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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.

Canadian Institutes Federated

Meanwhile, among Canadian Institutes, the need for a co-ordinating body had arisen. Consequently, in 1919, delegates from each Canadian province met in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada was formed, under the Presidency of a distinguished and beloved Canadian Judge Emily Murphy.

Today under the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada, more than 70,000 rural women are organized "for Home and Country" in more than 3,000 local Institutes.

At the biennial meeting of the F.W.I.C. to be held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, June 9-13, 1947, and at the various district and provincial conferences this year, the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Women's Institutes will be celebrated.

The Federated Women's Institutes of Canada, like its member Institutes, is strictly non-sectarian and non-partisan in politics. In addition to co-ordinating the work and serving as a clearing house for the activities of the provincial Institutes, the F.W.I.C. has the following objectives:

1. To raise the standard of homemaking.
2. To develop agriculture.
3. To promote educational, moral, social and economic measures.
4. To encourage co-operation and community efforts.
5. To initiate nation-wide campaigns in accordance with the objectives of the Federation.

Officers are elected at the biennial meeting of the Federation for a two-year term and consist of an Honorary President, President, two Vic-Presidents, Recording Secretary, Corresponding Secretary, Treasurer, Publicity Director and a Board of Directors made up of two representatives from each province.

The work of the F.W.I.C. is financed by its member Institutes who contribute at an annual rate of five cents per individual member.

Local Institutes are united in some provinces in district or regional Federations, and in provincial Federations in all provinces. These groups meet annually and their conferences are attended by delegates from local Institutes. The work of the Institutes in most provinces is supported by small grants from provincial governments and is assisted by a Superintendent, who is an officer of the provincial Department of Agriculture, or the provincial University. These officers also serve as counsellors to the F.W.I.C.

An important phase of Institute work, and one receiving more and more attention in Canada, is the development of Junior Institutes or Girls' Clubs. Programs are designed to assist the girls in the fields of personal, home and community living. Girls' Clubs frequently join with Junior Farmers' Clubs in educational, agricultural and recreational programs.

Work of the Institutes

The war record of the Women's Institutes from 1939-1945 was outstanding. Members were represented on many wartime boards and commissions. They provided ambulances, mobile kitchens and canteens, Station wagons and vast quantities of hospital and medical supplies, clothing and knitted goods. Thousands of dollars worth of vegetable seeds were sent as gifts to British Institutes and hundreds of tons of jam were made and sent overseas. Cash contributions to various war charities were substantial.

Recognition of this work of the Canadian Institutes was given by the King on two occasions when the two F.W.I.C. wartime presidents were mentioned in the King's Honours List. In 1943, Mrs. H.A. Dunham, retiring President, was created a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, (C.B.E.), and in 1946 her successor, Mrs. Cameron Dow, was named an Officer of the same Order, (.O.B.E.).

In addition to their war work, during these years the Institutes maintained their regular program of study and action in the fields of health, education, social welfare, homemaking and citizenship.

With Canada's new Citizenship Act coming into force on January 1, 1947, citizenship is highlighted in this year's study program. The role and responsibilities of women in political life is being stressed. Institutes are working to have women appointed on School Boards and to other municipal offices. Immigration problems and policies are also being studied.

Much of the work of the Women's Institutes has always been directed towards securing improved health services in rural areas. Among the projects being stressed this year are establishment of school clinics, measures for the control of tuberculosis, cancer and venereal disease, and immunization of children against infectious diseases. Many Institutes are sponsoring the Blue Cross Hospitalization Plan in their communities. The provision of school lunches is receiving widespread attention.

The provision of scholarships to enable rural girls to attend colleges of Household Science has been a regular feature of the work of several provincial Institutes for some years.

In Ontario, the birth-place of the Women's Institute movement, Institute members are celebrating their 50th anniversary by creating an "Adelaide Hoodless Fund". Their objective is \$36,000 and the fund will provide scholarships to enable girls from Ontario farm homes to study Home Economics at the provincial Agricultural College.

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