

Frances Clements honoured for 72 years with W.I.

Milton senior maintains a busy lifestyle

BY JENNIFER ENRIGHT

Frances Clements stopped driving a car at the age of 91. But that hasn't put the brakes on her hectic schedule. Now the 92-year-old Milton resident gets around thanks to friends who drive her to meetings and other events.

Frances maintains a lifestyle that her daughter Donna Coulter can only marvel at. Known to her youngest child as "the galloping senior," her life revolves around a packed timetable that includes visits to the Milton Seniors Activity Centre, social outings, and trips with other seniors to see plays, card playing, and meetings of the Eastern Star.

Over the years, Frances has also been involved with the United Church Women (UCW), Halton Music Festivals, and for the past 72 years she's been a member of the Women's Institute (W.I.), a worldwide women's organization that was created to educate rural women and that nowadays works to assist both rural and urban women. Frances has belonged to two institutes in the Halton area, first the Mountain Union W.I. and later the Nelson Women's Institute.

This week, she was honoured for over seven decades with the Women's Institute at the Masonic Hall in Milton and an article will appear about her involvement with this organization in *Home and Country*, the W.I.'s magazine. But her life has been so full, as a farmer's wife, mother, grandmother, and now great-grandmother that it's difficult to limit her life story just to her involvement with the institute.

Donna can't remember a time when her mom wasn't involved in some activity, and she says that helping out the hospital was just one of many ways that her mom got involved in the community. Frances and her husband, the late Allan Clements, were supporters of the Milton Hospital from the beginning. "My parents were on the first fundraising for the Milton Hospital." In those days, Frances kept busy making a lot of pillows to raise funds for the hospital, and she still keeps up this activity. She can laugh now at her past exploits with needle and thread. "I helped with all of their bazaars. I made cushions until they came out my ears."

At one time, she also belonged to the Milton Horticultural Society and she showed floral arrangements at the Milton Fall Fair using roses and other flowers grown by her dad, George Cudmore. Frances recalls in a written history of her father that after he finished farming in Trafalgar Township he worked for 15 years tending one of the largest private rose gardens in the Milton district. Born in 1870, he died at the age of 97. "He used to grow lovely

roses and things. He would take them into the Milton Fall Fair and they would wilt and they wouldn't get a prize. So I went and took a course in flower arranging at the Royal Botanical Gardens. And I came back and started flower arranging and showed his flowers. He had a lot of prize roses and gladioli and things after that."

Resting on her kitchen table are written accounts about her dad as well as notes she's recorded about her involvement with the Women's Institute. Back in the depression years, she was invited by her future mother-in-law to a meeting of the Mountain Union W.I. It was May 1933 and the fees as she notes in her written account were "either fifty cents or a dollar." "I felt it was an interesting meeting. I joined six months before I was married. I was Frances Cudmore then."

Life as a farmer's wife was hectic and Frances says she wasn't as involved with W.I. until her three eldest children were in school. Then she would take her youngest, Donna, to meetings with her. Later, she would also take her granddaughter, Karen Doherty, who would later become Karen McFadzean.

Karen, who was born blind, played an important role in Frances' life. Because of her, Frances learned Braille and gave a talk on the subject of Frances and her education at one W.I. meeting. She also produced a written account of her granddaughter's life, entitled *Memories to Share*, that tells of a life enriched by the smells and sounds that Karen encountered around her. Sounds, as Frances writes, "became Karen's main contact with the world she knew," whether it was the "song of a robin, the chirp of a cricket, the buzzing of bees."

Karen died about eight years ago, but memories of her life linger on for Frances, together with fond recollections of her involvement with various organizations including W.I. In seven decades with the institute, she has witnessed a few changes. Meetings, which in the 30s attracted about 50 people, are now down to about 26. And the W.I. organization she originally joined, Mountain Union, disbanded in the 1980s as many others have in recent years. That's when she decided to join Nelson W.I.

The busy schedule hasn't let up for this vivacious lady, eight years shy of her 100th birthday. But by her own standards, Frances isn't as active as she once was. She has "two dummy fingers" that make it difficult to use her hands at times, though they haven't prevented her from playing cards or crocheting. And she enjoys taking it easy at the Milton Seniors Activity Centre.



Frances Clements

KAREN'S MAIN CONTACT WITH THE WORLD ... WAS THE "SONG OF A ROBIN, THE CHIRP OF A CRICKET, THE BUZZING OF BEES."

"I would have been Bobby"

An adoption story

BY ANN KORNUA

Gail Mclean knew from a young age that she was the odd-girl-out in her family. She didn't look like anyone else and acted very differently from her brother or her parents. It wasn't surprising to her when she found out at a very young age that she was "Her mother's special gift." Gail was adopted by two loving Milton parents in 1983 who raised her to never feel as if she was a burden or a problem. As Gail got older she felt an overwhelming urge to look for her estranged birthmother to find out where she came from.

"I was real young when my parents told me I was adopted," Gail explained. "My parents always tried to incorporate it in my life. My mom would always tell me that I was a special gift to her. Sometimes I would feel different when at school and around other kids. There was only one time I felt bad about it when I was at school and I told someone that I was adopted and they didn't believe me. I wasn't cool enough to be adopted," Gail said laughing. "I never really ran into too many difficulties growing up knowing it."

Her parents, Gloria and Bill, would help their daughter and their son (also adopted) to understand when they were still quite young. They taught them to never feel resentful and to look towards the future and realize that they always had a family that loved them. Gail believed in this and knew that everything was going to be alright despite her urge to discover who she was and where she came from. "I found my birthmother when I was 17 and I broke all the rules to do it," Gail said.

Gail had complications finding her birthmother from day one. The Children's Aid file where her social worker and case were recorded could not be opened and the information was kept classified. In instances like this, children who want to discover who their birthparents are must wait until they are eighteen before they can go searching for their family. In some instances the birthparents feel so strongly about the child's benefit and safety that they request Children's Aid to withhold the information and sign up on a list that decrees that they are not to be contacted even after their child becomes eighteen. Gail decided the best way to find her birthmother would be to go on TV and announce to the world she was looking for a missing part of her.

Five months shy of her eighteenth birthday, Gail took a trip down to Toronto to appear on *Speakers' Corner*, a popular open forum TV show, and take the risk of her life. With her she took the only things her mother left the last time she held Gail in her arms. "I had two letters and a teddy bear and they were the only clues to my birthmother that I possessed. I went in the booth really scared and said who I was and showed the bear and read the letter and asked if she could get in contact of me because I was looking for her," Gail said. Sadly that night the backpack in which Gail was carrying her most valued and trusted

mementoes from her mother was stolen. Gail was devastated. Her only hope now was if her birthmother was watching and would try to contact her.

Her mother wasn't watching that night; she didn't even get City TV in the town she lived in. Luckily a good friend saw the program and quickly called Roberta, Gail's birthmother, to let her know her daughter was searching for her. Roberta quickly contacted City TV and appeared on *Speakers' Corner* the following week, reading a letter stating

that she was overjoyed her daughter was searching for her. Gail knew the moment when she saw her birthmother on the TV who she was and started jumping up and down with joy and quickly called her adopted parents to let them know. "I kept screaming Turn on the TV now, mom! It's her! It's her!" Gail said.

From that moment on, Gail with her parents worked together with the Burlington Child Aid to safely reunite the estranged mother and daughter. With



PHOTOS SUBMITTED BY GAIL MCLEAN
Gail and her birthmother, Roberta after 18 years of being separated.

help from her case worker and support from her adopted family they arranged a day when the two women could finally meet after eighteen years of being apart. "I remember I sat in the lobby waiting for her to come and every time someone walked in I would jump up to see if it was her and get sad when it wasn't," Gail said. "When she finally came into the room I just stood at her in awe since it was like looking into a mirror. She looked just like me and I was so choked up I couldn't speak at first and then I just started crying 'I found my mommy!'"

"My name would have been Bobby," Gail said. "I am lucky that I have a fantastic family despite everything. I have two loving parents that support me and my brother in everything we do. I don't feel bad about being adopted. Because my mother made a choice for me I got to live in Milton and go to great schools and have a chance at life. I can't feel upset or bad about what she did because she was thinking for me and I love her for that."

"What do you have to lose?" was Gail's motivation behind the search for her birthmother. Meeting her birthmother made Gail feel alright with who she is and better understand where she came from. Gail's story has a happy ending but many adopted children today are still looking for answers to who they are. Gail hopes that her story will give people the courage not give up and to find their missing parents.