

The Prescott Women's Institute

By The Prescott Museum & Visitor Centre

Founded in Stoney Creek, Ontario, in 1897, the Women's Institute is a charitable organization. It is dedicated to enhancing community life, advocating for social change, and providing resources to empower women to improve their education and skill set. Founded by education reformer Adelaide Hoodless, the organization quickly spread across Ontario. By 1905, 105 branches were in operation, and by WWI, the Institute was active in 7 provinces. It first found its footing overseas due largely to the efforts of Madge Watt. Watt, a member of the British Columbia Women's Institute, collaborated with the Agricultural Organization Society of Great Britain to form the first overseas branch. The institute aided the wives and daughters of farmers in assisting the war effort.



Adelaide Hoodless, the founder of the
Women's Institute,

Prescott's branch of the Women's Institute came in the 1920s. On May 28th, 1923, a group of 50 women from Prescott met at Old King Street Town Hall. They gathered to establish the organization. The effort was led by Maynard Women's Institute District President Maud Row. The officers of the first Prescott Women's Institute were: President Mrs. E.A. Cook, Secretary-Treasurer Mrs. W.C. Brown, and District Director Mrs. R.T. Alexander.

With 120 active members involved at its peak, the Prescott Women's Institute played a key role in several community improvement initiatives. In 1928, the group was instrumental in the creation of the Town of Prescott's first garbage collection program. In 1930, the group ran a milk program which gave a bottle of milk daily to 100 school-aged children in Prescott. However, their greatest community involvement came during WWII. Alongside other local charities such as the Prescott Red Cross and the Canadian Legion Branch 97, the Women's Institute collected food and clothing for families in need, prepared care packages for soldiers overseas and organized community holiday events.

W. I. CHILDREN'S NIGHT
Women's Institute Friday evening Dec. 17th in the Hall will be known as Children's Night. Slogan: 'Tis the spirit in which 'tis given, not the gift, which warms the heart.' Roll Call answered with a gift for a child. These will be sent to the Children's Home at Brockville. Demonstration on making Christmas decorations by Mrs. John Gray. Remember the questionnaire. Program committee, Mrs. Jas. Campbell, Mrs. David Gray, Mrs. Andrew Gray. All children from Institute homes are invited. Mr. and Mrs. Santa will be there. Lunch will be served.

Newspaper clipping from the Prescott
Journal, December 9th, 1951

Through the organization 30 years history, many remembered the group for their work running the "rest room" at the old town hall. Originally operated by the Maynard Women's institute branch prior to the founding of the Prescott organization, the "rest room", or "pit stop" as it was sometimes referred to, was a section of the old town hall where individuals traveling by foot or buggy from surrounding municipalities could freshen up, enjoy a cup of tea and allow for their horses to rest at minimal cost.



Old Town Hall where the "rest room" was located on King Street



Newspaper clipping from the Prescott Journal, March 22nd, 1951

One of the organizations greatest achievements in the town's history came on October 21st, 1937, when Lady Tweedsmuir made a guest appearance at the organization's annual general meeting apart of her 1937 tour across Canada. Spearheading this project was Prescott Women's Institute President Mrs. W.H. Raney; Mrs. J.K. Wyman and Miss K.W. Melville, vice-presidents; Mrs. Ralph Wallace and Mrs. E.H. Francis, secretaries; and Mrs. Joseph Burke, treasurer.

Over 150 members of the local Women's Institute gathered at the St. John's Parish Hall to take part in the "out-of-the-ordinary" event. Upon her arrival Lady Tweedsmuir gave a powerful address to the audience, congratulating the members of the institution on their hard work, noting both herself and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth were proud of the work they had done.

Following Lady Tweedsmuir's address, a vote of thanks was issued by Miss Wyman, who sang "God Save The King", while Mrs. Birch, Mrs. Warfeild and Mrs. Elliot all sang "O Canada" to close out the presentation. A luncheon was held for all those in attendance, sitting at the royal table alongside Her Majesty, and her party of guests were Mrs. Raney, Miss Wyman, Mrs. Burke, Mrs. Wallace, Miss Melville, Miss Frances, Mrs. Pelton, Mrs. Horan and Mrs. Black.

Hosted by the members of the St. John's Church Guild, the luncheon was described as of excellent quality, with efficient service. With other members of the clergy decorating the hall with extravagant arrays of flowers, with white and silver tapestries to match the dining sets. After the roughly hour and a half long event, Lady Tweedsmuir departed the parish hall at around 3 pm, taking a short tour of King Street prior to her departure from Prescott.

Petition Seeking New Parks' Commission Presented Council From Women's Institute; If Approved May Mean Park Here in 1939

Ground was theoretically broken last Monday night at Council meeting for a new community park to be opened in Prescott next summer when Councillor Mrs. Joseph Burke presented a petition on behalf of the Women's Institute asking for the appointment of a commission under the Public Parks' Act.

The petition represents many weeks of canvassing by the Institute and members of the Eastern Star and Rebekahs to secure the necessary 200 signatures of local ratepayers in order to properly present the request. Mrs. Burke announced that 215 signatures had been affixed to the document and more could have easily been secured.

Next move will be the preparation of a by-law by the town clerk

and its first reading by Council and then a move by the electors at the time of the municipal election on December 5th as to whether they want the Parks' Act invoked in Prescott and a commission set up.

If the question carries by the necessary majority then the new 1939 Council will have a mandate to proceed with appointment of such a commission which would include the mayor and other citizens. It would be this body's task to study available sites for a community park, decide on its scope and ask for a grant to further its establishment.

So the road towards realization of this oft-mooted idea is now well paved and a many years' wait may be fully realized in 1939.

Newspaper clipping from the Prescott
Journal, November 24th, 1938

After years of declining membership, the organization dissolved in May 1954. Throughout the organization's 30-year history, many notable women were involved in the organization. Mrs. Mary A. Burke served as president of the organization while serving a term with the Prescott Town Council (being the first women to do so), Kate Melville (the daughter of former mayor Thomas Melville) worked as the Prescott correspondent to the Brockville and Ottawa daily press, while Mrs. Raney (the wife of pharmacist W.H. Raney) helped operate the successful drug store on King Street for several decades alongside her husband.

Although the Women's Institute disbanded in 1954, the group's purpose to support the community remained alive through the community organizations that came after it.

Last Spring Meeting of W. I.; Red Cross Work

At their last meeting before the summer recess, held Monday afternoon in the Rest Room, the Women's Institute enjoyed a splendid program prepared by Mrs. E. J. Lauster.

Mrs. J. Burke was in the chair and the meeting opened with the Institute Ode, followed by the reading of the minutes, presentation of correspondence and roll call by the secretary, Mrs. R. Wallace. Reports of committees were received and routine business dealt with.

Mrs. R. T. Alexander, who will be in charge of the September meeting, gave her report, as District representative, of the district annual recently held.

A number of the members of the Institute have been meeting Tuesday afternoon to do Red Cross work and Mrs. Leacy reported that five suits of pyjamas, five hospital gowns, five scarves, one pair of socks, one set of garments for refugee children, six utility bags, one hot water bottle cover and thirty-eight bandages had been completed.

A rally of the District Officers is to be held in Prescott on Sept. 19th, and an invitation was received from the Children's Shelter at Brockville to visit that organization on Friday, June 28th.

The social part of the programme included several musical numbers—choruses, part songs, solos and piano duets by public school pupils under the direction of Miss Lydia Earle which were well received and greatly enjoyed. Miss K. W. Melville acted as hostess for the tea hour assisted

Newspaper clipping from the Prescott
Journal, June 27th, 1940

The Prescott Museum & Visitor Centre
Open Wednesday - Saturday, 11-5
202 King Street West, Prescott, ON

