

dotes by Peggy Knapp, the Women's Institute's ACWW representative and a member of a WI branch in Guelph.

In one village in Uganda, AIDS had so devastated the population that only a few women and children were left alive. The goat herd, the only available source of food, had become inbred and was producing little milk.

What was needed were healthy goats in their prime to improve the stock.

Once the story was relayed to branches through the ACWW, members in every province buckled down and raised sufficient funds to send four healthy male goats from South Africa to that Ugandan village.

In a second example, a group of children in another Ugandan village were left orphans after their parents died from AIDS, with the result that the children felt worthless in a culture where old and young work for the common good. The children had no way of contributing to their village and no money for school.

Once again, Canadian WI branches came to the rescue with funds to start a piggery. The orphaned children earn wages looking after the pigs with the result that they are able to once again contribute to their village. The pigs are a valuable source of food and the money earned by the children pays for their education.

Concerns

Knapp likens the relationship between Women's Institutes and the Third World to two sisters, one with a closet full of clothes the other with an empty closet. "The one with the full closet says let's share."

But, despite the successes, there are concerns about the WI's future.

A FWIC strategic planning workshop, held a couple of years ago, pointed to a need to publicize achievements of the WI. An example of the widespread ignorance about the WI, along with its talent for understatement, is the lack of success the organization has had so far in getting co-founders Erland and Janet Lee elected to Hamilton's Hall of Distinction. Co-founder Adelaide Hoodless is already a member.

The workshop also found a lack of focus, that the Institute was spreading itself in too many directions.

A glance at the current list of resolutions before the centennial celebrations and international conference



Members meet in the Erland Lee Museum in Stoney Creek, where the Women's Institute was founded 100 years ago.

which begin today in Hamilton, includes a range of calls, from a review of ad-mail rates so that non-profit organizations can use the service, to concerns about the presence of unknown chemicals in liquid-filled products such as paperweights.

Another 23 resolutions still on the books include concerns about such diverse subjects as gratuitous violence on television and the safety of growth hormone used to increase yield from dairy cows. The hormone has not yet been approved for use in Canada.

An even more important concern is the institute's falling membership. Aging members are dying off and fewer young women are joining.

Since 1990, Canadian membership has fallen by about 30 per cent, to just under 24,000 from 34,700.

Some members believe part of the problem is the WI image of women sitting around quilting, knitting or making jam. Few outsiders realize the strength of the institute's lobby, much less that each branch conducts its meetings according to parliamentary procedure and follows an educational program, with presentations in several different areas including Canadian industry, education and cultural affairs.

Membership has also fallen because of the increase in urbanization and the increase in the number of women who work outside the home and have both less time and more choice of clubs and volunteer groups.

According to Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario figures, there are

1,628 WI members in the rural areas surrounding Hamilton.

June Williams is president of the Stoney Creek charter branch, which has a membership of about 24, all but three over 75.

"We're good Canadian antiques who belong in a museum," she says.

Yet, despite the aging membership, Stoney Creek members still raise enough funds to provide cash prizes for a local historical literary contest and prizes for area schools.

Recently the branch funded the planting of a centennial rose garden at the Erland Lee Museum, home of the Lees.

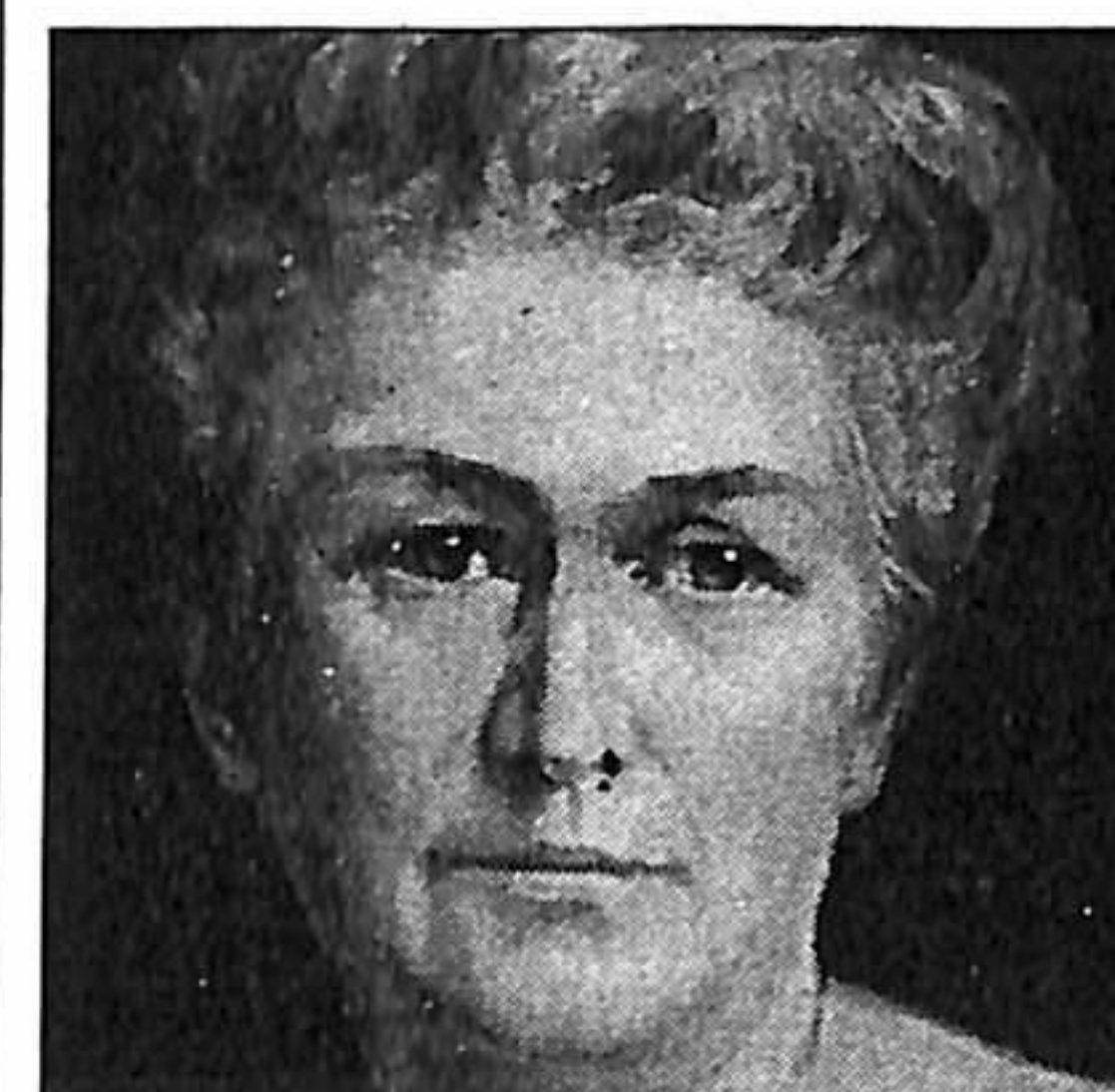
Williams admits to sadness at the thought that the charter branch may eventually fade away, but believes strongly that the organization it spawned will continue.

"Women need each other and the Institute supplies that necessity"

Knapp also believes the Women's Institute will continue and flourish. It may also have a future role in urban areas — there are already a couple of branches in the Toronto area — where women living isolated lives could find support and friendship within a non-sectarian organization like the WI, which has a voice extending through provincial and national governments to consultative status at the United Nations.

"What other organization can offer you this?" asks Knapp.

While it's true that membership is falling, she sees younger women joining, if not yet in sufficient numbers to



Adelaide Hoodless

KEY DATES

■ **Feb. 19, 1897:** The first meeting of what was to become the Women's Institute was attended by 101 women and one man — co-founder Erland Lee — in Squire's Hall, Saltfleet Township (now Stoney Creek) to hear Hamiltonian Adelaide Hoodless talk of the need for an educational forum for women. The catalyst had been the death of her infant son from drinking impure milk.

Hoodless together with Erland and Janet Lee of Saltfleet, who arranged the meeting and helped draw up the original constitution on their dining table, are recognized as co-founders.

■ **By 1913** there were branches in every province leading to the formation of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada six years later. The movement then spread to the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand and more recently to South Africa.

■ **By 1933** the dream of Canadian WI member Madge Watt was realized and the Associated Country Women of the World was formed as a worldwide association of rural women, with representatives from 26 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and North America.

■ **Today** the organization has more than seven million members in more than 65 countries with seven representatives in specialized agencies at the United Nations.

offset the decline. Many young professionals are also returning to their rural roots and in the Hamilton area especially, recently retired professional women are joining and bringing with

The Binbrook branch is an example of a resurgence in interest and advocacy. With 35 members, ranging in age from their late twenties to their early thirties, the branch has a regular attendance of 25 at its monthly meetings.

Much of its energy is devoted to fighting pornography and increasing awareness about what it views as too-explicit sex education in schools.

Concerns expressed last fall by several groups, including the Binbrook branch, about a 20-minute sex-education video for ages nine to 12 led to the inclusion of videos in the Wentworth County school board's policy on the handling of sensitive human sexuality material. Parents must now give permission for the video to be shown to their children.

Amazed

"As an Institute we've moved on from issues like wrapping bread to the major concerns of today," says member Mary Whitwell, a retired teacher.

And it's that emphasis on today's worries for parents that has brought Nicole Belanger, 38, into the Binbrook fold. The mother of three teenage children, she felt the need of a support group with whom she could discuss her concerns.

She's amazed that other women aren't beating down the doors to join.

"We have to be aware of how children are influenced. Where are the women my age? Don't they need to learn together?"

The branch also co-sponsors, with Binbrook United Church, a Morning Out program at a local church for young mothers with pre-schoolers.

A trained child-care worker looks after the older children, while babysitting is done by WI "grandmothers" so that the moms can take advantage of classes in skills as diverse as bread-making to self-defence and cardio-pulmonary resuscitation.

The branch is also known for its fundraising through fashion shows, silent auctions and catering for workers at the local fair.

Knapp says she continually marvels at the Women's Institute's achievements over the past 100 years.

"When Janet and Erland Lee escorted Adelaide Hoodless up the steps of Stoney Creek Squires Hall that cold February night, they couldn't have had any idea what they were starting.

"To think, 100 years later, millions of women all over the world are celebrating the Women's Institute."