

Women's Institutes valuable part of 'her'-story

Heritage Perspectives

By
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Women's Institutes began in Ontario in 1897, and by 1919 the numerous branches joined to form the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario. As the idea spread to other provinces the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada was formed.

The movement eventually spread around the globe, currently exists in 60 countries, and is recognized as the largest women's organization in the world. By 1951, at its peak, there were 1,500 branches in Ontario alone. Today there are about 700 branches in Ontario, including many in Northern Ontario.

At the turn of the last century Ontario had a major percentage of its population on farms in rural areas. The provincial Department of Agriculture sponsored Farmers Institutes that provided adult education programs for farmers. Some women were marginally involved.

When the idea of a Women's Institute was proposed, it was scoffed at by many men, but the women persisted. In the years since, millions of women have been successfully involved.

In the early years, the program was primarily directed toward domestic science courses to teach housewives cooking and sewing skills, and how to keep their families healthy and safe.

More community activity

This soon changed to include more community activity. The current WI brochure states that they are "an organization for personal growth and community action." The community involvement included work with schools, recreation, and lobbying on the status of women, legally and politically.

During the two world wars they supported the Armed Forces, and after the war sponsored baby clinics and supported new immigrants.

The provincial government's Department of Agriculture supported the institutes with administrative staff, teachers, a magazine, and money for conventions at various levels into the 1980s. By then, the demographics had changed and there were not as many farms. With the

Women's Movement many other groups competed for membership. Many women also began to pursue careers outside the home. Membership dropped and some Women's Institutes disbanded, but the movement continued to thrive.

In the 1980s the Women's Institutes separated from the government and became autonomous, established its own offices, hired its own staff, ran its own training programs, and began publishing its own magazine. In 1997, in their centennial year, they published a definitive, award-winning history book called *For Home and Country: The Centennial History of the Women's Institutes of Ontario* written by Dr. Linda Ambrose, a professor at Laurentian University.

The book outlines in "detail that can only be touched upon here" the work, progress and evolution of the organization.

Copies available

Copies are available in local libraries, or from the provincial office in Guelph (519) 836-3078.

To understand the work of local branches, let's look briefly at one example, the Chisholm Township Women's Institute, one of seven in the Nipissing area (Phelps, Calvin, Mattawa, Rutherglen, Trout Mills and Kipling.)

The Chisholm group was formed in 1926 with 17 well-known women involved. The numbers grew and a wide range of work directed at the home and community was carried out. A playground was established, and later a community centre (in the old S.S. No. 1 school). The WI built a cairn in front of the Chisholm Central School and placed the bell from the old school, with a plaque, there commemorating the history of rural schools in the community. A swimming program was initiated that continues today under the township recreation committee. Work was done with young people, and some of these activities evolved into a 4H program.

They also supported the township schools in various ways, financially and otherwise.

Today, 75 years later, a look at last year's completed agenda shows a wide variety of activity, including regular monthly meetings, occasionally with other WI groups and tours of places of interest.

There was continuing involvement in the Powassan Fair. As a millennium project, planters were placed in

the township park, and 2,000 bulbs were planted, making a beautiful spring display. A king-sized quilt, made by the members, was raffled off as a fund-raiser. Several speakers gave presentations on various topics. A special self-defense course drew close to 40 women. The WI continues to cater for special events as required. Graduation gifts were presented to Grade six graduates, and an exchange student to Japan was supported.

This year's program is similar in nature, with the completed September meeting attracting several outside guests. Two members from each local WI will be part of a major new initiative of the provincial office on health care that will take place this year, partially supported by a \$229,000 grant from the Ministry of Health.

From a heritage perspective Women's Institutes have been collecting archival material for many years. In 1947 this process was formalized in the Tweedsmuir History Book Project (named after the Governor General's wife.) Each branch appointed a curator who co-ordinated the collection of material for scrapbooks for future reference. Elinor Smith, the local curator, received the Ontario Heritage Foundation Achievement Award recently on behalf of the WI.

Many of these books evolved into local history books sponsored directly by the WI, or supported by them. Much of this work has been micro-filmed (at the University of Guelph) and recognition has come from genealogical and historical groups for the work.

The Chisholm WI has produced two fine history books (*Our Chisholm Story Vol. 1, 1880-1960 and Volume II 1880-1972*). In 1996 the Chisholm WI established a community-based history book committee on which they were members, to produce a third book covering the past 25 years. Chisholm Council provided a repayable loan to add to the money raised by the committee to publish the book.

This book was launched at the Chisholm United Church's Millennium Homecoming on Sept. 23. Copies are available from the Township Office (724-3526) or at Bob's Kinfolk store for \$18 (while at Bob's Kinfolk, have a look at the latest WI fund-raiser quilt and pick up a raffle



Women's Institute members celebrating their 100th birthday in 1997.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE FEDERATED WOMEN'S INSTITUTES OF ONTARIO

ticket for a chance to win.

Many thanks to the Chisholm WI, and to the many Women's Institutes of Ontario, for making a significant contribution to the "her"-story of the province.

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