodless written by Ruth Howes, the women hoped to improve the home from the physical, intellectual and cultural standpoints, making Hoodless their honorary president. They even adopted her suggestion for a motto, "for home and country" - one

that is still used today.

The idea of a rural women's group spread, and it became a national organization in Canada in 1919.

Today, the Federated Women's Institute of Ontario (FWIO) boasts of over 25,600 members, entailing 1,152 branches across the province. There is also the Federated Women's Institute of Canada (FWIC), which encompasses membership from all 10 provinces. Formed in 1919, its intentions are similar to those of the provincial organizations, except it works on a national basis, co-ordinating programs of provincial units and initiating nation-wide programs.

But Women's Institute has spread far beyond this. In 1933 it became international with the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW). Having a membership of over nine million in 66 countries of the world, the ACWW works closely with the United Nations, and holds a world conference every three years to decide policies, discuss matters of mutual concern, elect officers and vote on resolutions "of importance to all."

In Ontario, FWIO is divided into different levels, beginning with the individual member, to branch, district, area, and finally the provincial body.

Members hold convenorships under which speakers are brought in for meetings to discuss issues. They convenorships are: agriculture and Canadian Industries; citizenship and world affairs; education and cultural activities; family and consumer affairs; and resolutions.

While WI was originated by mostly farm women, its members now share a variety of backgrounds, including farm and town women, part-

time farmers, and women who work full or part-time out of the home. A woman may become a member of WI when she is 16, although many members report their branches to have an average age of somewhere between the mid-40s and mid-50s.

The organization has created another level of itself to attract younger people. This is the Junior Women's Institute for girls from 14 to 16 years of age. •