

Who started WI

75 years ago?

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Spectator Staff

Was it a man or a woman who founded the world's largest women's rural organization?

Should Adelaide Hoodless or Erland Lee get the honors for starting the first Women's Institute in Stoney Creek in 1897?

It depends, it seems, on who tells the story.

The dispute continues as members prepare to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the founding on Feb. 19.

The dispute appears to be a question of women's rights — ironic because the world-wide organization, the Associated Country Women of the World, certainly cannot be classified as a group fighting for women's rights.

In actual fact, Mrs. Hoodless and Mr. Lee both played major roles in the founding of the first WI. To the more peace-loving members they are known as the co-founders. But Lee supporters and Hoodless supporters remain adamant.

Whether one or the other was the founder, or they were co-founders, amounts to a fine point of interpretation. The story of the founding goes like this.

In 1897, the South Wentworth Farmers' Institute was a flourishing society. Each year the institute held a ladies' night when the only concert was to have a bit of music on the program, a vocal solo and a piano instrumental. The provincial department of agriculture supported men speakers, on request, to talk on agricultural subjects.

When the program committee met that year, Mr. Lee, the secretary boldly suggested they invite a woman to speak for their ladies' night program.

The woman in question was Mrs. Hoodless of Hamilton, who had lost a two-year old son through feeding of impure milk. She claimed she had been improperly informed and because of the tragedy she strived to have domestic science taught to girls in high schools. Her cause had led her to speak at a farmers' meeting at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph

where Mr. Lee heard her. Although he was determined to have Mrs. Hoodless speak on ladies' night, his institute colleagues would not hear of it. A woman's place, they argued, was in the home — not on a public platform.

And so it was agreed at the committee meeting to have their regular government speaker address them. The question on what item to have on the program for ladies' night, the members left in trust to Mr. Lee.

He then extended a personal invitation to Mrs. Hoodless to speak at the meeting.

Successful

As chairman for the evening Mr. Lee was successful in his plot. He managed to both liberate the women and pull a coup over his chauvinist colleagues.

But if there were red faces in the crowd that night the reddest must have belonged to the government speaker who preceded Mrs. Hoodless with his topic — the Feeding of Calves. During her speech she said there was a need for women to be informed on the care and feeding of infants.

It is at this point in the story that opinions differ. Miss Marjorie Lee of Hamilton (Mr. Lee's daughter), who wrote a history of the founding, claims her father was so impressed by Mrs. Hoodless' comment on the need for women to be informed that after he thanked her, he asked how many women would attend if he called a meeting to organize a Women's Institute. All 30 women present stood, Miss Lee's report says.

However, Mrs. J. McKinley Morden, 95, the only living charter member now a resident of a Burlington nursing home, claims this is not true.

Mrs. Morden, who was 20 when she attended the ladies' night meeting, says Mrs. Hoodless suggested it would be a good idea if the women had an organization like the Farmers' Institute. This suggestion, Mrs. Morden says, was made during her speech.

However, Mrs. Morden concedes the dispute is "silly and foolish" because Mr. Lee also was involved in it. "It's the 100 women who attended

the first meeting who should get the credit. If those women hadn't taken hold of it there wouldn't have been a Women's Institute today. They are the ones who made it a success."

In any case, an organizational meeting was scheduled for Feb. 19 with Mrs. Hoodless as guest speaker. Mr. Lee and his wife became the first public relations people for the WI by spreading the word of the coming meeting, driving around the area in a cutter.

The men still opposed the idea of women organizing. Comments of the day were: "Oh, well, let them start. It won't last long without a man to run it."

The organizational meeting was held with 100 women and Mr. Lee attending. He was named chairman with Mrs. Hoodless as honorary president. Mrs. E. D. Smith of Winaona was president, Miss Margaret Nash, Stoney Creek, secretary and Mrs. John McNeilly, Stoney Creek, treasurer.

Objections

The constitution, similar to that of the Farmers' Institute, was written by the Lees over the objections of husbands who said the WI would cost money. "Let's put the fee at 25 cents a year," Mrs. Lee said. Over another sneering remark — "Let them try it. All women fight and it will break up" — Mrs. Lee said: "We'll start with the Lord's Prayer. That should put us in a good frame of mind."

At the first meeting the organization was called the Women's department of the Farmers' Institute of South Wentworth.

But at the next meeting it was changed to the Women's Institute of Saltfleet Township. Then, finally, when other branches were organized in the township, the original group became the Stoney Creek Women's Institute.

Mrs. Hoodless always took an interest in the WI and was invited to speak to them many times. On one occasion, she and her husband were invited for the presentation of the new pins inscribed with the motto: "For Home and Country. Mr. Hoodless was asked to present the first pin to his wife as a mark of the

WI's esteem "for the woman who gave other women courage to speak in public."

Since that time when rural women were liberated and encouraged to meet (their only other outing was church on Sundays), the Women's Institute has spread to 64 countries around the world and has six and a half million members.

Whether WI branches in other parts of Canada and throughout the world hail Mrs. Hoodless or Mr. Lee as the founder is unknown.

But as recently as December last year, an advertisement placed in a Toronto newspaper in connection with the founding of a department store there proclaimed Mrs. Hoodless as the WI founder.

Apology

Mrs. Lloyd Daw, president of the Stoney Creek WI, promptly wrote a letter to the chief copy writer of the store informing her of the mistake and received a letter of apology with due respect to Mr. Lee.

There may be differences in opinion concerning the founder but there is little difference in the organization today from when it was founded 75 years ago. The aim is still the same — to present educational and cultural programs to help women better themselves as homemakers and citizens and to use their leadership abilities in the community and beyond.

The six original objectives of the WI — domestic economy; household architecture (special reference to heat, light, sanitation and ventilation); health (physiology, hygiene, calisthenics, medicine); floriculture and horticulture; music and art and literature, education, sociology and legislation — were updated in January for the first time in 75 years and will go

into effect in April when each WI branch has its annual meeting.

The revised objectives are agriculture and Canadian industry, citizenship and world affairs, education and cultural activities, family and consumer affairs and resolutions.

The form of the meetings remains the same. Each objective has a standing committee with conveners, with the meetings planned around the topic of the objective.

Music and demonstrations are part of the meetings — at the time of this interview the Stoney Creek WI was having a demonstration of fruit and jam products similar in idea to demonstrations held in the early days of the WI.

One difference in the past and present WI activities is the participation in community affairs.

The Stoney Creek WI enters floats in the town's parades, marches in others and is involved in sidewalk sales. Once a year members are the hostesses at the Sunday tea at Wentworth Lodge, Dundas, where they also attend bazaars. Cancer dressings are made once a month and every Christmas they donate canned goods to a local charitable institution.

But one objective WI members here find it difficult to carry out is the agricultural program.

Stoney Creek was a rural area and a village with a population in the low hundreds in 1897 when the WI was formed. In 1956 it was incorporated as a town and it now has a population of 8,193.

There are other problems here in the founding place of WI. Most of its present mem-

bers are senior citizens. The youngest member is Mrs. Daw, who is 52. She and the immediate past president, Mrs. Lorna Rogers, admit there is a danger of the Stoney Creek branch folding if younger members don't join.

There are 64 members now, 10 less than in 1897. About 35 attend the monthly meetings, held two buildings away from Squire's Hall, the original WI meeting place.

Worried

Mrs. Daw said when she moved to Stoney Creek five years ago and arrived at her first WI meeting, (She had been coaxed by Mrs. Rogers) she wondered: "What am I doing here with all these old ladies?"

Both she and Mrs. Rogers are worried because two WI branches in the Wentworth district closed recently because of low membership.

"The organizations flourish in the farming and northern areas where there are no other distractions," says Mrs. Rogers.

But here, she said, referring to Stoney Creek, "we're over-organized. There are 12 women's organizations and too many activities to compete with."

She and Mrs. Daw see only one solution. And that is to merge with the WI in Saltfleet township. But, they admitted, the members weren't that much younger there.

Says Mrs. Rogers: "It will be terrible if we can't get together." Although both say it gets harder to maintain the WI every year, they are optimistic. The only thing keeping the two branches apart now is lack of an agreement on a time schedule.

"But as long as I'm living I'll never let it die," Mrs. Rogers says determinedly.

Whether the WI is still relevant to today's lifestyles is in question. Says Mrs. Morden: "It could fold in some Ontario places but not in the rural areas."

But while the future of the Stoney Creek WI might sound dismal at this stage, Mrs. Daw and Mrs. Rogers are not letting it dim the 75th anniversary celebrations.

In addition, they are cheered by the announcement that the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario have raised the required \$40,000 to purchase the 99-year-old Erland Lee homestead on Ridge Road, Saltfleet. The FWIO hopes to own the homestead by June.

In honor of the 75th anniversary of the founding of the first WI, the FWIO held a luncheon today at the Royal York Hotel in Toronto.

Guest speaker was Mrs. Olive L. Farquharson of England, president of the Associated Country Women of the World. Others attending were Mrs. H. L. Noblitt, Ottawa, FWIO president, Dr. Irene Spry, Ottawa, deputy president of ACWW, and Mrs. E. V. Fulton, Birtle, Man., president of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada.

Invitations were sent to more than 1,300 branches in the province.



MRS. MORDEN

Attending from the Stoney Creek WI was Mrs. Rogers.

The Stoney Creek WI will hold its own celebration next Saturday, 6.30 p.m. at Sidonia Hall, Barton Street East in the form of a family-style dinner open to the public. Special guest will be Mrs. Farquharson.

Attending both functions are Mrs. Gordon Conant, Oshawa, Mrs. E. D. Smith's daughter, and Miss Lee.

Mrs. Morden cannot attend because she is recuperating from a broken hip.