

History

The Women's Institutes is an organization with rural Ontario roots. The first branch was formed in 1897, at a time when rural women lived in isolation and often in ignorance. Male farmers had organized as the Farmers' Institute to help them learn about recent innovations and scientific approaches to agriculture, but there was nothing similar for their wives.

Shortly after Adelaide Hoodless' eighteen-month-old son died from drinking impure milk, she began to campaign for an educational forum for women. Hoodless wanted women to meet to learn modern methods of looking after their families and keeping house, to become more responsible citizens and community leaders, and to have opportunities for cultural and social activities.

PHOTO: Adelaide Hunter Hoodless, founder of the Women's Institutes.

After an information meeting attended by 101 women and one man from the Hamilton area, 35 women met on a cold night in February to form the Women's Institute of Saltfleet Township (later Stoney Creek WI). Adelaide Hoodless, Janet Lee and Erland Lee drafted the first constitution for the new organization. Erland Lee used his influence to obtain a government grant for the group and from that time it became associated with the Ontario Department of Agriculture.



Women's Institutes comes to Nova Scotia

In 1906, the idea of Women's Institutes began to crop up in other provinces.

In Nova Scotia, WINS was launched in part because of the influence of Dr. Melville Cumming. In 1911, Dr. Cumming, then principal of the Nova Scotia Agricultural College and Secretary of Agriculture for the province, visited Ontario. On his return to Nova Scotia, Dr. Cumming recommended to the provincial government that the organization be established here.

In 1913, Miss Jennie Fraser of New Glasgow and a graduate of MacDonald College was appointed superintendent of the Women's Institutes of Nova Scotia. With the assistance of Mrs. Laura (Rose) Stephen of Ontario, the first Institute was organized in Salt Springs, Pictou County on July 17, 1913. In 1919, Miss Helen J. MacDougall took over the position of superintendent and remained with the organization for the next 26 years.

Also in 1919, the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada (FWIC) was formed to coordinate the work of the provinces and became the national voice for rural women in Canada.

The movement spread rapidly throughout the United Kingdom in the early 1930's due to the work of Madge Watt, a British Columbia woman who had moved to England. She was aware of similar organizations in Europe and proposed a world-wide association of rural women so that women around the world could work together for the common good of the family.

In 1933 the dream of Madge Watt was realized. The Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW) was formed with representation from 26 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and North America.

Today, ACWW has over seven million members in approximately 70 countries. It has seven representatives in the specialized agencies of the United Nations. In this way, each member of the Women's Institutes of Nova Scotia has a provincial voice, as well as an international voice.