

# Torn between tradition and transition

## Women's Institute

By Agnes Bongers  
Women's Editor

**T**he Federated Women's Institute of Ontario (FWIO), grandmother of today's farm women's movement, is finding itself in a dilemma. Wedged between a supportive but declining membership, yet fighting the antiquated image of a slow-acting, older women's coalition, WI has become torn between tradition and transition: struggling to maintain the roots that please its loyal followers, yet fighting to present a young, contemporary image in hopes of bolstering its ranks.

For as one flag-waving, true WI-devotee put it, if the organization does not change to become more attractive to a younger membership, "it will surely die."

A sad fate for a body which has seen itself survive through 88 years, expanding in that time from a lone Stoney Creek branch, to a national and international organization. In Ontario, WI now boasts of about 25,600 members dispersed across 1,150 branches throughout the province.

With that kind of membership already existing, it must have something to offer rural women. Fellowship, education, and leadership training would be three quick answers WI members would offer. The results of involvement with WI, according to Rebecca Johnson, of the Thunder Bay area, are the molding of leaders who have gone on to become heads of communities and politicians.

She points out the well-structured organization offers a teaching of parliamentary procedures considered "second to none." Few would doubt this statement, but this particular gold star for WI has turned out to be a detriment in retaining new, younger members, looking for an expedient method to get their message through the organization and on to government.

Women who have turned to some of the newly-formed farm women's organizations complain WI ties up its resolutions in a knotwork of detail and procedure, and they charge the WI is not considering agriculture to a great degree in its resolutions and regular meetings.

Donna Lunn and Suzanne Leach are both members of Women for the Support of Agriculture groups, located in different counties. They say they are primarily interested in learning about agriculture, and could not find this direct approach to farm issues with WI.

Women's Institute members are generally not pleased with these and other women's decisions to create new rural organizations instead of using the existing one of WI to further their causes.

Marcie Johnston, an executive member from Perth County, reports the agriculture convenorship of WI is available as an avenue to learn more about the industry, and wishes farm women would turn to this group. She accuses the other organizations of involving women strictly in agricultural issues, not allowing for the creation of the "well-rounded"

person WI tries to form.

Some argue the two organizations are completely different, and offer women something the other cannot. It is for that reason that people such as Lorna Campbell, Ilderton, chose to join both the local WSA and WI, feeling she could contribute and learn from both groups. Lorna's only complaint is that the two organizations do not work well together.

But it would prove a benefit to rural women as a group if they would take an existing organization and mold it into something useful to themselves and their community, believes Bonnie Popov, Essex County. Rather than forming a new group, she and women in her area did just that with their local WI branch.

Bonnie reluctantly joined with WI after a friend coaxed her into it. Up until that time she had the image of WI members as "grey-haired old ladies."

When she joined, Popov remembers the women at that time were basically members who did nothing. But the Essex County farm woman took charge and now meetings include talks on Block Parenting, computers, and lectures by police officers. Popov and her friends brought the dying group from a membership of six to 26, with an average age now in the mid-30s.



W.I. member, Marjorie Hedger, helps Elgin Manor (St. Thomas) resident, Blanche Bogart.