



REFERENCE PAPERS

CANADIAN INFORMATION SERVICE

OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

OTTAWA - CANADA

No. 13

WOMEN'S INSTITUTES - FIFTY YEARS OF GROWTH

To the rural women of Canada, February 19, 1947 is a very special day, for it marks the 50th anniversary of the founding in Canada of the first Women's Institute. It is unlikely that anyone of the hundred farmers' wives who gathered in a small Ontario village on that winter night in 1897 realized how profoundly the decision they took was to affect the lives of countless thousands of rural women in many parts of the world. None there could guess that from the "Women's Institute" they formed that night would grow an international fellowship of rural women from more than a score of countries, united by common aims and ideals.

The women had gathered to hear an address by Mrs. Adelaide Hoodless, wife of the chairman of the School Board in the nearby city of Hamilton, Ontario. A short time before, Mrs. Hoodless' infant son had died as a result of being fed impure milk and that determined her to work to save other babies from a similar fate. She was invited to address a meeting of the Farmers' Institute of Saltfleet Township and there suggested the formation of a similar organization for the farmers' wives. On February 19, 1897 these women came together at Stoney Creek and the first Women's Institute was formed.

Growth of the Movement

With its primary aims of improving farm home conditions and affording opportunities for the wives of farmers to meet together for fellowship and study, the new organization met a very real need in Canadian rural life. The organization spread rapidly and by 1915 Women's Institutes were established in all nine Canadian provinces.

In England, the outbreak of the war of 1914-1918 created a need for a combined effort among country women, particularly in connection with the production and preservation of food. In 1915, Mrs. Alfred E. Watt, a member of the Advisory Board of Women's Institutes in British Columbia, brought the question of the formation of Women's Institutes in England before the Agricultural Organization Society. This Society gave their enthusiastic support to the idea and Mrs. Watt later joined their staff as Women's Institute Organizer.

Rural women in other countries also became interested in this Canadian-born organization and associations with similar aims and methods of working, but not always called "Institutes", were established in many parts of the world. Today, a partial list of countries in which Women's Institutes, or their equivalent, are active would include Australia, New-Zealand, the United States, South Africa, Burma, Sweden, Switzerland, Palestine, India, France, Denmark, Ceylon and Estonia. Members from these and other countries are affiliated internationally through the Associated Country Women of the World, of which Mrs. Watt is President.