

THE WOMEN'S INSTITUTE 1897 - 1972

In September 1881, Adelaide Hunter married John Hoodless a manufacturer and dealer in furniture, in Brantford. Four children were born to this marriage. At the age of 18 months the youngest child, John, died. When her doctor told Mrs. Hoodless that her child had probably died from drinking contaminated milk, she was shocked that she could have been so neglectful. She was more shocked to learn that many babies were dying from the same cause. Soon she was heading a campaign against the selling of impure milk in Hamilton. Meanwhile she was conceiving in her mind the thought that Domestic Science should be taught to girls as part of their formal education.

In 1884, the Ontario Government had sponsored the formation of the Farmers' Institute. The purpose of this organization was to get farmers together in groups to study subjects pertaining to the improvement of the farm industry. Mrs. Hoodless addressed an almost entirely male audience in Guelph and she accused them of being more concerned about the health of their animals than of their children.

A young farmer, Erland Lee, Secretary of the Farmers' Institute in Wentworth Co., was so impressed by Mrs. Hoodless and her ideas that he invited her to speak at the Ladies Night of the Saltfleet Twp. Farmers' Institute February 12, 1897.

In the course of her address she pointed out that if men needed an organization to help them grow better crops, perhaps such an organization was more important for women, since their work, homecraft and mothercraft concerned the home and care of the loved ones who dwell therein.

The proposition was put to the women and 35 indicated they would be interested and agreed to attend a meeting in Squires Hall at Stoney Creek. At that meeting on a stormy February 19, 1897, 101 women and one man, Mr. Erland Lee, showed up. An association known as the Women's Department of Domestic Economy in Affiliation with the Farmers' Institute of South Wentworth, was formed.

After the organization of the Women's Institute, Mrs. Hoodless was involved in many interests especially the promotion of the teaching of Household Science. She was a very fluent speaker, and travelled widely in Canada, the U.S.A. and Great Britain.

On the eve of her 52nd birthday, she was scheduled to speak at the Federation of Women's Clubs in Massey Hall, Toronto. She complained of a bad headache and when she was halfway through a brilliant speech, she stopped, took a sip of water, the glass crashed to the floor and Adelaide Hoodless was dead, February 26, 1910.

Many tributes were paid to this inspired woman. A cairn is erected to her memory a half-mile from her homestead in Brant County. On it she is credited with having founded the first Women's Institute and was active in the establishment of the MacDonald Institute in Guelph, MacDonald College at St. Anne de Bellevue and the National Council of Women.

In 1961, the F.W.I.C. Homestead Committee renovated the birthplace. The house furnishings were donated by many institutes across Canada and this was accomplished as a Centennial project July 1, 1967.

This is the year of the 75th anniversary of the W.I. As an anniversary project, the W.I. purchased the Erland Lee Homestead which is situated at the top of Lee Mountain about two miles east of Stoney Creek. The Lee family were of United Empire Loyalist Stock, having come to Canada in 1792. Erland Lee was born May 3, 1864. Mrs. Lee was one of the first directors of the Stoney Creek W.I. and it was her suggestion that the meetings should open by repeating the Lord's Prayer in unison.

It was through the efforts of Mr. & Mrs. Lee that the first W.I. was formed and it was on the walnut dining table in their home that the original constitution of the organization was penned by Mrs. Lee. This dining room table remains a treasured piece of furniture in the home.

In 1961 a memorial plaque in front of the Lee Homestead was unveiled in their memory.

For many years it has been the hope of the Ontario Women's Institute that the Lee Homestead could be purchased to become an archive for treasured documents. And so it is with great pride that the Ontario W.I. have been able to accomplish this in the 75th year.

Pictures and full details of its furnishings may be seen in a book just published in 1972 in commemoration of the 75th Anniversary, "Ontario Women's Institute Story," which will be donated to the Eganville Public Library by the Golden Lake Women's Institute.