

An exciting time for WI members

By **STEPHEN BEECROFT**
Editor

"This is an exciting time for all Women's Institute members," said Mary Kneebone, curator of Stoney Creek's Erland Lee (Museum) Home.

She is referring to the centennial year of the world-wide organization that started right in this city in 1897.

"The first meeting was held on Feb. 19, exactly 100 years ago," said Ms. Kneebone.

Since then, Stoney Creek has become known across the world - not because of the Stoney Creek Dairy or Battlefield Monument or the 1813

Battle of Stoney Creek, but because the WI was born here.

A Stoney Creek News reader, Harry Ramsden, brought a British magazine to our offices two weeks ago which described a new variety of fuchsia named to mark the WI centennial.

"Fuchsia Stoney Creek has been bred and developed by the well-known commercial fuchsia breeder Roy Sinton," stated the magazine article. "It has attractive mid-green foliage and a very neat, trailing habit ..."

The News spoke to Sharon Hearld an employee with Lynn House Plants Ltd., in the village of Clenchwarton, Norfolk, England, which is marketing

Fuchsia Stoney Creek.

"The offer was originally going to end last December, but we have extended it until March," said Ms. Hearld.

She said the Women's Institute in England had "got in touch with our managing director" about the possibility of selling this special plant.

"They're selling well," she said. "We have got a lot of calls from Women's Institute members."

Due to customs regulations, Fuchsia Stoney Creek cannot be shipped to Canada by Lynn House Plants, said Ms. Hearld.

How it all started 100 years ago

By **MARY KNEEBONE**
Special to The News

As a charter member and secretary of the South Wentworth Farmer's Institute, Erland Lee was present at an agricultural conference at Guelph in 1896, where Adelaide Hoodless gave a stirring speech regarding the subject of women and education in the area of domestic sciences.

So impressed with her ideas, Mr. Lee invited Ms. Hoodless to address the annual Ladies Night meeting of the Farmer's Institute on Feb. 12, 1897. With only 30 women present at that meeting, it was decided that another meeting would be held exactly one week later, whereby Adelaide Hoodless would once again address the women of Saltfleet Township.

During the next week, Erland and his wife, Janet, rode by horse and cutter up and down the roads of Saltfleet, personally inviting women from every class and distinction. The result was that on Feb. 19, 1897 101 women and one man (Erland Lee) were present to hear Ms. Hoodless speak. Mr. Lee presided as chairman over the meeting and it was on this night that it was motioned that a women's Department of Domestic Economy in affiliation with the Farmer's Institute be organized. This motion was moved by Ms. Melson and seconded by Ms. Lee.

One week later, this organization became known as the Women's Institute of Saltfleet.

Shortly after, Ms. Lee became one of the first directors of the Women's Institute. On Feb. 25, 1897, with direction from E.D. Smith, Major F.M. Carpenter and Erland Lee, Janet Lee hand penned the original constitution and by-laws at the dining room table that is still present in the Erland Lee (Museum) Home.

It was suggested by Janet that the first membership fees be set at 25 cents per person, an affordable sum for all women wishing to join.

According to the original document, the purpose for the organization was as follows:

■ The object of this Institute shall be, to promote that knowledge of Household Science which shall lead to improvement in household or architecture with special attention to home sanitation, to a better understanding of the economic and hygienic value of foods, and fuels and to a more scientific care of children with a view of raising the general standard of the health of our people.

On behalf of the organization Mr. Lee wrote to F.W. Hodson, superintendent of Farmers' Institutes, and to John

Dryden, Minister of Agriculture, asking for affiliation with the Farmers' Institutes and for government cooperation and support. These requests

scrapbooks of the history of their communities. Better known as Tweedsmuir Histories, these books represent one of the most outstanding



■ Mary Kneebone stands outside the Erland Lee Museum Home, holding the original WI constitution.

Photo by Richard Leitner

were granted and government assistance was secured for the Women's Institute.

It was the first organization of its kind in rural Ontario. It provided an education forum for rural women at a time when there was little else besides isolation and ignorance.

As advocates for a better future for women, Erland and Janet Lee and Adelaide Hoodless showed incredible insight as they promoted an exceptionally new idea that was to one day inspire the hearts and minds of women all over the world.

Their progressive thinking has today developed into a fellowship of women around the world.

Why is this story so important?

It signifies a distinct part of Canada's history that had a profound effect on the lives of women and as a result, families and communities.

From its inception, this organization was not limited in scope. The original constitution states that all members would have the opportunity to expand their knowledge in a variety of other areas such as art, literature, music, medicine, horticulture, sociology, education, legislation, architecture (with special references to sanitation, light and heat), just to name a few.

In 1940, many of the branches across the province began compiling

and valuable contributions of the Women's Institute Organization. These histories incorporate information about the community, including geography, topography, municipal government, farming, homes, education, trade and commerce, recreation, local families, churches, schools, libraries, industry (past and present), war records, etc. These comprehensive factual collections of historical data and pictures have been recognized by the Ontario Ministry of Education as authentic sources of material for students of history.

A hundred years later, the Women's Institute Organization is now represented worldwide with a membership of over six million in more than 80 countries. Through the umbrella organization, Associated Country Women of the World, WI members remain connected to the common cause of being "For Home and Country."

In 1995, membership in Ontario donated over 1/2 million hours in volunteer service to a wide variety of projects and causes. Many members are currently volunteers, fundraisers and supporters of their local community museums across the province.

It is these contributions to the preservation of our local history that must not go unnoticed.

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