

ORIGIN OF THE WOMEN'S INSTITUTE

"Two people are given credit for the beginning of our organization, a man and a woman." Erland Lee heard Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless speak at Guelph on the subject, "The Value and Need of Domestic and Sewing in our Public Schools"--late in 1896.

Mrs. Hoodless is credited with the real founding of our organization because of the catastrophe in her home, through which her 18-month-old son died because of the use of impure milk in his diet. She felt she should have known more about baby care, and gave a great deal of her remaining years toward the furthering of the lot of women in our province. This probably accounted for the enthusiasm with which she presented her address at Guelph that day so many years ago.

Erland Lee was a prominent young farmer in Saltfleet township, Wentworth. At this time, in 1896, he was president of an organization known as the "Farmer's Experimental Union." He decided, after hearing Mrs. Hoodless' address, to ask her to speak to this union. This she did. The meeting was held at Stoney Creek and several women attended the meeting, an unprecedented event. During the course of the talk, Mrs. Hoodless stated that if an organization was good for farm men, there should be one of equal value to farm women. At the close of her address, Mr. Lee asked how many women would be interested in attending a meeting the following Friday, for the purpose of organizing a "Women's Institute." Thirty-five people signified their intention to attend. So it was that on Friday, February 19, 1897, Mrs. Hoodless to her amazement found on her arrival at "Squire's Hall," Stoney Creek, 101 women and one man. Needless to say the one man was Mr. Lee who acted as chairman for the evening, when was organized the first Women's Institute in the world.

When almost 60 years had elapsed since that date, the Women's Institute movement has spread to all parts of the world. There are close to 80,000 members found in branches now in all provinces of Canada, and in Ontario there are over 40,000 members found in 1,500 branches.

The work accomplished by this huge group of women is tremendous and too far-reaching to discuss in this article. Ontario Institutes have supported financially needy people in all parts of the world as well as within our own country. The rural women have become a highly educated, capable and versatile group of people through their association with this "Country Woman's University."

So today we have an adult organization handed down to us complete in its constitution to the most minute detail, as a result of the work of the members who have given to us the Women's Institute. We look to the brilliant future, only because of the accomplishments of the past.

In the Women's Institute we have an organization that has been of particular benefit to rural women during this past half-century. It has raised the standard of their social and economic activities and cultural opportunities by encouraging each member to keep in mind always that she is a link in the great chain of endeavour; not only as a practical partner in the world's business, but as well, a spiritual force in human affairs.

Now while we treasure accomplishments, let us look forward to a future fraught with endeavour. In the past half-century the past which has been rich in that we have become adult in our thinking. We take up the torch thrown by our builders of the past, and carry it on to attain accomplishments in the future, so vast and so fine that they are beyond our scope of vision in this, the present.