

For Home and Country. The Women's Institutes of Grey County

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ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Treasures from Ontario's Archives

For Home and Country *The Women's Institutes of Grey County* by Trevor Parsons and Chris Timbury

"After all, it is the history of humanity which is continually interesting to us, and our village histories will be the basis of accurate facts much valued by historians of the future." – Lady Tweedsmuir

Women in Ontario faced many challenges at the beginning of the twentieth century, one of the largest being the lack of education in practical household matters. Women had no formal teaching of home care, yet were expected to cook, clean, and raise children in difficult conditions. Women's Institutes [WI] were created to address these problems.

Adelaide Hoodless, co-founder of the WI, lost her young son because she had fed him raw milk. After learning that boiling the milk could have prevented his death, she became determined not to let the same happen to other

women, and envisioned an organization of women who could share their knowledge and skills. She organized the world's first WI at Stoney Creek with the help of Erland Lee in 1897, modeling it after the prominent Farmers' Institute. While the Farmers' Institute focused on the science of farming, the WI would focus on homemaking.

Women's Institutes exploded in the early twentieth century, with 888 branches and 30,000 members in Ontario alone by 1914. There are still over 500 branches in Ontario and over 9 million members worldwide. WIs have accomplished many things in Ontario, including mandatory stopping for school

Adelaide Hoodless, co-founder of the Women's Institute. Photo courtesy of Grey Roots Archives.

Grey County Archives

Grey Roots Museum & Archives
102599 Grey Road 18, R. R. #4,
Owen Sound, Ontario N4K 5N6
(519) 376-3960 ext 111 or
Toll Free (866) 473-9766
<www.greyroots.com>

The archival holdings at Grey Roots are an extensive assemblage of municipal and private collections covering the history of Grey County.

buses with flashing lights, signs at railway crossings, the teaching of music and home economics in schools, and even pushing for the pasteurization of all





Mrs. Agnew, Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. King giving the Bothwell's Corner Women's Institute Tweedsmuir a final inspection. Photo courtesy of Grey Roots Archives.

milk for sale. Besides passing resolutions for legal change, individual WIs have contributed to many community projects and produced records called Tweedsmuir Histories.

Tweedsmuir became even more popular at the encouragement of Lady Tweedsmuir, the wife of Governor General Lord Tweedsmuir. She took a special interest in Canadian history, and encouraged WI members to keep local histories in the late 1930s. These books were called "Tweedsmuir Village History Books." By the 1950s, there were almost 1,000 WI branches across mostly rural Ontario compiling Tweedsmuir histories, and in 1957 a provincial Tweedsmuir Histories Curator was appointed. Since that time, Tweedsmuir have become a unique source of history and insight into the development of a community. They are regulated by provincial, area, and branch Curators according to the Tweedsmuir

Histories Manual. In 2004, WI Tweedsmuir Curators were awarded the Scadding Award for Excellence by the Ontario Historical Society.

Tweedsmuir focus on personal histories or local development. They often contain newspaper clippings of major area events, local landmarks, and birth, marriage or death announcements. There are many personal histories and short biographies, as well as histories of land plots or buildings. There are frequently photographs of the community or WI members.

For the last year, the Grey County Archives has been working on digitizing the Tweedsmuir histories of Grey County. Many WIs have donated or loaned material to the Archives, turning over holdings from 74 branches in the County and, at present, 76 Tweedsmuir history volumes. These Tweedsmuir are being carefully scanned and converted to appear, fully searchable, on the Grey Roots Museum & Archives website <www.greyroots.com/exhibitions/virtual-exhibits/tweedsmuir>

One of the first Tweedsmuir made available online was the Kemble Tweedsmuir. Kemble WI has a special place in our Archives collection, as it was the first Women's Institute in Grey County and the third in the world. It was formed in 1897 and still serves the Township of Georgian Bluffs and the city of Owen Sound. Their Tweedsmuir contains over 350 pages of history and more than 200 photographs, many dating back to the early 1900s.

Currently the Archives has placed thirty-two Tweedsmuir volumes from seventeen Institutes online and is continuing with the project. They are



Mrs. John Hillis and Kemble Women's Institute members making a leather Tweedsmuir History cover. Photo courtesy of Grey Roots Archives.

an exceptional resource for scholars, genealogists, and historians alike, reminding us not only of the role Women's Institutes have played in local history, but also how our own communities have grown and developed into what they are today.