

Ontario Women's Institute as an educational force

Adelaide Hoodless pioneer
to Women's Institute

Florence Diamond
F.W.I.O. President

The first Women's Institute was organized as the result of a remark made by Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless during a speech she was making at the ladies' night of the Farmer's Institute on February 12, 1897, at Stoney Creek, Ontario. Mrs. Hoodless said that farm women should have an organization similar to the Farmers' Institute, through which they could meet to hear experts speak and discuss subjects pertaining to improvement of home living, i.e. Household Science.

Previously Mr. Lee had heard Mrs. Hoodless speak at a meeting in Guelph and he felt she had much to offer and went back and after some persuasion got permission to have her come and address the Ladies' Night mentioned above. There was some opposition because they felt it had to be a man to tell them how to raise calves, etc.

Mrs. Hoodless' idea appealed to Mr. Erland Lee, Secretary of the South Wentworth Farmers' Institute. After some discussion on February 12, it was decided that a meeting should be held a week later, February 19, 1897, at Squire's Hall in Stoney Creek. Mrs. Hoodless, who then lived in Hamilton, agreed to speak again. During the ensuing week, Mr. and Mrs. Lee visited many homes in the vicinity of Stoney Creek as they drove up and down the rural roads with horse and cutter inviting the women to attend. So Mrs. Hoodless spoke, and the conception of an organization was outlined. Thirty-five women signified their intention to become members.

The idea for such an organization came from a personal tragedy in the life of Adelaide Hoodless. Her youngest son died at the age of 18 months and the doctor had told her that in his opinion, his death had been caused by the child drinking impure milk. Adelaide Hoodless blamed the death on her own ignorance and the thought grew in her mind that girls should be receiving training in Household Science along with the other subjects taught in schools. To promote the teaching of this subject became a crusade which Mrs. Hoodless pursued the rest of her life.

On behalf of this new organization, Mr. Lee wrote to Mr. J. L. Hodson, Superintendent of the Farmers' Institute and to the Hon. John Dryden, Minister of Agriculture asking for affiliation with the Farmers' Institute and for government co-operation and support. These requests were granted.

The following is quoted from Mr. Hudson's report dated 1898-1899 -- "The object of Women's Institute shall be the dissemination of knowledge, relating to domestic economy, including household architecture with special atten-

tion to home sanitation, a better understanding of the economic and hygienic value of foods, clothing and fuel, and a more scientific care and training of children with a view to raising the general standard of health and morals for our young people."

Within three years several Women's Institutes of Ontario were organized for word of this new organization spread rapidly throughout the Province of Ontario. Women were eager to take advantage not only of the social aspects of the meetings but to avail themselves of the educational opportunities it offered.

In 1899 Dr. C.C. Creelman succeeded Mr. Hodson as Superintendent of Farmers' and Women's Institutes and he began to receive inquiries re the formation of branches. In answer to the inquiries, Dr. Creelman prepared a circular giving all the available information on the organization.

Early in the 1900's women were reaching for opportunities for better education for themselves and for their daughters. The Women's Institutes was the method developed to meet the general need for education for homemakers. The Department of Agriculture recognized the need and endeavoured to meet it by the appointment of a staff of capable and well-qualified lecturers who were available for courses of instruction to Institute members.

In 1903, in addition to the specialists, another speaker service was set up with a part time staff of women of varied interests and qualifications -- women doctors, nurses, teachers, dietitians, dressmakers, experts in horticulture, beekeeping, dairying and housewives with a flare for public speaking and some experience in Institute work. Every year each Women's Institute District in the Province prepared for a "Summer Series of Meeting" and itinerant speakers travelled from place to place addressing local Institute meetings and to quote a report of the day bringing both information and inspiration." There was a winter series, too, arranged by the Farmers' Institute.

After a few years the women in the Institutes began to feel the need for more professional help and asked to have teachers who were specialists in their line going from place to place giving a whole series of lectures on one subject in each place.

Miss Mary Urie Watson, the first principal of Macdonald Institute at Guelph, took up the cause arguing that the Province was "spending large sums of money" to provide farmers with information about the best methods of caring for crops and livestock and that "surely it was of equal importance to provide women of the country with guidance in homemaking, nutrition, child care and family living.

On Miss Watson's recommendation, a committee was appointed; and a program of short courses was drawn up and presented to the Minister of Agriculture, the Hon. James S. Duff. The Minister readily accepted the plan and provided the staff of lecturers and teachers required. During the fall and winter of 1912 and 1913, short courses called Demonstration Lecture Courses in food values, cooking, home nursing and sewing were offered to Members of the Women's Institutes. Records show that 1,167 women attended these courses.

The section of the Department of Agriculture dealing with the Women's Institutes was known in the early days as the Women's Institute Branch. The Demonstration Lecture Courses were sponsored by the Women's Institutes for women and any girls who could attend. In addition to courses in Food and Nutrition, Clothing and Textiles, Home Crafts, and Health Education, there were courses and Conferences in Home Planning and Furnishings. Later courses in Administrative Leadership were offered to help the women in carrying on their own organization.

In 1934 Mr. Putnam retired and Miss Bess McDermand became superintendent of the Women's Institute Branch. Miss McDermand introduced a local Leader Training School method.

This system brought local leaders, usually Women's Institute Members, to a central "school" to take instruction from a member of the staff of the Women's Institute Branch. It was then the duty of the leaders to take the information back to the members of their local groups. This system of developing leaders has been most successful and is used still to get information to Women's Institute Branches.

After World War II, the name "The Women's Institute Branch" became the Women's Institute Branch and the Home Economics Service. The policy was instituted that the services of the Branch were available to all rural women in the province and Women's Institutes applying for the service.

The name of the branch was again changed to the Home Economics Branch, Ontario Department of Agriculture and Food and now is just that, but Ontario Ministry. Miss Helen McKercher was the director for 20 years retiring in 1976 and was succeeded by Miss Molly McGhee. Each director has constantly worked to keep the program of the Department up-to-date to meet the educational needs of women in the area of homemaking. In 1970, the program of the Home Economics Branch offered short courses, training schools, workshops in Crafts, Clothing and Textiles, Food and Nutrition and Parliamentary Procedure, also on Tweedsmuir Histories. Food Forums are offered as evening sessions and met with approval.

Adelaide Hoodless died in 1910, too soon to see that well-planned Home Economics courses in schools were to become a part of the education of a girl and too soon to see that education in Home Economics would be made available to girls and young women through the very organization that she had inspired. Junior Extension Services have been designed by the Home Economics Branch and promoted by the Women's Institutes as early as 1923 when Girls' Garment Making Clubs were introduced by the assistant superintendent, Miss Ethel Chapman. Homemaking Club work has developed steadily with the clubs in food, clothing, house furnishings, etc. and for some time have been designated 4-H Homemaking Clubs with a large percentage of the leaders supplied from the ranks of W.I. members.

(Continued On Page 23)



Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless