

The Ontario Women's Institutes – Their Substantial Contribution to Our History

Presentation by Deborah Ireton, President of the Lanark South District WI
and Drummond Centre WI
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About FWIO

For 120 years, **Women's Institute (WI)** Members have actively worked together for family, home, community and country. The objective of the first Women's Institute Branch, formed in Stoney Creek on February 19, 1897, was to improve women's skills in the art of homemaking and childcare.

The **Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario (FWIO)** was organized in 1919, giving Members a stronger voice by working together as a united group. Through education and support programs and services, FWIO's original focus expanded to include personal growth opportunities, government lobbying and health and community wellness projects.

Our most notable initiative, the **ROSE (Reaching Ontario Sharing Education) Program**, encourages our Branches to help increase awareness and expand the skill sets of WI Members and others in their communities. As a result, each year thousands of individuals become more knowledgeable on social, health, domestic and environmental matters through their participation in "ROSE Sessions" (More later in this paper).

Today, FWIO has approximately 3,500 Members in 280 Branches across Ontario.

Our Mission

"The **Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario** is a not-for-profit charitable organization with affiliations around the world, working with and for women in Ontario. Through the network of Branches, we offer educational programming and community support; advocate for social, environmental and economic change, and work towards the personal growth of all women, for home and country."

Our Beginning

In 1889, at the age of 14 months, baby John Hoodless died from what was called "summer complaint", an intestinal ailment that was common among young children at the time, caused by drinking impure milk.

Shocked at her loss, Adelaide Hoodless, turned her personal tragedy into a public movement to educate women in domestic science. She became a spokesperson for a movement that worked to have women trained in the practical science of running a household according to scientific principles, first opening a cooking school in Hamilton

in 1894, and later playing an important role in raising funds and promoting a school for domestic science on the Guelph campus of the Ontario Agricultural College. She was also effective in encouraging the Montreal tobacco magnate, William Macdonald, to donate the funds for building the Macdonald Institute, which opened its doors in 1903.

On Feb 19, 1897, **Adelaide Hoodless** addressed a meeting of one hundred women in a town hall meeting in **Stoney Creek, Ontario** - to promote the formation of rural women's groups - to be known as the Women's Institutes. Her message - it was time to concentrate on rural living from the women's point of view, to elevate the job of homemaking to the same level as that of farming. What was needed, she proposed, was a dedicated women's group, that could learn together of how to improve homemaking through a study of domestic science.

Farmers had access to such information through groups called **Farmer's Institutes**, which had existed since 1884 under the provincial department of agriculture. There is a close connection between the **Farmer's Institutes** and **Women's Institutes**, because the person who helped to facilitate the WI organizational meeting in Stoney Creek, where Hoodless made her historic speech, was a member of the **Farmers Institute**. **Erland Lee** is officially recognized as a cofounder of the first Women's Institute, and, he saw the potential for expanding the Farmers Institute model to include women. His perception was not widely shared by his male peers. Erland's wife, **Janet Lee**, was a key figure in helping to launch the WI, working with her husband to recruit women to attend the organizational meeting. She was also instrumental in shaping some of the key features of the new group, including the constitution of the organization. The final copy of that document was drafted on **Janet Lee's** dining room table, now on display at the museum in **Stoney Creek**.

The First WIs

The first group was established in **Stoney Creek** - then a second in **Whitby** and a third in **Kemble**. These branches grew out of the structure provided by the Farmers Institutes and the enthusiasm generated by female lecturers addressing the local women. Each new group followed a pattern that combined interested local women, with sponsorship from existing agricultural organizations, and inspiration from lecturers.

The early advocates were not without opposition - not everyone supported the novel idea of Women's Institutes. In fact, male attitudes were among the biggest obstacles facing the young movement. Some husbands were concerned with the cash outlay required to establish such a group. Foreseeing that criticism, **Janet Lee** proposed a membership fee of only twenty-five cents per year to ensure that the costs were affordable for everyone. Another sneer was... 'Let them try it...all women fight and it will break up...it won't last long without a man running it!'. However, **Erland Lee** was supportive, and had even taken a risk in proposing **Adelaide Hoodless** as a speaker for the **Saltfleet Farmers Institute** against the wishes of the male membership; his invitation resulted in the formation of the first W. I.

Erland Lee also assisted in the drafting of the first constitution and by-laws, and made the necessary contacts with officials in the Department of Agriculture to explore affiliation with the existing **Farmers' Institutes**.

The WI's Role Expands

As the numbers and branches grew, the WI movement grew in scope in the field of domestic science and other fields of education. **MacDonald Institute** formed a lending library of domestic science topics, providing materials, through the mail, to Institute members. In the first year, they received 350 requests for information. Eventually they provided travelling lecturers, teaching short courses at remote areas.

Women also acquired skill from organizing their local groups, including public speaking, which helped provide a new level of self-confidence to many women. WI also moved beyond individual development, as the branches provided the hitherto unavailable benefits of working together as a group – developing a Sisterhood of woman.

Support to the War Effort

Virtually every branch of the institutes provided support to the WWI, knitting woollen socks – in the hundreds of thousands. In 1916, nearly 900 branches with a membership of 30,000 women, were busy knitting. At the 1915 fall convention, it was reported that 13,524 pairs of socks had been knitted. Support was also provided to the **Red Cross**, in the amount of \$1.650,000, in goods and cash.

Not only did the Institutes provide an effective forum for wartime production and personal sacrifice by the women, but they proved to be an effective way for women to support one another emotionally during that time. The wartime experience of knitting together, both literally and figuratively, ultimately led to a new pattern of organization when the **Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario** was established in 1919. In addition to the provincial organization, a similar national federation was created in the same year to tie together all the W I's across Canada, under an umbrella organization known as the **Federated Women's institutes of Canada**.

Just twenty years after the close of the Great War, the winter 1939-40 issue of **'Home and Country'** announced the launch of another war effort by the institutes. The Institutes pledged to continue to accept their responsibilities for home and community life, and to carry on special war efforts. The women were asked to turn their attention to peace proposals and post war plans.

The Tweedsmuir Histories are Launched

In the **'Historical Research and Current Events Report'** of 1933, **Miss Applebe**, a Provincial Convener, urged the branches to collect and save the history of barns, buildings, and places of interest. Many branches started scrapbooks to carry out this request. During **Lord Tweedsmuir's** term as Governor General of Canada, **Lady Tweedsmuir**, who had become a devoted W I member in England, took a great interest in the W I of Canada. At a meeting of the **Athens W I**, now of **Leeds East District**, Lady Tweedsmuir stressed the need for preserving the interesting history of our

Canadian people, the places, customs and activities of our developing land. In 1936, a proposition to preserve local history was forwarded to the provincial board of the FWIO, and slowly the wheels began to turn. The Provincial Convener proposed in her 1940 report that branches begin "**Village History Books**", and, in 1945, the program was officially launched. The **Tweedsmuir Histories** of local communities have become one of the WI's most outstanding and valuable projects.

In 2010, an agreement was made with the **Ontario Genealogical Society (OGS)** to digitize the Tweedsmuir Collections, to make them available to the public through the OGS e-library. This is great news to the WI. The original documents could remain locally, and the public could access the Tweedsmuir's online for family research, learning about our rich communities, and discovering the wonderful work that has been created by WI members. Today, Tweedsmuir Books are now officially "**Tweedsmuir Community History Books**" and the Curators are now called "Coordinators". Despite the name changes, Tweedsmuir books continue to be compiled by all levels of the Women's Institute's structure – Branch, District, Area and Province. While many are still in the homes of the Coordinators, others have been deposited in local archives, museums and other locations.

Pennies for Friendship

This Program was launched in 1939 as a means of financing the ACWW organization - **The Associated Country Women of the World** - the largest international organization for rural and urban women. The **Federated Women's Institutes of Canada** is an affiliated society of the ACWW

Pennies for Friendship are used to keep Membership dues low, so that eligible societies are not prevented from joining because of costs. Other means of financing the ongoing work and infrastructure of ACWW had to be found; in 1939, the Chairman of Finance, **Mrs Godfrey Drage**, proposed asking members of each ACWW society to donate at least the smallest coin of their country each year, to enable the continuation of essential work on behalf of other women and their families. This voluntary fund has become the lifeblood of ACWW.

The '**Pennies**' funds are mainly used to meet the expenditure of the Central Office, which deals with:

- Negotiating external funding for projects and providing feedback reports to the donors; also the evaluation, monitoring and administration of these projects.
- Servicing the large worldwide membership through maintenance of a computer database in London, the publication of the quarterly magazine – the Countrywoman, the international work of the Officers.
- Liaising with UN agencies dealing with issues relating to the welfare of rural women.
- Other administration costs essential to meet legal and other obligations that all charities are subject to, accounting, management of investments, filing of returns, etc.

The origin of the W I Colours

The W I Colours came from Guelph (which was named for Queen Victoria, the reigning monarch at the time, whose family name was Guelph). As it is called the 'Royal City', the royal colours of blue and gold were chosen to be the W I colours.

The W I Ode

The W I has an 'Ode', the author of which is not known - nor is there a record of when it was first used by our organization. However, mention of it are in reports between 1910 and 1915. The words were first used by the **Royal Templars**...sons of temperance lodge in the Simcoe County.

"A goodly thing it is to meet in friendship's circle bright,
Where nothing stains the pleasure sweet nor dims the radiant light.
No unkind word our lips shall pass, no envy sour the mind,
But each shall seek the common weal, the good of all mankind."

W I Motto

At the first W I Convention, held in 1902, a request for a motto and a pin resulted in the appointment of a committee to receive suggestions and make suitable selections. The judges were **Adelaide Hoodless** and **Mary Watson**...dean of Macdonald Institute. With the thought of the improvement of the rural home in mind, it is related that **Laura Rose**, while sitting in her mother's parlour penned the words, "For home and Country"; this motto was selected, and has been universally adopted.

W I Badge

A committee appointed to arrange for a pin for W I was again provided with an idea by Miss **Laura Rose**. It was designed from a signet ring she wore at the time and was in the form of a small oval in blue and gold, and could have the initials of our Institute, in the centre. A small maple leaf was placed on each end and the words of the motto engraved on the oval band.

The W I Grace

The words of W I's Grace were submitted to the Provincial Board by members of the Ottawa area in their annual meeting in 1950. They were composed by Mrs. **Clara Lintell Deakin** of City View and Merivale W I, and were to be sung to the tune of Old Hundredth. The board accepted them, and recommended that this grace be used at all W I functions.

"We thank Thee, Father, for Thy care; Food, friends and kindness we share; May we forever mindful be of home and Country and of Thee".

Mary Stewart Collect

Mary Stewart, the author of the Collect, was born in 1876 in the state of Ohio, and moved with her parents to Georgetown, Colorado. After graduating from the University of Colorado she became principal of the high school at Longmont, Colorado, where she joined a Women's Club. She wrote the Collect as a prayer for the day, and called it a **Collect for Club Women**, because she felt that women working together in an

organization was something new, and perhaps had a need for a special petition and mediation of their own. It was offered for publication in 1904, and has been adopted throughout the world by English speaking women.

“Keep us, oh Lord, from pettiness;
Let us be large in thought, in word, and deed.
Let us be done with fault-finding and leave off self-seeking.
May we put away all pretence and meet each other face to face, without self-pity and without prejudice.
May we never be hasty in judgement and always generous.
Let us take time for all things; let us grow calm, serene, gentle.
Teach us to put into action our better impulses, straightforward and unafraid.
Grant that we may realize that it is the little things that create differences, that in the big things of life we are at one.
And may we strive to touch and know the great human heart, common to us all.
And, oh Lord God, let us forget not to be kind.”

About the ROSE Program

FWIO's most notable initiative, Reaching Ontario Sharing Education – or the *ROSE Program* – encourages WI Branches to help increase awareness and expand the skill sets of both WI Members and people in their communities. As a result, each year thousands of individuals become more knowledgeable on various social, health, domestic and environmental matters through their participation in “ROSE Sessions”.

Scholarships from FWIO

FWIO Provincial Scholarship

Helen M. McKercher Scholarship

90th Anniversary Scholarship

Ontario Women's Institute Scholarships

International Scholarship - Lady Aberdeen

---as well as many scholarships offered through branch, district and area W I's.

Resolutions

One of the objectives at all levels of FWIO is in the conduct of its affairs. In every phase of its work the Women's Institute shall be non-partisan, non-sectarian and non-racial. All Women's Institutes shall be operated for the equal good of all citizens in a democratic manner to ensure that proper opportunity is provided for the expression of opinions and that the rights of a minority are respected.

Women's Institute members have been instrumental in establishing new laws and amending existing ones. Our Members voice their concerns and initiate resolutions at the community, provincial, national and international levels.

Historically, FWIO has played a pivotal role in influencing many changes to provincial laws and practices, including:

- Mandatory stopping for school buses with flashing lights
- Installation of railway crossing signs

Painting of white lines on provincial highways
Implementation of easy-to-understand labels on food products
Enforcement of the proper use of slow moving vehicle signs
Clear markings on poison containers
And many other initiatives!

Erland Lee (Museum) Home

Location: 552 Ridge Road, Stoney Creek, Ontario, L8J 2Y6

Phone: [905-662-2691](tel:905-662-2691) or [Email](#) the Museum

Tours: Thursday - Sunday from 10:30am-4:00pm

Admission: Adults \$5, Seniors \$4, Children 5-18 years \$3, Family \$13 (plus HST)

In 1972, the **Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario** (FWIO) purchased the Lee family home. The objective is to preserve the vintage home as a memorial to the birthplace of the Women's Institutes (WI), and feature the early middle-class, rural Victorian lifestyle. It opened as the **Erland Lee Museum** the same year, with the exterior and the 1873 additions restored to their 1897 beauty.

The white board and batten house is an example of Gothic Architecture, and exhibits household artifacts and furniture circa 1790 to 1930. Many of the artifacts are original to the six generations of the Lee family who lived in the home between 1808 and 1971.

The Carriage (Drive) House, also an original 1873 building, features displays of farm-related implements and tools, exhibits on Stoney Creek history, including donated family artifacts from the community, and other special exhibits throughout the year. The museum boasts a quilt collection, with a mix of traditional and modern patterns and techniques, many quilted by members of the Women's Institutes. The highlight of the quilt collection, and a piece of Canadiana, is the 1875 Margaret Sheriff Quilt.

Adelaide Hunter Hoodless Homestead

359 Blue Lake Road, St. George, ON N0E 1N0

Museum Hours: The Homestead is open throughout the year, and also by appointment.

Information: 519-448-1130

Admission: Adults \$5.00; WI Members \$4.00; Children (aged 6 – 11) \$2.50;

Children (aged 5 and under) FREE; 'Friends of Adelaide' FREE

In the first half of the 20th century, the property was owned by various families until it was purchased by the **Federated Women's Institute of Canada** (FWIC) in 1959. The FWIC, along with the help of other Women's Institute groups worldwide, renovated the farmhouse to reflect the time period in which the Hunter family would have lived there. Today, the homestead continues their original sentiment and reflects the time period of c. 1875-1880, when Adelaide was nearly a grown woman. The furnishings within the home were donated largely by WI members.

The Women's Institutes of Today

Over the years, the Women's Institute has grown and changed with the times. Courses once offered from OMAF are fond memories of many members. Now the Rose Programs are doing the job of teaching courses. There is a movement to modernize the WI.

A new phrase has been adopted... ***'Women Involved'***.

WI—WOMEN INTERESTED

WI—WOMEN INFORMED

WI—WOMEN INVOLVED

*'A WOMEN'S ORGANIZATION WORKING TOGETHER
TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES AND THE WORLD'*

For further information, see the FWIO website at: www.fwio.on.ca

Or Deborah Ireton, Lanark South District President