

Who started WI

75

years

ago?

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Was it a man or a woman who founded the world's largest women's rural organization?

Should Adelaide Hoodless or Erland Lee get the honors for starting the first Women's Institute in Stoney Creek in 1897?

It depends, it seems, on who tells the story.

The dispute continues as members prepare to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the founding on Feb. 19.

The dispute appears to be a question of women's rights — ironic because the world-wide organization, the Associated Country Women of the World, certainly cannot be classified as a group fighting for women's rights.

In actual fact, Mrs. Hoodless and Mr. Lee both played major roles in the founding of the first WI. To the more peace-loving WI members they are known as the co-founders. But Lee supporters and Hoodless supporters remain adamant.

Whether one or the other was the founder, or they were co-founders, amounts to a fine point of interpretation. The story of the founding goes like this.

In 1897, the South Wentworth Farmers' Institute was a flourishing society. Each year the institute held a ladies' night when the only concession was to have a bit of music on the program, a vocal solo and a piano instrumental. The provincial department of agriculture supplied men speakers, on request, to talk on agricultural subjects.

When the program committee met that year, Mr. Lee, the secretary boldly suggested they invite a woman to speak for their ladies' night program.

The woman in question was Mrs. Hoodless of Hamilton, who had lost a two-year old son through feeding of impure milk. She claimed she had been improperly informed and because of the tragedy she strived to have domestic science taught to girls in high schools. Her cause had led her to speak at a farmers' meeting at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph

where Mr. Lee heard her. Although he was determined to have Mrs. Hoodless speak on ladies' night, his institute colleagues would not hear of it. A woman's place, they argued, was in the home — not on a public platform.

And so it was agreed at the committee meeting to have their regular government speaker address them. The question on what item to have on the program for ladies' night, the members left in trust to Mr. Lee.

He then extended a personal invitation to Mrs. Hoodless to speak at the meeting.

Successful

As chairman for the evening Mr. Lee was successful in his plot. He managed to both liberate the women and pull a coup over his chauvinist colleagues.

But if there were red faces in the crowd that night the reddest must have belonged to the government speaker who preceded Mrs. Hoodless with his topic — the Feeding of Calves. During her speech she said there was a need for women to be informed on the care and feeding of infants.

It is at this point in the story that opinions differ. Miss Marjorie Lee of Hamilton (Mr. Lee's daughter), who wrote a history of the founding, claims her father was so impressed by Mrs. Hoodless' comment on the need for women to be informed that after he thanked her, he asked how many women would attend if he called a meeting to organize a Women's Institute. All 30 women present stood, Miss Lee's report says.

However, Mrs. J. McKinley Morden, 95, the only living charter member now a resident of a Burlington nursing home, claims this is not true.

Mrs. Morden, who was 20 when she attended the ladies' night meeting, says Mrs. Hoodless suggested it would be a good idea if the women had an organization like the Farmers' Institute. This suggestion, Mrs. Morden says, was made during her speech.

However, Mrs. Morden concedes the dispute is "silly and foolish" because Mr. Lee also was involved in it. "It's the 100 women who attended

the first meeting who should get the credit. If those women hadn't taken hold of it there wouldn't have been a Women's Institute today. They are the ones who made it a success."

In any case, an organizational meeting was scheduled for Feb. 19 with Mrs. Hoodless as guest speaker. Mr. Lee and his wife became the first public relations people for the WI by spreading the word of the coming meeting, driving around the area in a cutter.

The men still opposed the idea of women organizing. Comments of the day were: "Oh, well, let them start. It won't last long without a man to run it."

The organizational meeting was held with 100 women and Mr. Lee attending. He was named chairman with Mrs. Hoodless as honorary president. Mrs. E. D. Smith of Winona was president, Miss Margaret Nash, Stoney Creek, secretary and Mrs. John McNeilly, Stoney Creek, treasurer.

Objections

The constitution, similar to that of the Farmers' Institute, was written by the Lees over the objections of husbands who said the WI would cost money. "Let's put the fee at 25 cents a year," Mrs. Lee said. Over another sneering remark — "Let them try it. All women fight and it will break up" — Mrs. Lee said: "We'll start with the Lord's Prayer. That should put us in a good frame of mind."

At the first meeting the organization was called the Women's department of the Farmers' Institute of South Wentworth.

But at the next meeting it was changed to the Women's Institute of Saltfleet Township. Then, finally, when other branches were organized in the township, the original group became the Stoney Creek Women's Institute.

Mrs. Hoodless always took an interest in the WI and was invited to speak to them many times. On one occasion, she and her husband were invited for the presentation of the new pins inscribed with the motto: For Home and Country. Mr. Hoodless was asked to present the first pin to his wife as a mark of the