

# The Women's Institute

A forum to discover and stimulate leadership



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The Women's Institute motto — For Home and Country — is as potent for its members today as it was when the WI was founded nearly 84 years ago.

Although the dominant mood of the Sixties and Seventies has been liberalism and the strident, demanding voice of the 'women's movement', the WI is by far the nation's largest women's organization, with more paid up membership than political parties.

In Ontario, there are 1,224 branches, with 28,064 members and 3,189 life members. Nationally, there are 2,576 branches with 51,021 members.

Yet despite this enormous network, the Women's Institute remains almost maddeningly homes-

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pun and unsophisticated, benign and selfless in everything its members stand for. They are, nevertheless, surprisingly effective in what they set out to achieve. Perhaps one of the reasons for the passionate unworldliness of the WI is that it has stuck remarkably close to its original design.

The WI was founded on Feb. 19, 1897, by Adelaide Hoodless, born on a farm near St. George, in Brant County in 1910. She had been shocked by the death of a child as a result of ignorance and lack of hygiene and she was determined to spend the rest of her life educating women specifically as home-makers and citizens.

She also, with incredible foresight, saw the potential of an organization that provided, not only

the opportunity for women to exchange information, but a forum for any woman, however obscure, to state her views on any topic, except party politics, and have those views heard and seriously considered.

One person who speaks for all WI members and everything the movement stands for is Mrs. Vera Collings, of R R 7, Napanee. She is provincial board director for the Kingston area, which embraces the counties of Leeds, Frontenac, Lennox and Addington.

Vera joined the Victoria II Women's Institute along with her mother, Mary Graham, in 1945, when they lived in Selby. One look at the five main principles of the WI was enough to convince Vera she should join the WI.

"These principles," she said, "were aimed at helping women acquire sound and approved home-

-making skills; helping to discover; to stimulate and develop leadership; helping to identify and resolve the needs and problems in the community; helping to promote the use of available resource materials and helping to develop better informed, happier and more useful citizens.

The wisdom of the WI is first-principle wisdom, derived from practical domestic considerations and priorities. In conjunction with the ministry of agriculture, short courses in the art of making jam and bread, knitting, sewing and canning are given.

For junior members, there are courses in etiquette and table manners, among others.

Vera belongs to Maple Ridge Women's Institute, which has a membership of 35. A former branch president is Mrs. Martha Bielish, now a senator in Ottawa. The current president is Mrs. Emmie Oddie.

Vera outlined the format of a typical WI meeting. Meetings are held once a month, she said, and each meeting opens with the singing of the institute ode.

"There's always a roll call," Vera adds, "and then we proceed with

our topic — either a speaker or a project."

These projects take in agriculture and Canadian industries, citizenship and world affairs, education and cultural activities and standing committees.

"Through the WI," Vera says, "resolutions are presented to different levels of government. The WI is vitally concerned about its country. Observe our motto! If something is needed in the community and the need is there, the WI goes to work."

One project Vera is proud the WI threw its support behind was the county hospital in Napanee. Funds were raised and finally the project became a reality.

Another project dear to the heart of Vera and her colleagues are the provincial and district scholarships awarded across the province for girls wishing to enter university.

On the local level, the highlight is the annual presentation of the Annie G. Haggerty scholarship, honoring the memory of the Napanee resident who rose to international prominence as an outstanding WI leader.

Practically every WI branch has its Tweedsmuir history — a compilation of historic events in each community. Lady Tweedsmuir was the wife of the governor-general of Canada (1936) and was an active worker in the WI in Britain.

As the 54th annual convention of the Kingston area of the Women's Institute will be held in Napanee Thursday and Friday, I would like to offer a tip of the hat to these women, for nostalgic reasons.

I remember, in Britain, during the last war, the ministry of agriculture inviting the WI to organize a co-operative fruit preservation scheme to use surplus fruit. It was the WI who found the solution to the shortage of vitamin C when citrus fruits were scarce. The members collected enormous quantities of rose hips.

I also remember the first thing I saw on cold, draughty, bombed out railway stations while on my way to my RAF station — the gleaming tea urn, and behind it, tirelessly tap turning, the splendid volunteer women from the Women's Institute.

God bless, you ladies!

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