

For Home and Country

The Role of the Federated Women's Institute in Rural Canada



Canada

Farmers in late nineteenth century Canada read agricultural newspapers such as

The Farmer's Advocate and Nor'west Farmer to keep abreast of developments in scientific farming. Farmers' Union and Grange meetings provided an outlet to discuss concerns in their local community with their peers. Unfortunately their wives and daughters had no such outlets. Despite offering recommendations on cake recipes and curtains, agricultural papers rarely mentioned household science, and discussions at farmers' union meetings certainly never touched on the domestic realm.

In 1881, Adelaide Hunter married John Hoodless and moved to a comfortable home in Hamilton where most observers expected her to settle into a life of middle-class domesticity. In August of 1888 her fourth son, John Harold, died of "summer milk fever," likely from drinking unpasteurized milk. The helplessness that she felt as a mother

Adelaide Hoodless, ca 1890

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prompted Hoodless to start lobbying for domestic education for girls in public schools as well as at the university level. Although from the perspective of today this might seem antiquated, one must remember that her aim was to introduce the same level of science to the operation of a household as was applied to the cultivation and fertilization of fields.

This was also a period when much was being written about improving standards for household hygiene and domestic science. Hoodless began by speaking at Farmers' Union meetings on topics of importance to farm women. From those activities came the idea to create a parallel organization of value to rural women. Out of the first meeting held in 1897 at Stoney Creek, Ontario, grew an organization called the Federated Women's Institutes (WI) of Canada.



The WI often lobbied provincial legislators on behalf of its rural communities. Toronto, 1930

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By 1919, WI branches had been established in every Canadian province. WI meetings also provided members with a much needed forum in which to socialize with their peers.

In its early development, the WI was closely associated with Canadian agricultural colleges. The establishment of the Macdonald Institute at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph, Ontario, and Macdonald College in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, near Montreal, was due to their lobbying efforts. In Ontario, the provincial Department of Agriculture aided WI development by publishing handbooks outlining how to establish a branch, the duties of officers, how to run meetings, and suggested topics of study. Elsewhere across Canada instructors from provincial agricultural colleges were frequently invited to lecture at WI branch meetings. The WI could hardly be characterized as a hotbed of radical

feminism, still, the membership effectively worked the political system to improve the plight of rural women. Over the course of its history this has meant rallying around Emily Murphy, their first national president, during her involvement with the “Persons Case,” to pressing for counselling resources for farm families facing the pressures of economic stress.

Long before most Canadians had heard the phrase “think globally, act locally” those precepts were guiding the activities of Women’s Institutes from coast to coast. Although they clearly had a rural orientation, the WI’s community projects rarely had a single focus but rather were directed at solving pressing issues as observed by the local membership. Their projects often benefited the many small urban centres that serviced the needs of the surrounding farming communities.



The social well-being of their rural community was important to WI members. This community hall in Colpoy's Bay, Ontario, was erected by the local WI branch.

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A WI member demonstrates the ease of washing dishes in an ergonomically designed kitchen.

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On the domestic front, changes in the WI's focus mirror similar developments occurring in society at large. These ranged from short courses on canning practices to prevent botulism, or adopting new labour-saving devices for the home, to recommendations for ergonomic kitchens designed for comfort of use, to suggestions for farm ownership succession and estate planning. Experts invited to address the Ontario Annual Convention in 1906 touched on a myriad of topics including tuberculosis prevention, safe milk handling practices, dental hygiene and the role of women in country life.

Like their peers, Women's Institute members provided patriotic support for Canada's participation in both World Wars. In addition to knitting innumerable pairs of socks and rolling bandages, members also undertook fund- and consciousness-

raising activities to assist the war effort and the home front. Because of the members' association with agriculture, many of those efforts focused on increasing food production and decreasing waste.

Much of the WI's worldwide efforts were co-ordinated through Associated Countrywomen of the World chapters around the world. During both World Wars in Europe, Canadian WI members provided assistance and moral support to their counterparts and their families in Great Britain. Today, working in tandem with other non-governmental organizations, the WI bolsters the development of craft programs for women in developing countries to help augment household incomes.

The WI did its part to help the war effort on the home front during the First World War as demonstrated by this exhibit at the Royal Winter Fair in Toronto.

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Milton Junior Institute's display at the Milton Fair promotes assistance for destitute children in the Middle East.

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One of the programs for which the WI is well known, “Pennies for Friendship,” was launched in the 1930s by Margaret Watt, a Canadian living in England. Pennies collected by members were pooled to assist with the

Mrs R. G. Purcell, FWIO President, presents a cheque for the Cockshutt tractor, destined for Greece, that the WI purchased with the proceeds of branches’ “Pennies for Friendship” collections.

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works by catering agricultural society dinners and operating food concessions at events such as ploughing matches and fall fairs. Despite their rather stereotypic tone, these efforts have proved immensely successful. As anyone who has attended an agricultural fair will attest, the local WI’s tent is the best source for delicious, nutritious food.

WI members knew that the health and well-being of young mothers and babies were not only of immediate benefit but also would have long term payoffs in terms of health care costs. Hence “Well Baby” programs in rural communities across Canada often benefited from WI support. This figured in the purchase of equipment such as baby scales as well as volunteer

The operation of portable “Well Baby” clinics was supported by many WI branches.

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A WI member hands over the keys for the ambulance the Institute purchased for the community of Port Dover, Ontario.

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purchase of items of benefit to the local or world community. In the 1950s, after civil strife had rocked Greece, the WI’s Pennies for Friendship drive financed the purchase of a Cockshutt tractor that was sent to assist Greek farmers to produce food for their nation. Often WI members raise funds to support their good

assistance in the operation of mobile clinics in rural areas. They also financed hot meal and school milk programs in rural schools in the 1940s. They sought to improve the minds of rural families by acquiring books and vehicles necessary for bookmobiles in many remote communities across Canada. In Ontario, books were often acquired by the WI through their connections in the province's Ministry of Education. In the 1960s, the lobbying efforts of Women's Institute branches on the Niagara Peninsula were instrumental in the establishment of Brock University.

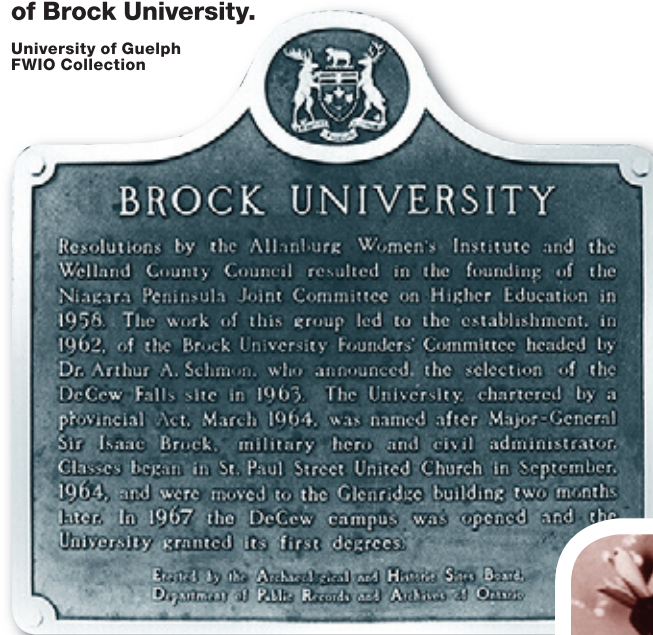


WI branches often funded public school milk programs such as this one in Waterloo County, Ontario.

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An Archaeological and Historic Sites Board plaque commemorates the Allanburg, Ontario, WI Branch's role in the founding of Brock University.

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An interest in Canada's past prompted many branches to write and publish *Tweedsmuir Histories*, each documenting the local history of a county or region. These histories continue to provide

excellent documentation of this country's rural life. Their interest in the serious side of history did not prevent members from occasionally sporting old hats that they pulled from their closets to participate in comic hat competitions.

The history of the WI's contribution to Canadian life revolves around the unflagging role that the organization played and continues to play in supporting this country's farm communities.

Members of the Massey, Ontario, WI Branch wear their prize-winning comic hats.

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