

Institute was a rock for 93 years in Altona

In its 93 years of operation, I didn't attend a single meeting of the Altona Women's Institute.

Yet, at its final gathering, its swan song so to speak, I was there, feeling like an onion in a petunia patch.

This definitive get-together was held Saturday, first at the Altona Mennonite Meeting House, just east of Stouffville, where an engraved stone was unveiled and, later, in the lower auditorium of Stouffville United Church, where members officially concluded a near century of service.

President Peggy Hood explained how memberships had dwindled to a mere 14, making it no longer practical to carry on. The inscription on the memorial stone read simply: "In recognition of Altona's Women's Institute for their work in the community." The boulder was appropriately placed under a young maple tree, also an institute gift.

While much has changed in 90-plus years, it was the pending encroachment of the now-infamous Pickering airport that ripped the Altona community apart, scattering residents to the four winds. Only two remaining members live in the area.

Answering the toll of the final bell Saturday were Peggy Hood, Stouffville; Doris MacAloney, Stouffville; Marjorie Fretz, Stouffville; Edna Carruthers, Goodwood; Ruth Anne Cowan, Stouffville; Kim Cowan, Stouffville; Lillian Byer, Stouffville; Jean White, Stouffville; Blanche Tindall, Altona; Luella Lewis, Mt. Albert; Merle Dickinson, Woodville; Bernice Andrews, Cannington; Irene Slack, Stouffville; and Audrey Feasby, Stouffville.



Roaming Around

with Jim Thomas

Others in attendance included: Barbara Evans, district president, Port Perry; Jackie Lockie, district secretary, Zephyr; Winn Harris, Sunderland; Marie White, Stouffville; Doris Williams, Stouffville; Lena Barkey, Stouffville; Dorothy Reesor, Stouffville; Marion Jensen, Stouffville; Louise Hope, Etobicoke; Annabell Jones, Sandford; Eleanor Bunker, Minden and Dorothy Risebrough, Sandford.

Kim Cowan of Stouffville was unique, being a fourth generation member from the same family including great-grandmother Bertie Carruthers, grandmother Edna Carruthers and mother Ruth Anne Cowan. Ms Cowan was presented with an engraved institute gavel.

Lillian Byer, 93, of Stouffville, is as admired as the Institute itself. She's been a member 73 years, joining the organization in 1930. Edna Carruthers' association dates back 58 years.

The institute held its first meeting June 18, 1910. Twenty-six attended, but by year's end membership had grown to 42. A group of men, calling themselves the Farmers' Institute, actually preceded the women, but didn't last. To their credit, however, it's been said they had a hand in establishing the organization's distaff side.

In its heyday, the Altona Institute was extremely active sponsoring short courses in hat and lampshade-making as well as sewing. It also catered hundreds of dinners and banquets, as well as promoting 4-H club work.

Murray Wagg, a member of Richardson Masonic Lodge in Stouffville, told of the bountiful meals provided the lodge by the institute on some of the coldest winter nights.

"I'll never forget Edna Carruthers' awesome elderberry pie," he said. "The two organizations working together was a rewarding relationship none of us will ever forget."

Joe Nighswander, a long-time Altona resident, remembered a spelling bee, sponsored by the institute, between students of Altona and Glasgow schools.

"I was given a really difficult word," he recalled, "prompting me to take off my coat. Everybody laughed. But I eventually spelled it correctly and went on to win the match."

Lillian Byer's recollections prompted impromptu applause. She likened institute accreditation to, in her words, obtaining a college education in home economics. She recalled how the institute purchased a vacuum cleaner when they first came out. Members were permitted to borrow and take it home. "It was better than putting carpets out on the clothesline and beating the dust out with broom handles," she said.

Through various events, the institute supported many worthwhile initiatives, both locally and far afield. Mrs. Byer said including, the Sick Children's Hospital, war efforts and the Canadian Cancer Society.

It was an afternoon filled with mixed emotions, joy and laughter, sadness and sorrow. But the good works of the Altona Women's Institute will live on through visible accomplishments initiated 93 years ago.

Jim Thomas is a Stouffville resident who has written for area newspapers for more than 50 years.

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