

# Women's Institute plugging away

The organization, more than 100 years old, has done a lot of good, but, relentlessly, its membership is shrinking and aging.

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The pasteurizing of milk is so routine these days that many people have forgotten why it's important.

White lines down the centre of provincial highways are just one of those things that have always been there, right?

Music on the school curriculum is just a regular part of growing up.

But to the Women's Institute, these are markers not only of social progress, but also of its history.

The Women's Institute is a rural organization now in its second century.

Its membership is shrinking and aging along with the shrinking and aging rural population in Canada.

But it claims a proud history of making a difference to the everyday lives of people across Canada and overseas.

"They're leaders in a lot of things, but it doesn't come out that way," says Marjorie Johns, president of the Huron South district of the Women's Institute.

"The government takes over and everyone thinks the government (thought of it)."

She's not upset about the often forgotten role of Women's Institute.

"We've learned to accept it. I guess it was always the women's role. But let me tell you, when you want a job done, it takes women to do it."

Huron South district celebrates its 100th anniversary today with a dinner at the Dashwood Community Centre.

Perhaps significantly, the evening isn't exclusively about the history of the Women's Institute. The guest speaker is Mark Winegarden, who biked across Canada with his 12-year-old son to raise awareness of diabetes. Johns says it's a worthwhile subject because diabetes affects so many people.

The Women's Institute story begins in 1897 in what is now Stoney Creek, southeast of Hamilton.

A broad-minded farmer named Erland Lee invited the social reformer Adelaide

Hoodless to come from Hamilton to speak about the need for an educational society for poorly educated rural women.

After the speech, Hoodless and Lee sat in the Lees' dining room, drawing up the constitution and bylaws for this new organization while Lee's wife Janet wrote it out in longhand. Erland Lee was treasurer of the Farmers' Institute and the new group took the parallel name of Women's Institute.

Branches sprang up quickly after the founding.

Their aim was to improve living conditions of families and communities. Women were informed about sanitation, child-raising techniques and other matters of "domestic economy."

Pasteurization was high on the agenda because Hoodless's infant son had died from drinking infected milk.

As lobbying grew for this and other causes, provincial and national bodies were formed. Branches spread to Scotland and England and the Women's Institute joined the Associated Country Women of the World, based in Britain.

But accomplishments are tinged with some sadness.

"We're getting to celebrate something we're never going

to get to celebrate again," Johns says of her branch's centenary — not only because few live long enough to see two such anniversaries, but also because branches are closing.

Six are left in the Huron South district after two recent closings. Others are 'iffy.'

But the Grand Bend branch is bucking the trend with some younger members — meaning women in their 50s.

Cassie Lovie, 54, joined three years ago — "I had been thinking of joining some volunteer group," she says — when the Grand Bend branch put a display in a plowing match. Now she's on the committee that plans the monthly meetings.

Grand Bend's major fundraiser is at the community's Thanksgiving farmers' market. Lately, monkey dolls made from men's long grey socks — an old craft revitalized by the group — are big sellers.

The branch has given money to a nursing home for a patient lift, to poor teens for Christmas gifts and to the local library. "It gives you a good feeling that you've done something that you wanted to do and you're not getting paid to do," Lovie says.

Johns joined the branch in Elimville near Exeter in 1949, the year after it was formed, because of the opportunity to learn, enjoy fellowship with other women and pick up homemaking skills.

Recently, she travelled to England and Scotland, where she visited branches. It gave her a sense of the worldwide ties. "You kind of feel part of something bigger."

Jane Dearing joined the Crediton branch 38 years ago to get to know her neighbours.

"My mother belonged when I was a teenager. I changed townships and wanted to get to know the rest of the women in the area and thought that was a good way."

She likes the social aspect of the group and learning old skills updated to new times or hearing speakers on modern issues such as phone scams.

"We try and keep abreast of the times because the times surely are changing and it's hard to keep up with it."

When she joined the Crediton branch, it had 35 members, but only 14 are active today.

"We're having a hard job finding younger members because younger mothers are so busy. I have a daughter busy with dance and hockey

and they just don't have the time to come out.

"What the future brings, I'm just not sure. There are so many other things out there you can join. I just know I'm going to keep going as long as it's going, because it's done me a lot of good."

## WOMEN'S INSTITUTE CAUSES

Since 1897, the Women's Institute has advocated to have:

- ▶ bread wrapped
- ▶ white lines painted down the centre of provincial highways
- ▶ fluorescent paint on the sides of rail cars
- ▶ garments labelled for quality
- ▶ music on the school curriculum
- ▶ a law forcing traffic to stop when a school bus is stopped
- ▶ breathalyser and blood tests for drivers
- ▶ poison containers marked
- ▶ milk pasteurized
- ▶ dental and medical inspections in schools
- ▶ war memorials set up

## BROWNS WI

# Neighbourhood Watch wants flashing lights

### Two intersections of Highway 7 are a concern

The January meeting of Browns Women's Institute was held on Wednesday January 15 at 10 a.m. in the school. The co-president Liz Harrison presided and welcomed everyone back after the holidays. She announced the Lakeside W.I. will be having a Luncheon and Euchre at the Parish Hall, Lakeside on Saturday February 8, with

lunch at 12 o'clock and euchre at 1:15 p.m., snow date February 10.

Notice was given of the Oxford District 100th anniversary being held at Elmhurst Inn, Ingersoll on June 9.

Ladies Day Away will be held on April 18 at 10 a.m. at the Dundas United Church, Woodstock. Judy Newman will be giving a demonstration on refinishing furniture, as one of the courses offered, also scrapbooking is being offered.

There was a letter from Home Support Services asking if we would cater for the

meal on May 30 at Kingsway Lodge at 12 o'clock. The answer was yes. The Pennies for Friendship was how many homes can you see from your home? In St. Marys the ladies could see quite a few. The roll call was 'give a security precaution for your home' and was answered with motion lights, leaving a light on, using a timer, putting rods in track of sliding doors.

Citizenship, Culture and Community group was in charge of the program with Carol Miller presiding. Betty Barons read a poem "Yes We Can."

Carol called on Sheila Greason to give an account of Neighbourhood Watch in their area. It was first sponsored by Uniondale W.I. There are Block Captains on each road, which covers Highway 7 to Oliver Sideroad and from Cobble Hills Road to Highway 19. Signs 'Neighbour Watch' are up in this area.

Right now they are lobbying for flashing lights at Highway 7 and Cobble Hills Rd., and at Highway 7 and Highway 19. Ruth Gill gave us more safety tips for the home.

The next meeting will be on February 19 at 10 a.m. in the

School, when the speaker will be Jackie Rowe from the Garlic Box.

### Euchre party

The regular Euchre party was held on Thursday January 9 in the school at 8 p.m. The prize winners were as follows - ladies high Kathy Jeffrey, lone hands Ina Pickell, low Betty Barons. Men's high Terry Barber, lone hands Doug Kennedy and low Jim Kennedy. Door prize winners were Jean Sims and David Arthur.

The next euchre party will be this Thursday, January 23 at 8 p.m. in the school.