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Women's lib? It started right on our doorstep

You probably didn't know it, but the women's liberation movement started right here in the Hamilton area.

Who says so? The president of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada, Mrs. John McLean.

According to her, the mother of women's lib was none other than Adelaide Hunter Hoodless of Hamilton, who began campaigning for home economics classes for women after the tragic loss of her 18-month-old son.

The child died of an infection, caused by drinking raw milk that hadn't been boiled.

Home

Mrs. Hoodless was determined that other women would have the knowledge to prevent similar tragedies and she began a campaign for household science classes in schools, said Mrs. McLean.

This campaign took her to a Farmer's Institute meeting in Stoney Creek in February, 1897, at the home of Erland Lee. Mrs. Hoodless persuaded the women to form an organization of their own to improve their homemaking skills.

In the Lee home the constitution was written for what became the Stoney Creek Women's Institute.

The Erland Lee homestead in Stoney Creek has been restored to an 1850s decor by the Ontario women's institutes. It opened to the public in August last year.

That first organization was committed to "improving physical, intellectual and cultural conditions in the home" and raising the standard of homemaking," early minutes of their meetings record.

These were rural women and with the help of farm organizations in a predominantly rural Canada, the idea spread across the country.

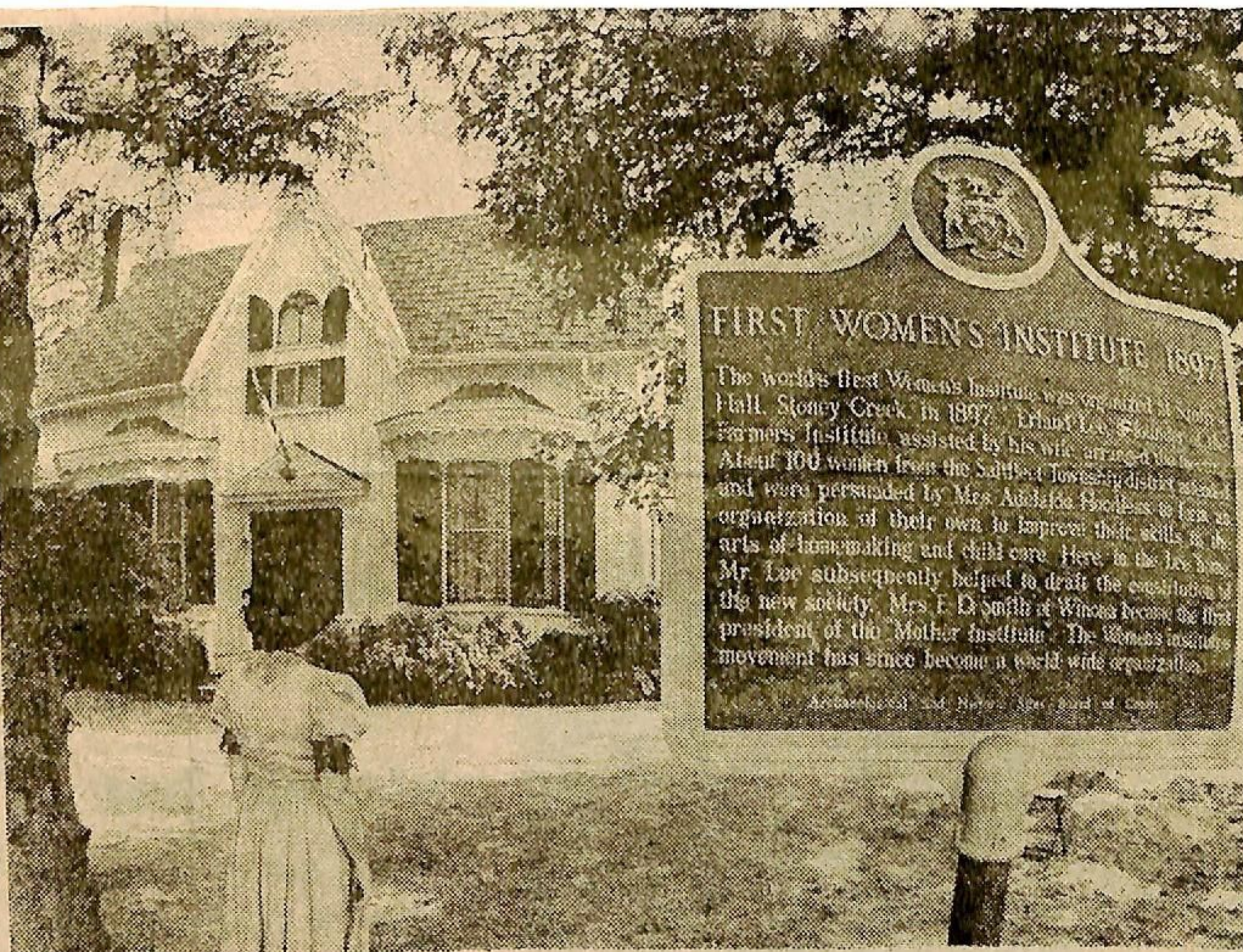
Leader

In 1919 delegates from the provinces met in Winnipeg and the result was the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada, with the blessing of the federal agriculture department.

Now, with a growing number leaving the farms for urban life, the FWIC membership has levelled off at 57,000.

Mrs. McLean is a 47-year-old mother of three from Eureka, N.S., a Sunday school teacher, church treasurer, 4-H leader and active in other organizations in Pictou county. She said the institute encourages members to take an active part in everything.

"We're criticized by many as being an older women's



The Erland Lee home in Stoney Creek . . . an early bastion of the women's rights movement.

organization," she said, with some women's liberation groups regarding the institutes as outdated.

"We emphasize the importance of the family in our society. I think the women's institute has been women's lib for a long time, but it doesn't mean we went out and burned our bras and did all these other ridiculous things that they do. We've been fighting for equal rights . . . It's old hat to us."

"If there's a job to fill, whether it be on a school board, a municipal council or as a member of the legislature we train our women to be ready to take on any of these positions.

"If there is a need we fill it."

Mrs. McLean, a soft-spoken, blue-eyed blonde who was elected president at the institutes' triennial convention in Banff last June, has been a member of the organization for more than 20 years.

For the next three years she will divide her time between the family dairy farm, the FWIC's national office here and visits to provincial organizations.

Health

Among the recent achievements of provincial institutes that Mrs. McLean takes pride in are:

- The Alexandria Solarium and Crippled Children's Hospital in Vancouver.
- Alberta's free radium treatment under the Canadian Cancer Society.

- A New Brunswick home for the aged.

- Mobile facilities of Prince Edward Island's health program, which ensure adequate health protection in outlying areas.

- The Ontario branch's work in Ceylon, Korea and Greece in public health projects.

- Saskatchewan's homemakers' clubs, which work at improving the standard of living of Indian women.

FIRST WOMEN'S INSTITUTE 1897

The world's first Women's Institute was organized in Stoney Creek, Ontario, in 1897. Erland Lee, a farmer, assisted by his wife, arranged for the first meeting. About 100 women from the Saltfleet Township district met and were persuaded by Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless to form an organization of their own to improve their skills in the arts of homemaking and child care. Here in the Lee home Mr. Lee subsequently helped to draft the constitution of the new society. Mrs. F. D. Smith of Wilton became the first president of the Mother Institute. The Women's Institute movement has since become a world-wide organization.

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