

## **THE BIRTH OF THE WI – Ray Williams, Rainhill WI**

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this evening.

Many of you know me but for those who don't I will give a brief introduction.

I was born in Liverpool and grew up in Litherland where my ex-husband and I were married. Shortly after this we immigrated to Canada in 1964. We started in the Toronto area but moved around for the first 10 years until we settled in the village of Millgrove.

Millgrove was a small village boasting a church, an elementary school, a library and park, a cemetery and general store. There was also a thriving Women's Institute which I joined after a few years.

Each meeting started with the Mary Stewart Collect which Mary, who came from Colorado U.S.A. wrote in 1904 as a prayer for Women's Clubs of town and country worldwide with widely different interests working together. Mary carried the idea of WI to England and later became President of the Association of Countrywomen of the World. This Collect really moved me and we recited it at every WI meeting.

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As we are celebrating 100 years of WI in Britain, you may be interested to know that Women's Institute was born in Canada in 1897 in the small town of Stoney Creek, Ontario, not far from where I lived. Due to the foresight of 3 amazing individuals, lives of many men, women and children were saved and improved.

Following is an account of those events and some of the things that Women's Institute achieved in those early days laying the foundation of the things that WI is still achieving worldwide.

ERLAND LEE was a notable Canadian farmer, teacher and Government employee from Stoney Creek, Ontario. He is best known for his role in the founding of the Women's Institutes, an international organization originally formed to promote the education of isolated rural women.

Erland was a prominent member of the Lee family, which came to the Niagara Peninsular in Canada (then British North America) as United Empire Loyalists in 1872, after the American Revolutionary War. They settled on top of the Niagara Escarpment and cultivated a prosperous farm.

Both Erland and his wife Janet were teachers before taking up farming. The success of the WI was largely due to their hard work. They organised affiliation to the Farmer's Institute and recruited the support of the

Ministry of Agriculture through which came Government co-operation and support. Janet was elected to the first WI committee and was one of a group of these pioneer women who visited other Farmer's Institutes to encourage the formation of more WIs. They were helped by Laura Rose Stephen who suggested the WI motto for Home and Country and designed the badge and proposed blue and gold for the official colours. as being a schoolteacher, also carried on the family tradition of mixed farming, raising jersey cattle, processing maple syrup and growing fruit.

The third founding member was Adelaide Hunter Hoodless. Adelaide Hunter was born on Feb 27, 1857 just a few months after her father passed away. She was born near St. George, Ontario where she received her formal education. At 24 she married a businessman John Hoodless and moved to Hamilton where they raised a family of 4. Sadly, her first child died at 18 months after drinking unpasteurised milk, and Adelaide felt it could have been avoided if she had been more educated. In those days women spent their time at home keeping house and looking after the children. Adelaide lived in a rural community where women and female children were expected to work outside in the fields or helping with the animals as well as do all the running of the house. Education was a low priority for females. The tragedy of losing her baby inspired Adelaide to set about making sure that more women were educated in matters of "domestic science" and she began pushing for courses to be taught in Hamilton Public schools.

Having created a stir in that endeavour, she had garnered a reputation for being an entertaining speaker and was invited to speak at the annual meeting of the Farmer's Institute in 1896 where the main focus of discussion was the health of farm animals. When she took the podium she advocated that the health of family, be put above that of the animals, and in doing so, moved one man, Erland Lee, to invite her to speak at his local Farmer's Institute's next meeting. At this meeting to which both men and women had been invited, it was suggested that some type of organization for women to be established to study and improve homemaking, in the way that the Farmer's Institutes worked to improve farming. So a meeting was planned for the following Friday night, to give some time to advertise, and an attendance of thirty-five was expected. Erland and Janet spent that week inviting and encouraging the women of Stoney Creek to attend this 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting. Support was much stronger than anticipated when on February 19, 1897 one hundred and one women and one man (Erland Lee) crowded into Squire's Hall in the village of Stoney Creek, to organize the first branch of the Women's Institute. Erland as the only man in attendance, and acted as chairman of the first meeting.

The original Women's Institute constitution was written on February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1897 on the Lee's dining room table. Erland Lee's financial support of the Women's group was crucial to its expansion and success, and may be the only reason why the organization was recognized by the /Canadian government during a time when women were not considered citizens.

Erland Lee was also a member of the Saltfleet Masonic Lodge, Treasurer-Clerk of Saltfleet Township, and a teacher educated at the Hamilton Normal School. He jointly owned and operated the Vinemount Creamery with his friend and local member of provincial Parliament, Ernest D'Israeli (E.D.) Smith and maintained a mixed farm atop the Niagara Escarpment.

Knowing the limitations of rural women, the WI held "short courses", often in the homes of members, and taking only an afternoon, so that the members could gain important knowledge and skill without sacrificing responsibilities at home. The topics covered in the short courses were highly varied and limited only to that which pertained to "a better understanding of the economic and hygienic value of foods, "the scientific care of children" and "any line of work for the uplifting of the home or the betterment of conditions of community life," as designated in the constitution of the Women's Institute.

Clearly satisfying a widely felt need, the popularity of the WI grew quickly with 30,000 members from 888 branches recorded in Ontario in 1914. From the sorrow of a grieving mother grew an international institution with WIs today recording 9 million members in 70 countries. Tough the beginnings were humble, Adelaide Hoodless felt the need for an ongoing effort to better the lives of women and rural people everywhere, or a one paper put it "She had the prophet's vision of what ought to be and nobly took upon herself the burden of the voice crying in the wilderness."

Over the years WI has been responsible for many changes and improvements.

In Canada they lobbied to make it mandatory for traffic to stop in both directions for school buses with flashing lights.

In 1928 Women's Institute Members donated \$850,000 in goods and cash to the Canadian Red Cross for war relief.

WI is affiliated with member societies in over 70 countries with 9 million members as part of the Associated Women of the World.

The WI advocated making mandatory the use of breathalyzer and blood tests to determine sobriety.

WI campaigned for the listing of antidotes on all products containing toxic ingredients.

WI advocated for the pasteurization of all milk. (A resolution originating with Adelaide Hoodless).

The WI lobbied for reflective paint or imbedded markers be used on the centrelines of highways.

Six generations of The Lee family lived in the Homestead, sometimes called Edgemont on the Niagara Escarpment from 1808 until 1970, when it was sold to the Women's Institutes. The carriage house is the original 1873 building which features displays of farming equipment, exhibits and a quilt collection.

The constitution of the Women's Department of the Farmer's Institute (later changed to the Women's institute was penned by Janet Lee on the walnut dining table at the Erland Lee (museum) home. In 1967, the Erland Lee home was designated under the Archaeology Historic Sites Board of Ontario. In commemoration of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, The Erland Lee Museum is a now National Historic Site of Canada and is also designated under the Ontario Heritage Act.

In recent years the Museum was closed by the Federal Government. However, after much lobbying from the WI, it is now a National Historic Site of Canada and is the New Home of the Provincial Office of the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario and was officially re-opened to the public in September, 2014.

"Cairn" a sealed time capsule was designed and erected by Marino Checchini in celebration of FWIO 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday in 1997 to be open in 50 years, 2047.

Some of the many items in the capsule include;

Copies of the Constitution:

"Mary Stewart Collect" and the "Institute Ode"

Many donated special FWIO Pins

One and five dollar bills, coins – penny, nickel, dime and quarter

Memorabilia from 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary

Pictures of Erland and Janet Lee and Adelaide Hunter Hoodless.