

Museum a legacy of Women's Institute

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IF you were born in the country there is a good chance your mother belonged to the local Women's Institute branch at one time or another. If she is currently a member, she would be among about nine million women worldwide who belong to the WI or affiliated organizations. It all started in Ontario 94 years ago and the Erland Lee Museum in Stoney Creek is one of the legacies.

It was a spirited speech at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph by a Hamilton woman, Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless, which sowed the seeds of what would become the worldwide women's organization. Mrs. Hoodless's speech made an impression on a public-spirited farmer, Erland Lee.

Mrs. Hoodless spoke of the need for a women's organization in which farming wives could meet in a sort of ideas and skills exchange aimed at community-building with the emphasis on family and women's contributions. Lee was so impressed he invited Mrs. Hoodless to address the Ladies' Night audience at the Saltfleet Farmers' Institute, near Hamilton. An inspired Lee and his wife Janet set about travelling the Township of Saltfleet for the next week. The idea was to encourage women to attend a formal meeting at Squire's Hall, Stoney Creek on Feb. 19, 1897.

Erland and Janet Lee were well suited to the concept spawned by Mrs. Hoodless. Both were socially spirited — he was a successful mixed farmer producing fancy dairy products from pure Jersey cattle stock in addition to maple syrup and fruit. She had been a teacher and had helped set up a kindergarten system for the City of Hamilton before retiring from teaching to marry Erland in 1889. Born in 1862, Janet was two years older than her husband, who had also been a teacher, secretary and member of the Farmers' Institute for 19 years, and Saltfleet Township's clerk for 20. At 21, he had received a certificate in agriculture from the Agriculture and Arts Association of Ontario.

It was at that Feb. 19 meeting the world's first Women's Institute was organized. Janet carefully penned a draft of the bylaws and constitution assisted by Erland, Senator E. D. Smith and Major F. M. Carpenter. The documents and walnut dining-room table on which they were drafted are to be found at the museum. Mrs. E. D. Smith would be-

come the first president and Janet one of the first directors.

To avoid elitism and exclusion of poorer women from the membership, Janet suggested an annual affordable membership fee of 25 cents. Half a century later the tradition of making membership affordable for all remains intact. The WI has always attracted women from a spectrum of income levels and members continue to be active in helping to organize and contribute to almost every local event from annual fetes and fairs to village concerts and children's parties.

The WI's roots remain in agricultural communities where it was born. In Ontario, the organization remains rurally based — although there are plans to extend branches into cities. Overseas this has already happened in such countries as Britain.

With an emphasis on effective homemaking, over the years the WI gained a reputation as a "jam and Jerusalem" organization, since most branches in small communities almost inevitably rub shoulders with the local church and members are usually involved in church functions. The tag however may be a little unfair in that the WI's constitution aims at creating a non-sectarian organization which welcomes Jews, Muslims, Hindus or persons of any other persuasion.

The WI remains a vehicle aimed at enhancing the traditional family unit and improving skills of the homemaker and farming wife through networking shared information.

The home of the Women's Institute had inauspicious beginnings. James Lee was a Loyalist with a British army background. He, his wife Hannah, and family arrived in Saltfleet Township from Maryland in 1792. He travelled with some furniture and plants which still survive. James built a log cabin from available pine which formed the backbone of the house which was later added to by five generations of the Lee family. James died accidentally from a blow to the head when an axe blade flew off its handle during the raising of Saltfleet's first frame house.

Converted by successive Lee generations into a frame dwelling by the time Erland was born as a fourth-generation Lee on May 3, 1864, and now surrounded by mature pines, the Erland Lee home today appears as an elegant frame house with Gothic overtones and sits about 50 metres from the edge of the escarpment overlooking Hamilton, Burlington, Stoney Creek and Lake Ontario.

The Women's Institutes officially purchased the Lee home in 1972 and it has a shrine-like significance. From time to time, meetings are still held in the property which contains generations of Lee possessions. One

such item is the still-servicable seven-foot-high china cupboard built by James after he arrived.

The constitutional document which binds the WI together is on view. Janet's careful calligraphy is remarkable and the arrow-straight lines flow neatly across the unlined pages.

Next to the Erland Lee Museum is its two-storey Drive House which has a collection of early farm and shop tools. A hatch to the second floor allowed the horse-drawn sled to be hoisted to the second floor in spring and the buggy to be lowered.

Check the Drive House for the Christie Biscuit Jar Display which runs until May 5. Some exhibits are ceramic, others glass or porcelain and date from approximately 1830 to 1905. Included are some stunning Wedgwoods.

These days, WI activities are not confined to domesticity. Traditionally close to the land, the institutes are aware of global concerns. For information about environmental concerns call the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario, (519) 767-3510.

There are picnic tables in the museum's grounds at the rear of the house and on a clear day the view from the escarpment is impressive. The museum is open on weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and on Sunday afternoons from 1-5 p.m. Admission is free.