

# Women's Institute celebrate 100 years in 1997

By Gail McKinnell

Bells rang out across Lincoln on February 19 to announce the 100th anniversary of the Women's

Institute. Over 15,000 women in homes and community halls across Ontario celebrated the organization's centennial.



Adelaide Hoodless - Founder

## NIAGARA FARMERS' MONTHLY

It is the largest rural women's organization in the world, with more than six million members in more than 80 countries. Throughout its history, the W.I. has developed the personal growth of its members, while being instrumental in initiating government legislation to protect the family and the environment.

Erland and Janet Lee, of Stoney Creek, and Hamilton's Adelaide Hoodless founded this important women's movement. The first meeting was held in Squires Hall on King Street East on February 19, 1897.

To ensure a good turnout, the Lees drove their horse-drawn cutter up and down muddy Saltfleet roads, persuading women to come. One hundred and one women, plus Mr. Lee attended on that cold February night to hear Mrs. Hoodless speak on the need for domestic science education for rural women.

Her impassioned speech was born of her own personal tragedy. Eight years earlier, her 14-month-old son had died from drinking impure milk. The grief-stricken young mother was convinced that "women's work, homecraft and mothercraft, is much more important than men's since it deals with the home and the care of the loved ones who dwell therein."

Six days later, Mrs. Lee wrote the constitution and bylaws of the Women's Institute of Saltfleet by hand while seated at the walnut dining table in her Ridge Road home.

The Women's Institutes of Ontario were instrumental in getting milk pasteurized, bread wrapped, white lines painted down the centre of provincial highways, and stop signs at railway crossings. Those are just some of their accomplishments.

Those early women believed they possessed the internal resources to learn anything they need. And once they figured it out, they would come back and share it with each other.

For some years, the Women's Institute branches throughout the province funded pre-natal care. They raised that money through quilting bees, knitting bees and other practical means.

Although today's members tend to be elderly, the average age in Canada is 72, there is still a commitment to family issues such as drug abuse or pornography on the Internet.

About two years ago, the Institute sent a resolution to the minister of education calling for the re-introduction of domestic science in schools of both sexes.

Earlier this year, it presented a brief to the government about the effects on rural communities of closing small hospitals and cutting ambulance services.

Through the national organization each branch is allied with the Associated Country Women of the World, representing more than 376 country women's clubs and societies in 64 countries. Through this organization the WI has input in the United Nations.

Hamilton area president, Edna Ward of Jerseyville, presides over about 85 branches in the areas of Haldimand-Norfolk, Brant, Niagara and Hamilton-Wentworth. One of the Institute's most pressing problems, she has said, is getting the message to women about its accomplishments and what it has to offer.

Women are no longer following their mother or grandmother's example and joining the women's institute. It's especially important to get the message to young women. "People think we're a tea and cake institute and we're not," she says.

Institute statistics indicate the province's 15,000 members

logged three-quarters of a million volunteer hours in 1995 in their branch working to help create safer and healthier communities through local projects or by lobbying governments on important issues.

### 100TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATIONS

**APRIL 1:** The Erland Lee (Museum) Home, where Mr. Lee and his wife drew up the institute's constitution, reopens for the season.

**JUNE 16-17:** Garden parties in the morning and afternoon at the Erland Lee (Museum) Home on Ridge Road.

**June 17-22:** Canadian Federated Women's Institute annual conference at Hamilton Convention Centre with a special centennial celebration day on Saturday.

For more information, call the provincial office in Guelph at (519)836-3078 or contact your local branch.