

Adelaide Hoodless: Our first feminist?

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ADELAIDE HUNTER Hoodless was an early-day feminist.

Founder of the Women's Institute and domestic science programs in Ontario schools and other provinces, Mrs. Hoodless was also involved in the founding of the Victorian Order of Nurses, the Hamilton YWCA and the National Council of Women.



A photo of Mrs. Hoodless is displayed at the Lee home.

Although Women's Institutes and domestic science programs might be considered conservative today, at the turn of the century Mrs. Hoodless was derided as a radical new woman.

She was born on a farm at St. George, near Brantford, Feb. 27, 1857, youngest of 10 children.

Her father, David, had died some months earlier, leaving her mother to raise the children who remained at home.

Records of Mrs. Hoodless' education are sketchy. But she has been described by contemporaries as intelligent and extremely charming.

In 1881, she married John Hoodless, son of a prosperous Hamilton furniture manufacturer. The young couple moved to the Hamilton area and the first of four children was born the following summer.

In 1890 her youngest child died at the age of 18 months after drinking contaminated milk.

The beginning

The tragedy goaded Mrs. Hoodless into action. She became involved in a campaign for clean milk and the Hoodless involvement in public life had begun.

Like many feminists of the day, including Judge Emily Murphy, Mrs. Hoodless never questioned that a woman's place was anywhere else but in the home. But she did question many other facets of daily life.

Mrs. Hoodless decided the education system did not prepare women for their role as homemakers. She argued that a special program was needed — a domestic science program.

She was trying to elevate women's work, a haphazard chore for many, into domestic science on a level with farming and other masculine pursuits.

Mrs. Hoodless wrote a book on the subject and helped set up programs in Ontario schools which covered cooking, cleaning, nutrition and hygiene.

Between 1893 and 1908, she was responsible for introducing courses in 32 schools. She also influenced others, notably tobacco magnate William Macdonald, to found schools for domestic science teachers.

Having grown up in the country, Mrs. Hoodless was familiar with the lot of rural women.

At a meeting in Saltfleet Township (Stoney Creek) on Feb. 19, 1897, she discussed the Farmers' Institute and pointed out the need for a similar organization which would teach women to run their homes more efficiently.

Her proposal of an institute for women was met with an offer from Erland Lee, a member of the Farmers' Institute. Mr. Lee put his home at her disposal and it became the first Women's Institute.

The motto of the organization, "for home and country", emphasized one of Mrs. Hoodless' basic beliefs: a

nation cannot rise above the level of its homes; therefore women must work and study together to raise our homes to the highest possible level.

Victorian Order

Through Women's Institutes, farm women were taught basics of nutrition, cooking, sewing and preserving. In some areas, they were given what amounts to courses in small business.

Eventually, the movement spread throughout the British Commonwealth.

During the same period, Mrs. Hoodless was president of the Hamilton YWCA and in on the ground floor of another Canadian institution, the Victorian Order of Nurses.

Mrs. Hoodless served as first treasurer of the VON and was credited with realizing plans within two years. On July 26, 1899, Emily Dakin arrived from Halifax to become the first VON nurse in the Hamilton area.

Between the Women's Institutes, YWCA, VON and domestic science programs, Mrs. Hoodless had little time for political activity.

And although there is little evidence to prove that she was politically inclined, it's probable that such an energetic woman supported the idea of votes for women.

She served as treasurer of the National Council of Women, an organization which had its roots in Seneca Falls, New York, prior to the American Civil War.

Mrs. Hoodless' involvement with domestic science has thrown a cloud over her contributions to the women's movement. There have been allegations that, like many women in her social class, her interest in providing domestic science courses to working girls was rooted in the need for reliable servants.

But her drive and dedication were unmatched. She was tireless, campaigning constantly for domestic education.

On Feb. 26, 1910, she spoke to an audience about the need for yet another domestic science school. That school would become the Lillian Massey School of Household Science, associated with the University of Toronto.

Mrs. Hoodless would never see its opening. Earlier in the evening she had complained of a headache. In the middle of her speech, she paused, sipped some water, and collapsed on stage. She died within seconds.

Tributes poured in from around the globe. The *Tronto Globe and Mail* said, "She was one of the most widely known educationists in Canada and scarcely less known in the United States".

By today's standards, she may have been less than liberated. By the standards of her time, she was an important figure in Canadian feminism.



The Women's Institute has preserved the Erland Lee home in Stoney Creek in memory of its origins.—
Staff photos by Jim Fish