

# WI reaches out to city

By JOHN M. MUGGERIDGE

**E**lgin county's Hilde Morden stands in a quilt-festooned room full of elderly ladies sipping tea and says the Women's Institute has to "get away from the image of tea-drinking grannies who quilt."

The Women's Institute (WI), which turns 100 in 1997, has suffered from attrition over the past few years. Current membership across the 900 branches of the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario is 16,000. Canadian WI membership is 50,000, including the Women of Unifarm in Alberta, the Women of the National Farmers Union, and the Cercles de Fermières of Québec.

Annual fee is \$20, with project money coming from Queen's Park — \$40,000 last year. In contrast to its earlier close ties with the agriculture ministry, today WI operates at arm's length. This spring, it moved out of the ministry's Guelph office.

Attracting new members won't be easy, but the energetic Morden is up to the challenge. "WI hasn't spent a lot of time on public relations," says Morden. "We're not skilled in marketing our organization."

"We still have 16,000 members in Ontario. Where are the new women whose needs we are not filling?"

Morden, who headed up a task force on WI, says WI has to adapt. Busy farm women with off-farm careers require flexible meeting times. "We don't have to meet on the third Tuesday of every month," says Ontario president Marg Harris, during a visit to the Erland Lee home in Stoney Creek, Ont., the birthplace of WI.

Nor does WI have to be strictly rural. A branch recently opened in Toronto to get more smoke alarms into houses, after several basement fires.

Since it began in 1897, WI has sprung up wherever the need arose. Then it was educating farm women about pasteurizing milk. Later it was stop signs on school buses, Blue Box programs, and lines on roads. WI also got Ottawa to exempt music lessons from the GST



Fisher, at historic table where first WI charter was signed

Former Ontario WI president Peggy Knapp says the goals of WI haven't changed since the historic meeting in February, 1897, when Stoney Creek farmers Erland and Janet Lee made the rounds by cutter sleigh to bring 101 women together to hear the legendary Adelaide

Hunter Hoodless speak of the need to educate rural women.

"Rural women need a place where they can learn together and have access to up-to-the-minute education. One hundred years later, we're still talking about it."

"We're one of the best-kept secrets," she says. "We haven't protested or picketed."

Issues affecting farm women over the years have become a lot more complex. WI through its umbrella Associated Country Women of the World has "consultative status" at the United Nations, and deals with issues such as AIDS, Planned Parenthood and living wills.

How does that go over in church basements? Morden says guest speakers from the University of Western Ontario nursing school are invited to talk about AIDS in the community. "What are we going to do when a person with AIDS comes into our community, and how are we going to help their families?" asks Morden.

President Harris says one branch passed a resolution saying that "the white male is being discriminated against." People have young sons wanting to be in the police force and they were told not even to bother applying.

"We never use the word 'feminist'. We are interested in families."

*Handwritten signature or initials.*