

# Women's Institute logs 104 years working for community

Your kids' pyjamas are fire retardant because a heartsick Women's Institute member in Southwestern Ontario didn't want another mother to suffer the tragic loss she did.

The white lines running down the middle of highways: you can thank Women's Institute lobbyists for that safety feature.

Credit them also for making sure your loaf of bread comes to you wrapped, so the germs don't get in.

You drink safe, pasteurized milk because WI founder Adelaide Hunter Hoodless pushed it into law after the death of her infant son.

Today's members are urging the province to offer free livestock vaccines in areas where rabies is rampant. They're promoting rural literacy and farm safety.

The volunteer helping out at your local hospital's night re-

## DEBORA VAN BRENK



### COUNTY VOICES

ception desk is apt to be a WI member. So is the group catering that rural funeral.

If community commitment is what you're looking for, these folks have been ahead of the pack for most of their lives.

But this mainstay of rural family life has changed since our grandmothers' day.

Back when they began 104 years ago, Women's Institute meetings were pretty much the only place outside of church where rural women could escape the isolation of farm life and educate each other about family health and current events.

These were all-in-one sup-

port and political forums, steeped in tea and home-baked cookies.

Their emphasis today on women's health and family information is as strong as ever. But there are fewer to hear — and to pass on — the message.

Cars have made physical isolation less of a problem, public information can be found at the click of a computer mouse and mothers racing home from work to ferry the young ones from hockey practice to music lessons aren't likely to attend a mid-week afternoon meeting with friends.

The London area has 70 Women's Institute groups totalling 1,114 members. The numbers were "probably double that" when Fran Hyatt first joined the group 28 years ago.

Hyatt is head of the Mt. Brydges branch and president of the London and Area WI, which includes Middlesex County and a sizable chunk of

the surrounding counties.

Their good works are prodigious — from April 2000 to April 2001, they logged 68,114 hours of volunteer time, up 8,000 from the year before.

**"Women needed to be educated to make their homes and families educated and healthier."**

*Member Marg Eberle*

They drive people to appointments, raise money to equip local hospitals and build wells in developing countries, run fitness programs for seniors and deliver meals to shut-ins.

They run day-long health and education sessions for women in their communities.

Women's Institutes thought globally and acted locally before environmental groups appropriated that phrase for

themselves.

"They're a wonderfully dedicated group of women," Hyatt says.

But fewer. And older.

Most members are 60-plus, Hyatt says. "I'm probably the second-youngest member in the branch and I'm no young chicken."

Although the district saw 29 new members join the ranks last year, they lost more than they gained.

So are these groups headed the way of the quilting bee and wringer washer?

"I think only time can tell that," she says.

Marg Eberle, of Highgate in Chatham-Kent, is more optimistic. Her branch gained four new members this year.

"The original goal was that women needed to be educated to make their homes and families educated and healthier and all that good stuff. And that's what we're still doing today," says Eberle, a director

for the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada and a former president of the provincial body.

"We're still basically an educational organization," she says.

"Part of our job (to entice new members) is to show what we have done and show that we are relevant."

She says it's a struggle to get members just to record their volunteer hours because they just don't want to boast.

"They don't advertise themselves. We're the best-kept secret in the world."

Without a lot of fanfare, these women are making a difference to each other and their communities.

When an organization this crucial to rural life is struggling to find members and support, it's no time for misplaced modesty.

Women's Institutes have more than earned the right to blow their own horns.

## Freeda Conn worked in Ottawa during Second World War

By Sheila Coulthard  
STAFF REPORTER

Freeda Conn has been a lifelong resident of Zorra township except for the four years she spent in Ottawa during the war. When the Second World War broke out in Europe Miss Conn was a school-teacher. Miss Conn was a graduate of St. Marys DCVI and the Stratford Normal School. She began

teaching in Woodstock, then took a position at SS#12 in Belton.

"The war was on, I thought I could do something to help," said Miss Conn in an interview with the Journal Argus last week.

So she took a Civil Service exam, scored 91 per cent and moved to Ottawa to work in the War Department. Miss Conn worked for four

years keeping track of ships' movements in the Atlantic Ocean. All ships that sailed from Canadian ports heading to Europe sent coded messages detailing their crossings. Once the messages were decoded it was Miss Conn's responsibility to check and record the information received from each ship.

Freeda Conn, who's 93, said she enjoyed the work, "I didn't make many mistakes, I was

never called up on the carpet."

While working in Ottawa she made many good friends. The women she worked with were from all over Canada and they kept in touch for many years.

When the war was over Miss Conn returned to help out on her family farm at RR 4 St. Marys.

"I could have stayed on (in Ottawa) but all the other girls went home, so I did too," Freeda Conn



said.

Each November 11, Freeda Conn participates in the Remembrance Day services at Union Church, just as she will this Sunday.

**Freeda Conn, of RR#4 St. Marys, served in Ottawa in the War Department during WW2 and returned home to her family farm following the war.**