



## Women's Institute staple of rural life

The Women's Institute, an integral part of Canada's rural fabric, is 85 years old this month. Citizen Carleton Place correspondent **Mary Cook** looks at the evolution of the organization.



The Women's Institute — the WI for short.

The name is synonymous with rural women. Every village in The Valley has one and there are even a few branches in Ottawa.

But does the WI mean more than matronly ladies dishing out home baking at the fall fair?

For Dorothy Crump of the Morewood WI, who attended her first meeting with her mother more than 40 years ago, it has been "a social and learning experience."

"When my father was seriously ill, the members stepped right in and gave me much support. I couldn't measure the help they were."

It was 85 years ago that 101 women met in a small community hall in Stoney Creek, Ont., to help each other with the everyday problems of being a farmer's wife and raising a family.

Their chief concerns were hygiene, sanitation, making home economics part of the school curriculum and learning how to run a happy and successful farm home.

They called themselves the Women's Institute.

Today their objectives have broadened to include topics such as ecology, the country's economy and Canadian unity.

Their numbers have swelled to more than 50,000 in Canada. They have affiliations with the Associated Country Women of the World with representation in more than 70 countries.

There are half a million WI members in England alone, and in Canada there are 2,500 branches in every province including the North West Territories and the Yukon.

While other organizations are losing ground in memberships — and folding in many cases — the WI continues to attract new members and embark on new programs.

Although never loud and obvious, "the voice of women seems to reach into every corner of the rural community."

WI groups breathe life into fall fairs and into major events like the Ottawa Exhibition with displays of needlework, baking and crafts.

In many communities, the WI is the only organization which offers catering services. Hardly a week goes by, especially in summer months, that local branches aren't involved in making lunches for local farm meetings, catering to weddings, serving sandwiches and coffee to conferences and setting up food stands wherever they can in order to swell the branch coffers.

But WI life is more than buttering bread and making jellied salads.

"It brings together the young and old with common goals," says Dorothy Brown of the Ramsay WI. Each group is able to give to the other and each benefits from the presence of the other.

There aren't too many organizations where common goals can meld together such diversified ages.

Last year's annual report of the Federated Women's Institutes in Canada shows money was poured into developing water wells in Kenya, that scholarships were handed out across Canada, and that countless resolutions and submissions went off to governments showing concerns in everything from acid rain to child abuse.

Dozens of branches in Canada compiled local dossiers and worked with museums to document and record area histories.

The WI's continuing popularity is no mystery to Jenny Morgan, Executive Secretary of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada.

"We are filling a real need in the community, and have done so since the concept began."

"Not only are we working on many fronts at local and national levels, we are the only voice of rural women in Canada."

Local members are quick to agree. Says Margaret Howie of the Carp WI: "I would never have learned the things I did any other way."

Adds Margaret Nicholson of the Carp W.I.: "It's a way of finding friendship in a community. And I like the way members are always there to help when someone in the community is in trouble."

That was exactly what the founder had in mind when she gathered around her that first band of women in February of 1897.

Adelaide Hunter Hoodless, herself a farm wife, was concerned that although there was a strong men's farm organization, there was no group representing farm women.

Her theory was that wives needed just as much help in running the farm home and raising the farmers of the future as their husbands needed in growing good crops.

As urban-raised women move to the country and swell the rural population, many find themselves caught up in the spirit of the Women's Institute.

Says Mabel Ringreide of the Beckwith WI: "I'm not a farm woman originally so belonging to the institute has introduced me to many farm women I otherwise would not have met."

Margaret Drummond of Rocky Ridge WI agrees: "In my branch, there are half town women and half farm women. I find the institute brings the two groups together beautifully."

I get a great deal out of the workshops — and of course the companionship means a lot to me."

Hazel Blair of the Jonson May WI, a member of for than 30 years, apologizes because she isn't as active as she once was.

"I'm getting on in years. But I always loved WI work and hopefully, I've contributed something over the years."



DUNDAS DISTRICT WI celebrated their 75th Anniversary. Past Presidents attending the Annual Meeting are L-r Front row Mrs. Hugh Coons, Mrs. Donald Hess, Mrs. Lloyd Davis, Mrs. Nina Woods, Mrs. Fenton Hyndman, Mrs. Gertie Montgomery. Back row L-r Mrs. Roma McMillan, Mrs. Grant Becksted, Mrs. Alfred Carkner, Mrs. Claud Carr, Mrs. Jane Graham, Mrs. Irene Armstrong, Mrs. Clair Nugent. Absent Mrs. Ken Hillis.