

Context:

Gabriola, history

Citations:

Power, J., The Women's Institute, *SHALE* 28, pp.37–48, June 2014.

Copyright restrictions:

Copyright © 2013: Gabriola Historical & Museum Society.

For reproduction permission e-mail: nickdoe@island.net

Errors and omissions:

Other articles in relating to the old WI Hall / North School on Gabriola Island:

Windecker, Hazel, [Memories of a one-room schoolhouse](#), *SHALE* 5, pp.28–29, December 2002.

Harrison, June, [The four schools of Gabriola](#), *SHALE* 11, pp.37–44, May 2005.

Date posted:

December 29, 2015.

The Women's Institute

by Janice Power

If ever the world sees a time when women work together for the benefit of mankind, it will be a power such as the world has never known. Matthew Arnold

We may never have heard of many of the women in our history, but nevertheless, they have been there in the background making changes and supporting those—usually men of course—who were more in the public eye. Several world developments in the late-19th and early-20th centuries were the impetus for women to join together to work, fight, and push for what they believed in. The Women's Institute (WI) is one long-standing organization that was a result of that movement. The WI has had a presence on Gabriola Island for over sixty years.



The farm house where Addie Hunter lived until she married John Hoodless in 1881. www.brantrealty.com

Canada's first WI

The original idea of forming a women's institute was that of Adelaide Hoodless (née Hunter) who was born in 1858 on a farm in St. George, Ontario, not far from the city of Hamilton where she later lived.

Addie, or Adelaide as she later became known, entered public life after the death of her first-born son, who probably died as a result of drinking contaminated milk. Ms. Hoodless, needless to say, was devastated; she was angry and frustrated because such deaths were easily preventable. She was determined to ensure that other children would be safe, and that families would not have to endure what she had been through.

She became president of the local branch of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), which she co-founded, and lectured in domestic science classes at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph, emphasizing the importance of good hygiene and cleanliness.

In February 1897, she was invited to speak at a Ladies Night event at the Farmers' Institute in Stoney Creek.¹ There were 35 women present. In her talk, Ms. Hoodless suggested that education in domestic science might best be achieved through an

¹ Formerly Saltfleet Township, then part of South Wentworth, and now part of the city of Hamilton. Until recently, Stoney Creek remained primarily an agricultural area.

organization for women, similar to her hosts' Farmers' Institute for men.

Her suggestion was well received, and shortly after, on February 19, 1897, a hundred rural Ontario homemakers came together and agreed to create a Women's Institute. Erland Lee, the influential member of the Stoney Creek Farmers' Institute who had invited her to speak there earlier in the month, was the only man in attendance. He acted as chairman (his wife Janet also attended). The original Women's Institute constitution was written on February 25, 1897, on the Lees' dining room table. Erland Lee's political and financial support of the women's group was important to its success, and may have contributed to the organization's recognition by the Canadian government at a time when women were only beginning their struggle to establish their rights as citizens.²

Ms. Hoodless, WI, and the role of women

Adelaide Hoodless believed that "girls should be educated to fit properly for the sphere of life for which they are destined, that of homemaking, and this should be done by teaching domestic sciences in public schools".³

Today, this might be regarded as an unfeminist attitude, but back then, the role of women in society was seen, above all, to be homemakers, and it made sense that their education should reflect that reality. Adelaide Hoodless saw the value of educating women, and hence their daughters, and she saw how they could make the world a safer and healthier place.

² <http://www.ournellie.com/womens-suffrage/history-of-womens-rights>

³ British Columbia Women's Institute, *Modern Pioneers: 1909–59*, Evergreen Press, Victoria, p.4.



Adelaide Hoodless (1854–1910).

Wikimedia Commons

Initially, the Women's Institute concentrated mostly on the needs of women in rural areas for it was they who lacked opportunity and access to established educational facilities, and it was they who had the most difficulty educating themselves. They realized that by joining together, they could provide these women with the opportunities they lacked. Women's Institutes also lobbied the government to make changes to improve conditions for women and families.

Adelaide Hoodless came up against prejudice and apathy from many women of her day. Some saw her as, "that new woman who thought she knew better than devoted mothers who'd borne 10 children with maybe only three dying of typhoid and consumption".⁴ Perhaps the fact that she was the youngest of 12 children helped her to stand up for what she believed in! She was the first woman to be employed by the Ontario government as a lecturer and instructor. She focused on pure air, proper food, systematic management, economics,

⁴ *Modern Pioneers* (ibid), p. 6.

care for children, domestic/civil sanitation, and the prevention of disease.

Adelaide died in 1910 at the early age of 52, on a stage while giving a talk about education for women. How fitting! She left a multitude of advancements for women's rights and inspired women to take charge of their lives and to participate fully in their communities all across Canada. Her determination and perseverance created a women's organization that eventually become the largest international rural women's movement ever established.⁵

WI affiliation and structure

The Women's Institute structure was originally based on six "convenerships", namely, domestic economy; architecture with special references to heat, light, sanitation, and ventilation; health embracing physiology, hygiene, calisthenics, and medicine; horticulture and floriculture; music and art; and literature, education, sociology, and legislation. These closely resemble the committees in the WI today.

A convener (or director) was assigned to each convenership (or committee) and then, each year, members would undertake to educate other members about a topic of interest of their own choosing. Usually, there would be a presentation and a report about a different topic at each meeting. The author of *BC Women's Institute, Modern Pioneers*

⁵ The Federated Women's Institutes of Canada (FWIC) is a member of the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW), which is the largest international organization for both rural and urban women, with a membership of nine million in over 70 countries. ACWW also advocates for rural women and their families through its links with the United Nations (UN). The ACWW has special consultative status with UNESCO, and is a member of several UN NGO groups including the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), and the UN's Children's Fund (UNICEF).

writes: "When subjects peculiar to the female species were discussed, the door was locked in case a member of the other sex might intrude."

The initial WI membership fee was set at 25 cents to make it accessible to all women. Ms. Hoodless, with the backing of the Women's Institute, went on to work for all women's interests, and she financed various projects through her own efforts. She was involved with the establishment of: the Ontario Normal School, the Victorian Order of Nurses, the National Council of Women, the MacDonald Institute at Guelph, and the School of Household Sciences at MacDonald College, which is now a campus of McGill University in Montréal.

Sir William McDonald, a successful businessman and philanthropist, supported Ms. Hoodless's compassionate work of improving rural life. He donated \$200 000 to the Macdonald Institute in 1905 at the Ontario Agriculture College in Guelph, which was the leading research university for agriculture, food, environment, and rural communities in Canada, and of which Adelaide was a strong supporter. This institution provided girls with a "scientific education in homemaking at a very moderate cost..." and gave them training on how to teach others what they had learned.

Mary Stewart's Collect

In 1904, Mary Stewart, a WI member, composed the Collect (prayer) for Clubwomen, which is still recited at branch, district, and provincial meetings as well as world conferences. It was written as a prayer for the day. Mary wrote it, "because I felt women working together with wide interests for large ends was a new thing under the sun, and perhaps they had need for a special petition and mediation of their own".

Mary was born in 1876 in Ohio. She earned her BA degree, and in 1927 was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Colorado for her distinguished work in education, social, and civic service. She held a number of teaching positions in Colorado and Montana, and worked as a junior placement officer in the pioneer period of the US Employment services. Mary Stewart died on April 1, 1943. She gave the WI the copyright of her Collect before she died:

Keep us, O Lord, from pettiness;
let us be large in thought, in word and deed.
Let us be done with faultfinding, and leave
off self-seeking.

May we put away all pretence, and meet each
other without self-pity and without prejudice.

May we never be hasty in judgment and
always generous.

Let us take time for all things; make us grow
calm, serene, gentle.

Teach us to put into action our better
impulses, straightforward and unafraid.

Grant that we may realize that it is the little
things that create differences, that in the big
thing of life, we are one.

And may we strive to touch and know the
great human heart, common to us all,
and O Lord God, let us not forget to be kind.

WI ode and grace

The institute also has an ode that was sung to the tune of *Auld Lang Syne* at special functions:

A goodly thing it is to meet in friendship
circle bright
Where nothing stains the pleasure sweet, nor
dims the radiant light
No unkind words our lips shall pass, nor
envy sour the mind,
But each shall seek the common weal, the
good of all mankind.

And when WI members are gathered together for meals, this grace is used:

We thank Thee Father for Thy care,
Food, friends and kindness we share,
May we forever mindful be,
Of Home and Country and of Thee.
Amen.

BC's first Women's Institutes

Credit for bringing the Women's Institute to British Columbia goes to Laura Rose,⁶ who in 1909, formed fifteen WI branches in rural BC. She came to BC from Ontario, where she had been appointed by the Ontario Government in 1899 to further the cause of women. She was a graduate of the Farm Dairy School at the Ontario Agricultural College. She kept house for her older brother, and taught in a rural school. She judged at fairs, ran a dairy in Nova Scotia, and wrote for farm journals. She was an articulate, instructive, and entertaining speaker, which were ideal qualifications for her task as organizer for the institute.

Laura felt British Columbia was the richest, most sparsely populated and most attractive province of Canada. She saw the WI as "the organization that could cement the young country with its diverse interests together". It would, she went on, "...be the means of bringing together under one banner, those whose motto is 'For Home and Country', the rich and the poor, the old and the young, and those of all religions, to receive and give valuable and practical knowledge along the lines of homemaking and housekeeping".⁷

⁶ Another pioneer worthy of mention was Robertson Watt. She took up the responsibility of advising the provincial government on Women's Institutes and travelled extensively to establish local branches. She was one of the first women named to the Senate of the University of British Columbia in 1912.

⁷ *Modern Pioneers* (ibid), p. 15.

In 1911, the BC Agriculture Assistance Act recognized the Women's Institute in British Columbia. Mr. Scott the first superintendant Deputy Minister of Agriculture gave them a grant to assist in their development. The first advisory board chose their motto "For Home and Country" and their colors, green, white and gold, which represented British Columbia's great forests, snowcapped mountains, and the nuggets hidden in the rivers. This board consisted of four women from different parts of British Columbia who were appointed to help guide the infant institutes. The BC institute initially divided into two geographic divisions, Vancouver Island and the Mainland; now, it is divided into four: Lower Mainland, Vancouver Island, Okanagan, and Kootenay.

The early branches had projects such as learning to make better butter, and learning how carpet sweepers worked. Delegates attended conferences and brought back discussions on eugenics,⁸ co-operation between producer and consumer, business methods for women, recreation for young people in the rural districts, and opportunities for women in the 20th century.⁹ They helped establish a Home Economics school at the University of

⁸ Eugenics, the belief and practice of improving the genetic quality of the human population, became a popular academic discipline at many colleges and universities in the early 20th century. The scientific reputation of eugenics started to decline in the 1930s, a time when eugenics was used as a justification for the policies of Nazi Germany. Today, eugenics is widely regarded as a movement which inflicted human rights violations; however, the interest of Women's Institute members in the early 20th century would likely have been in prenatal care, birth control as a means to limit the numbers of unwanted children in poor families, and, possibly, the discouragement of women having children when there was a perceived probability that they would pass on a mental disease or serious physical defect, all as a concern and responsibility of individual women, not of the state.

⁹ *Modern Pioneers* (ibid), p. 15.

British Columbia, after the delegation led by Ms. Ravenhill in 1915.

During the First World War, every WI in the province put its energy into war work:¹⁰

They raised money for various patriotic projects; shipped tons of jam to Britain, some from their own factories; raised money for the first hospital ship and for other patriotic projects; sewed and knitted for the Ambulance League (which later became the Red Cross); sent hundreds of parcels overseas, and made wool-filled comforters. These acts of kindness did not go unnoticed by the people of England.

After the war, the WI provided an answer to loneliness and lack of education for the women living in distant and isolated spots in the vastness of British Columbia. The district conferences were extended to three days to accommodate the reports and discussions of the various standing committees. These standing committees were: agriculture; citizenship; cultural activities; home economics; publicity; social welfare; the League of Nations and its successor the United Nations and international exchange programs.

The provincial board appointed the conveners until the next conference. Most districts had conveners, who received reports from the branch conveners and in turn reported to provincial conveners. All the work of the institutes came under these Standing Committees. The efforts of these groups increased the food supply 35-60% during the First World War, and became known as "Canada's gift to the Motherland".¹¹

¹⁰ *Modern Pioneers* (ibid), p.16.

¹¹ *Modern Pioneers* (ibid).

Forming a national WI organization

Twenty-two years after the Stoney Creek Institute began, the idea of creating a national organization came into consideration.

The idea to form a national group was first considered in 1912. In 1914, however, when the war began, the idea was abandoned. At the war's end, it was Miss Mary MacIssac, Superintendent of Alberta Women's Institute, who revived the idea. She realized the importance of organizing the rural women of Canada so they might speak as one voice for needed reforms, and of the value of co-ordinating provincial groups into a more consistent organization.¹²

In February 1919, while long heavy trains puffed across the land, filled with men in khaki, bringing invalids back home, bright faced, clear-eyed, country women were travelling to Winnipeg, Manitoba, to create the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada.¹³

Judge Emily Murphy became the federation's first president. The national board consisted of two voting members from each province. There were many discussions and disagreements about the structure and purpose of the new organization, but in the end, delegates agreed that it should be a clearing house for the work of the provincial institutes, and that it should initiate national campaigns to raise the standards of home, community, and country. Each province was to contribute to its expenses.

In 1927, Judge Murphy was instrumental in obtaining women's right to sit in the

Canadian Senate.¹⁴ The WI voice had been heard and brought many changes and improvements in women's and families' lives in Canada.

WI has international conferences and BC has sent delegates to all the world conferences, giving its members an opportunity to travel and become more aware of the world at large. The Institute instilled a pride of Canada and the importance of good neighbours in its membership.

BC WIs from the 1920s to the 1940s

In 1922, two significant projects were initiated by the BC WIs: the Othoa Scott Fund, and the Women's Institute booth at the Pacific National Exhibition (PNE).

The Othoa Scott fund began with a letter from Ms. Scott, whose daughter, Othoa (Polly), was very ill with tuberculosis of the spine, asking for help from the WI. The Central Park WI in Vancouver subsequently sent letters to BC's 126 branches, and so began the raising of funds to provide treatment for Othoa.

This fund-raising effort evolved into the "Fund for Crippled Children of BC", an organization that held its first AGM in 1923.

¹⁴ She and four other women petitioned the Supreme Court of Canada to have the word "persons" in the British North America Act (Canada's Constitution at the time) interpreted to include women, but in 1928, the Court issued its ruling that women were not "qualified persons"; however, this judgement was reversed in 1929 by Canada's final Court of Appeal, the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in England. Manitoba was the first province to give women the right to vote in provincial elections, which they did in 1916. Several other provinces, including BC, followed suit within a year or two, only Québec holding out until 1940. It wasn't until 1920 that women had the unconditional right to vote in federal elections.

¹² Wikipedia's History of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada.

¹³ *Modern Pioneers* (ibid), p. 7.

This new organization began raising funds to build a hospital for crippled children in Vancouver and, in 1925, to build a solarium for the prolonged treatment of “delicate and crippled” children on Vancouver Island.

In 1927, after the WI received a contribution from the Royal Family, the 30-bed Queen Alexandria Solarium opened in Mill Bay with Othoa Scott as one of its first patients. And in 1928, Vancouver's Crippled Children's Hospital on Hudson Street admitted its first patient. The Vancouver hospital's name was changed in 1948 to the BC Children's Hospital, which is now supported by many organizations.

The main educational feature of the PNE began in 1922 with the WI providing demonstrations each day of weaving, leatherwork, quilting, spinning, and labour-saving devices. The demonstrations and handicraft display are still a part of the PNE today.

The BC WI in cooperation with the health department established and initiated 132 public health units in 1930. During the 1930s, the WI also sponsored 4-H clubs,¹⁵ and livestock and agricultural clubs. In this period, WIs also helped to organize community recreation including games, dancing, and gymnastics. Through the depression, they made quilts for underprivileged families, which led to forming craft, self-expression and weaver guilds that still exist today. During this time in other parts of BC, WI members helped organize local museums and started ventures to assist Aboriginal artists to sell their work.

In 1935, they appealed to the government, in union with the American WI, to remove

¹⁵ 4-H is one of Canada's longest-running youth organizations for young people between the ages of 8 and 21. The H stands for Head, Heart, Hands and Health.

obnoxious weeds on the border by the Peace Arch. This initiated border picnics and cross border conferences and get-togethers. On the second Friday in July they still alternate between the Canadian and American side to hold the Peace Arch gathering.¹⁶

The public was often unaware of all the work that WI had done, and in 1936, a bulletin was started giving news of the WI events and activities. Soon after, a monthly newsletter began to be published.

The WI established scholarships in the 1940s for women going into home economics and rural community welfare studies. Each member contributed two cents to the “Pennies for Friendship” fund to establish these scholarships. Scholarships now are given to women in other fields as well as home economics.

The power of women banding together to pass legislation was evident when in 1955, backed by 6000 women in 238 WIs, the Dogwood became the floral emblem of BC.¹⁷ The WI brought about many things we now take for granted, such as the packaging of bread in grocery stores,¹⁸ the installation

¹⁶ There is also a Good Neighbours garden plot in the Peace Garden between Manitoba and North Dakota, with a plaque that states, “to God in all his glory we dedicate this garden and pledge ourselves that so long as we live we will not take arms up against each other”. The BC WI sends plants to it every year.

¹⁷ BC WIs researched and recommended the Pacific dogwood (*Cornus nuttallii*) to become the provincial flower in 1956. Members found it or its relatives the dwarf dogwood or bunchberry (*Cornus canadensis*) and red-osier dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*) growing in all regions of BC, including the north.

¹⁸ In the interests of hygiene. More recently, the WI has campaigned against excessive packaging by supermarkets of everyday products on account of the damage it inflicts on the environment.

of stop arms on school buses, and the yellow line down the centre of highways.¹⁹

Gabriola Island's WI

Gabriola Island had begun to be settled by Europeans in the mid-1800s and by the turn of the century had several farms, a thriving sandstone building-stone quarry, and a brickyard. Hazel Windecker's great grandfather was Alexander Hoggan, one of the very early farming settlers who had previously worked in Nanaimo's coalmines and Newcastle Island's sandstone quarry.

Hazel, who has been a member of Gabriola's WI for more than 50 years, recalled that her father was given a veteran's land package on Gabriola in the 1920s to work in the forest industry. Hazel reported that in the early 1940s, Ms. Campbell moved with her retired husband to Gabriola Island, which at that time had a population of fewer than 300 people. Ms. Campbell had been associated with a WI where she previously lived and felt it would be a great way for the women on the island to get together and alleviate some of the boredom that she was experiencing living in a remote community. At this time, there were basically no other organizations for women to join on Gabriola. Lottie Mae Cox, Hazel's mother, was one of the founding members of the Gabriola Island WI branch.

Hazel spoke about growing up without electric power and being one of the few people to oppose the power coming to Gabriola because she felt it would affect the social life of the island. She was accurate in her prediction, but the comfort of the power was much appreciated and made conducting meetings much easier.

¹⁹ BC WIs were asked by the government in 1960 to make recommendations on how to make the highways safer. They recommended the yellow lines seen today.

Bea Myer, another 50-year member of Gabriola WI, recalled coming to Gabriola with her two babies and husband who was clearing land and working for the brickyard. He later worked at the shipyard that Les Withey set up after the war. Bea helped start the Islands Trust and helped freeze the zoning on Gabriola that was threatening uncontrolled development. She spoke of the roads on Gabriola: how dusty the roads used to be; how a 40-mph speed limit was placed on the island with the encouragement of the WI.

Bea with the support of the WI helped start the 4-H club in the early 1950s with a couple of kids; the club has grown and is still going strong. The WI would sponsor their July 1 picnics. She claimed she was the "fastest grandma on the island" from the races she won at these picnics. There was no doctor on the island until Bea was 40, and, since she was trained as a nurse, she did "lots of fixing up".

Inauguration 1947

The first meeting of the Gabriola branch of the Women's Institute was on December 1, 1947, with thirty ladies present. The WI superintendent from Victoria came and explained the aims and objectives of the WI.

The structure of their club was similar to all WIs worldwide in that they elected a President, Vice President, Secretary and Treasure, plus five or six conveners for: handicrafts; agriculture; home economics; and social events. They raised the membership from \$0.50 to \$1.00 to get the club started, and the Ratepayers' Association donated money to assist the club's initiation.

They initially met in members' homes, and later in the church, which, in lieu of rent, they cleaned, and had the church's organ repaired. After the present elementary



The Women's Institute Hall on Gabriola. The building is a school house and dates from 1927 when the original North School building burned to the ground. It became an overflow classroom for the new Gabriola Elementary School in 1954, but fell into disuse following an expansion of the elementary school. The building became known as the "club room", and was used for meetings by various organizations on the island, as it still is.

It was formally acquired from the School Board by the Women's Institute in March 1967 for \$250. The WI immediately organized renovations and installed a kitchen in the old cloakroom. Currently (May 2014), the WI are in the process of transferring ownership of the hall to the Gabriola Arts Council (GAC) who have pledged to maintain all of its current uses.

school was built, one of the little old schoolhouses was acquired. Here they started Gabriola's first library, supplementing the bus bookmobile and books-by-mail service.²⁰ In 1967, the WI also used their newly-acquired hall to start the island's first museum.

One of their first fundraising drives was a court whist drive—whist was a popular

social activity on the island in the 1940s.

All the communication was done by telephone as very few of the women drove at the time and vehicles were at a premium. There were two phone lines, party lines, at this time; one side had twenty-seven phones on it and the other had thirty-five. A grapevine of phoning made it easy to get in touch with all their members. When the phone rang six times, it was an emergency or a time for everyone to 'pick up'.

²⁰ In 2007, the Women's Institute donated its books to the Vancouver Island Regional Library which opened a branch on Gabriola in 1999.

Lunch was always an important part of the WI group as a social and focal point. The members would take turns supplying the lunch, even having a hot meal occasionally.

In the early days, transportation to the meetings was often on the school bus. The driver, Mr. Cox (Hazel's father), would pick the women up, deliver them to the meeting and then on his route back he would pick them up again. In an interview, Bea Myers spoke to me of how pregnant women were discouraged from driving in the early days, so many women didn't join WI until their kids were in school.

Bea recounted that in the prime of the WI she met a "...wonderful bunch of women". They helped several young mothers with parenting as women often married young, didn't have a lot of experience, or didn't have mothers near by. "Babies grow you up", said Bea.

Today, the majority of WI members are retired women, but at that time, the majority of members were in their childbearing years.

An engraved silver spoon was given to all new babies of Institute members. Many of the women brought their children to the meetings, as that was the only way they could attend; it was common for people to include their children in all aspects of island life. Today it is more rare to see this, a reflection of the changing values regarding families. Bea said:

Now everyone drives, too much is happening, and many women are employed outside of the home. There tends to be a negative attitude toward the WI now, and they are sometimes viewed as a bunch of old ladies.

Bea Meyers spoke of how a member would have to "trudge up the road to light the fire before the meeting". She said the local WI now has about 8-12 members although

Gabriola's population is around 5,000 people. Hazel Windecker said that the BC interior now has younger WI members than Gabriola, probably because there are not as many organized activities nearby.

Activities recorded in the WI's meeting minutes

Reading the minutes of the Gabriola WI branch meetings for their first three years is an interesting exercise. Often the meetings opened by singing 'O Canada', and reciting their collect. The meetings all followed the Roberts Rules of order. A few of the names that were involved in the WI in these first few years are family names that are still on the island such as Coats, Cox, and Gray.

At an early meeting, Mrs. Gray was awarded perfect attendance—sounds like they fashioned themselves similar to the school system! In the minutes of the early meetings, all women were recorded by their husband's name, for example, Mrs. Robert Gray. As the years went by, they were recorded using their own name, like Mrs. Joan Gray and eventually were recorded leaving off the Mrs. What does this say about how women saw themselves and how they got their sense of being? Did the WI help to bring some of this awareness with its development?

The WI helped to educate their members on how to lobby the government for political changes. The WI initiatives on Gabriola were the sparks that ignited various interest groups and organizations that exist on the island today, such as the 4-H Club, the Gardening Club, and the Spinners and Weavers. Some of the projects the local WI initiated and lobbied for were:

- medical inspections of schools;
- household science training in schools;
- monthly journals for the institute;
- sexual hygiene in schools; and

— a more efficient heating system to be installed on the ferry to replace the less efficient hot water heating system (that ferry held 5 cars and kids rode for free).

The institute's interest in handicrafts started with the formation of rug-hooking and leather-making groups. They contacted the Department of Extension at UBC for demonstrations of various arts and handicrafts when they wanted new ideas, or had questions concerning their projects.

Gabriola has many good gardeners, a tradition that can be traced back to the WI, as they explored different techniques and aspects of agriculture and gardening in their meetings over the years.

In November of their inauguration year, they discussed supporting building a public sport field, and they soon passed a motion to help the Royal Canadian Legion build a memorial sports park. The minutes also record that at the meeting, "Mrs. Joan Bloomfield gave us a thrilling and enlightening talk on her war experiences".

The organization was not only concerned with local issues. Early in the WI's inception, women on Gabriola corresponded with other WIs; they partnered with the Blackwell WI in England; and, up until 1950, they sent parcels of food and other supplies to help them recuperate from the war.

Fundraisers for their different projects were also some of the major social events on Gabriola such as: family dances with prizes for spotlight dances, whist drives, community dinners, theatre performances, and picnics. They celebrated Christmas, in 1948 with a party for their 26 members; and in 1949, they exchanged gifts with their WI match in Blackwell. They had some creative fundraisers as well—one was for everyone

to make something from a flour sack, which was later judged and sold.

Health care initiatives and emergency relief

A vital move they made as a local branch was to initiate a health clinic on the island; the only available medical facilities involved a ferry ride over to Nanaimo. "Mrs. Davis asked us to appeal to the government to establish an emergency hospital on the island at Mrs. Hume's." Mrs. Hume was a nurse that opened her home as an emergency health care service. The WI donated \$15 to buy first aid materials to stock up Mrs. Hume's home and replenished it as was needed. Stretchers were also purchased to keep at each end of the island to make emergency care accessible to as many as possible.

They assisted with TB mobile clinics, sent cards to sick community members, bought diapers for the destitute, helped families that were burnt out, and collected for BC flood relief. Bea Meyers spoke about the support WI has given the Queen Alexandra Hospital and how "heart-breaking it was to see the children there".

Projects for children and community improvement

They supported the annual children's picnic by assisting with food and lemonade. They contributed to the scholarship fund, supported school issues, organized bazaars, raffles, and made quilts. One guest, Mrs. Mackay, a school trustee, spoke about situations in the school and "how we can get things done by pulling together". They discussed new schools; (there were at various times four schools on Gabriola), and building a shelter for kids waiting for the bus. They saw needs in the community, discussed them and then found ways to

make them happen. The cemetery clean-up was an annual activity.

Educating themselves

They also educated themselves. Members were all involved in educating each other sometimes through projects like presentations about a town in BC, with photographs if they could find them. Prizes were given to the best presentations.

Meetings were spent discussing topics they wanted to learn more about. Everyone had a say— some suggestions were explorers, discovering the Gulf Islands, astrology, nutrition, the royal family, and local history. One topic chosen was on how the Spaniards “discovered” the Gulf Islands, and the minutes commented that “...many contained Indians, not always friendly”, reflecting the attitude of the day towards the First Nations people.

The minutes don't offer a lot of detail but do have little personal tidbits thrown in such as, “Mrs. Whyte gave a reading on Queen Elizabeth, which we all enjoyed and we decided that our own day and age wasn't so bad morally after all”. The minutes also record, “Mrs. Gray presented memoirs of Winston Churchill” and another notation was, “the Chinese people and China talk was enjoyable as Miss Bloomfield had lived amongst them”.

On June 1, 1949, the WI completed their first hooked rug to raffle for a fundraiser, and at this meeting their speaker was on “advertising”, and Mrs. C.E. Coat's comment was “...on the way we housewives are gullible enough to swallow their prattle”.

Other presentations were about visits to Australia and England, and Mrs. Coats commented, “Certainly the rest of us, stay at homers, thoroughly enjoyed these tales but began to get itchy feet”.

In this small selection from the minutes of the Gabriola Women's Institute, we see how, on Gabriola, as elsewhere, the WI is proof of the power of many women banding together for pleasure and work, to educate themselves and to bring about social change.

The organization has played a vital role in Gabriola's social development. The WI had a unique role in helping to form the wonderful place where we now live. These women were also the pioneers in the women's movement; they were the teachers and the leaders who prepared the way for women of today. We can take strength from their stories and struggles, and look forward to joining them in saging and aging. ◇

References:

Interview with Bea Myers, conducted by author, Nov. 21, 2007.

Interview with Hazel Windecker, conducted by author, Nov. 12, 2007.

British Columbia's Women's Institute, *Centennial Cook Book*, Victoria, 1911.

British Columbia's Women's Institute, *Modern Pioneers 1909-1959*, Evergreen Press, 1959.

Gabriola Island Women's Institute Meeting Minutes, Gabriola Museum Archives.

Author:

Janice Power is a retired elementary school counsellor for School District 68 who came here in 2001 from a small rural area in Saskatchewan where she had been a WI member at one time. It was around 2001 that the WI on Gabriola was winding down, and she wrote this piece because she wanted to record what their contributions to the community had been over the years. She now has a newly-established private counselling business on Gabriola.