

# History of the Women's Institutes

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## The foundation of Women's Institutes

The first Women's Institute was founded in 1897 at Stoney Creek, in Ontario, by Adelaide Hoodless. This middle class woman's life changed when her young child dies after drinking milk that was unfit for consumption. Thereafter, she worked towards having home economics taught in the province's schools and, in 1898, published a work entitled *Public School Domestic Science*. A few years later, the Women's Institute movement unfolds across rural Canada and the throughout world.

The movement's motto "For HOME and Country" illustrates their goals well, which are to enhance rural life and train citizens by studying key issues of national and international interest (particularly those pertaining to women and children)<sup>1</sup>. Since 1919, the various chapters of the Women's Institutes were represented by the Federation of Women's Institute of Canada (known today as the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada).

Founded under the supervision of the Macdonald College in Montreal, the Women's Institute in the province of Quebec (QWI) have spread since the 1910s. One of the oldest chapters of these women's groups by the way, was created in 1913 in the hamlet of Wyman. It was also the first Women's Institute (WI) in the vast County of Pontiac.

The Municipality of Pontiac will have, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, four other chapters of the WI: Quyon, Beechgrove, Eardley and Breckenridge (occasionally identified as Lower Eardley).

## The beginning of the Women's Institute in Pontiac

On March 3, 1913, a group of residents from Wyman, in the presence of Miss K. Fisher, Dean of the home economics program at the Macdonald College, meet at school number 3 in Bristol. The objective: to establish a Women's Institute branch in Wyman. The sixteen women and girls present signed in favour of the creation of this institute. They were Mrs D. D. Storie; Miss Alice Davis; Mrs Peter Russett; Miss Edith Edey; Mrs Nelson McLellan; Mrs Jas. A. Graham; Mrs

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<sup>1</sup> To find out more on the history of the Women's Institute, please visit the [Federated Women's Institutes of Canada](#) internet site or that of [Québec Women's Institute](#). Also consult Jean E. Dryden's article, « [Federated Women's Institutes of Canada](#) » *Canadian Encyclopedia*.

Thomas Graham; Mrs Alez Meldrum; Miss Lola McLellan; Miss Abbie Pritchard; Miss Jennie Graham; Miss Louisa Finlan; Miss Mae Hammond; Miss Mildred Kehoe; Mrs J. H. Biehler and Mrs James G. Graham (we notice that several married women used the first and last names of their husbands for their identity, which was common practice at the time)<sup>2</sup>.

At the end of the evening, Mrs Thomas Graham was elected President. Among the founders should be noted, Miss Abbie Pritchard, daughter of the Postmaster in Wyman. A recent graduate of the Macdonald College in home economics, she would become President after Mrs Graham. But mostly, she would play an active role in the Quebec Women's Institute, being secretary-treasurer, and treasurer for approximately twenty years. She was also the first woman in all of Pontiac County to receive the "life-time member" distinction in 1923 and was made honorary member of the Federation of Women's Institute of Canada (FWIC)<sup>3</sup>.

Two other branches (Elmside and Shawville) would be founded the night following the creation of the branch in Wyman. Beechgrove, Eardley and Breckenridge would follow in the next months and years.



Figure 1 : Les membres du Wyman Women's Institute à l'occasion du premier anniversaire de la création du groupe, le 6 mars 1914. Rang arrière, de gauche à droite : Miss Louisa Finlan, Mrs A. W. MacKechnie, Mrs W. J. Tompson, Mrs Alex Meldrum, Miss Edith Edey, Mrs Jas. G. Graham. Rang du centre, g. à d. : Mrs Nelson McLellan, Miss Annie Taber, Mrs Thos Graham with daughter on knee, Mrs John Ross. Rang avant, de g. à d.: Mrs Milton MacKechnie, Miss Ecenith Henderson, Miss Annie Meldrum, Miss Edna Edey, Mrs Fred Pritchard.

<sup>2</sup> Pontiac Archives, *History of Wyman W.I., 1913-1996*, typed manuscript, s. d.

<sup>3</sup> « Abbie Stewart Pritchard », *QWI Pionneers, 1911-1981* (Quebec Women's Institute, 1981), p. 197; Pontiac Archives, *History of Wyman W.I., 1913-1996*, typed manuscript, s. d.

A few months after the creation of the W.I. in Wyman, i.e. in November of 1913, the first Pontiac County's Women's Institute meeting was held. Abbie Pritchard was appointed secretary-treasurer, while Sophia Armstrong of Bristol, a former student of the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph, was elected President. She held this position until 1922, while being President of the Quebec Women's Institute as of 1919. Moreover, she was the first President in the history of the QWI<sup>4</sup>.

In 1914, the name of the Women's Institutes is changed for « The Homemakers' Club ». The former name of the organization would return in 1920. During the First World War, there is a trace of the Homemakers' Club in Onslow. The members of this group mainly lived between Steele Line and the Village of Quyon. It consists of the following ladies: Mary Ann Gibbons; Mrs John McKenny; Mrs. William Steele; Mrs Simpson; Josephine Foran; Mrs Jason McBane; Mrs John McBane; Loretta Gibbons; Mrs Albert Draper; Elsie Clarke; Mrs Victor McBane; Mrs Chas. O'Reilly; Mrs. William O'Reilly; Mrs J. S. Stanton; Mrs Jason Steele; Mrs J. J. O'Reilly; Sadie Steele; Mary O'Reilly and Josie Gibbons<sup>5</sup>.

In 1922, the Women's Institute Annual Report states 51 members in Breckenridge, 16 of which attended the meetings regularly. This branch, which was part of the Ottawa district, just as the Aylmer and Eardley branches are, raised nearly 500 dollars used to host a picnic, also used for a donation to the Aylmer Relief Fund and the purchase of prizes for the schools, books for the library and flower bulbs to embellish homes. Conferences were also given on the importance of vegetables and flower gardens, the quality of water in the home, as well as on the life of the Canadian government's cabinet ministers. The President was Mrs J. Faris, and Mrs D. Faris was the secretary.

Whereas for the Eardley W.I., 44 ladies were members and an average of 19 attended the meetings. One hundred thirty dollars were raised over the year and redistributed, for prizes at the agricultural fair, books at the McGill University and the purchase of fabric for quilting. Several subjects were discussed, which included cooking winter vegetables, making butter at the farm, dry-cleaning, table setting, the qualities of a modern homemaker, as well as the laws that govern the lives of women in the province of Quebec. The President then was Mrs H.P. Amm and the secretary, Mrs F.H. Cornu (Annie Maria Cornu, another Pontiac resident who has made her mark in the W.I.).

In 1922, the Beechgrove branch was comprised of 21 members, 12 of which attended the meetings regularly. An amount of money similar to that raised by the Eardley branch, was used

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<sup>4</sup> « Sophia I. Armstrong », *QWI Pionneers, 1911-1981* (Quebec Women's Institute, 1981), p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Picture of the members in *Quyon-Onslow, 1875-1975. Souvenir of Centennial* (Shawville, Pontiac Printshop, 1975).

for prizes for schools and school fairs, the purchase of books and small gifts for children. The President then was Mrs Russell Tabor and Mrs Jason Thomas, both from Quyon.

The Wyman W.I. consisted of 21 members, of which 13 on average attended the meetings. \$50 were raised by the women and used to support a family in need from Ottawa and to establish a library for the needs of the members. Mrs Thomas Graham was still the President, and Mrs S.E. Nicholson was the secretary. Several residents of the Municipality then belonged to the Provincial Executive Committee, of which Mrs Fred Lusk (Annie Lusk of Breckenridge) was Vice-President and Miss Abbie Pritchard (Wyman) was secretary<sup>6</sup>.

During the First World War, the members of the Women's Institute (let us recall, that became the Homemaker's Club), as much in Wyman and Onslow, than those situated to the east, were very active with the Red Cross. They contributed to the Canadian Patriotic Fund, and sent supplies and packages to the men at the front lines. This war effort was repeated during the Second World War. Later, they made both monetary and material donations to the Pontiac Community Hospital (known today as the CSSS du Pontiac), supported school fairs, they gathered to fabricate quilts for victims of fire or other disasters. While serving the community, the latter practice allowed them to preserve and pass-on this form of domestic skill<sup>7</sup>.

In 1953, the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada was granted Royal Patronage<sup>8</sup>.

### **From 1945 to this day**

At the end of the War, a Women's Institute was created in Quyon (1945)<sup>9</sup>. Several Presidents succeeded one another over the course of the 1950-60s: Mrs A.C.Shennett (1953), Mrs Burke (1956), Muriel Bronson (1956-57), Mrs Walter Clarke (1963), Mrs Lester McCann (1964), Mrs Johnston (1968), just to name a few. In November of 1956, the ladies of the Quyon W.I. decide to purchase a property close to the Quyon River in order to develop a Memorial Park, in memory of the men who have fallen in battle during both World Wars and the Korean War<sup>10</sup>. On July 22, 1959, the ladies from Quyon organize a great party for the official opening of the beach, where soon the Quyon Lions Club organized swimming lessons for the children<sup>11</sup>. The

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<sup>6</sup> *Annual Report of the Women's Institutes in the Quebec Province for the year ending March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1922* (School of Household Science Macdonald College, 1922).

<sup>7</sup> Pontiac Archives, *History of Wyman W.I., 1913-1996*, typed manuscript, s. d.

<sup>8</sup> « The Royal patronage is granted by a member of the Royal Family who supports the organization by volunteering his time to offer certain services or by making a charitable donation, in order to promote recognition of the group's achievements and contributions from different areas of public life ». Royal patronage – Canadian organizations.

<sup>9</sup> « Muriel Bronson Named Quyon W.I. Chief », *The Equity*, March 22, 1956.

<sup>10</sup> « Quyon W. I. Plans Memorial Park », *The Equity*, November 28, 1956.

<sup>11</sup> « Quyon W.I. Plans Beach Party », *The Equity*, August 4, 1960.

activities of the Quyon branch were very diversified, as shown in the following report of 1964-1965 :

« (...) We made donations of money to the Central Auxiliary of the P.C.H., the Canadian Red Cross Society, the Cancer Society, the Pontiac Anti-T.B. Assoc., Quyon and District Disaster Society, Quyon Agricultural Society, Q.W.I. Service Fund, Pontiac County W.I Fund. Nineteen silver dollars were given at the two schools for prizes in English and French. Prizes were given at the school fair. Two Centennial Trees were planted on the Memorial Park, a wreath placed at the war memorial. Seven Christmas stockings filled for "Save the Children Fund", "UNICEF Shell-Out", sponsored at Halloween. Handicraft was made for the W.I. Exhibit at the two fairs, some was sent to F.W.I.C. Convention for sale, some sent to Q.W.I Convention for display. Christmas parcels were sent to the Ade Memorial Hospital, Cards of sympathy and "Get Well" were sent to many people in the locality. We sponsored Sewing Course and a French Course for adults, also an Irish play from Vinton. (...) Delegates were sent to three conventions. A sale of plants, bulbs, etc. was held also a sale of food and other articles. »<sup>12</sup>

In the 1950-60s, the Beechgrove W.I. held its meetings in the members' homes. The members organized card games held at the Hall 70 (a community hall) or at the North Onslow Town Hall<sup>13</sup>. These ladies held bazaars as a way of raising funds, which they redistribute to various local and national charities. Several Presidents succeeded one another over the years, including Mrs Lloyd Hobbs, Mrs Vera Meredith, Mrs Violet Poole, Mrs June Emmerson and Mrs Bernice Bennett.

At the beginning of the 1950s, the Breckenridge Women's Institute was chaired by Mrs Austin Lusk. The members gathered at one of their homes in Breckenridge or Luskville<sup>14</sup>. In 1962, meetings which were followed by a lunch, were held at the Fairbanks Hotel in Quyon<sup>15</sup>. In general, the Breckenridge W.I. activities seemed to be gravitating more towards Aylmer, Gatineau and Ottawa than in Pontiac. As an example, the Institute participated in the Aylmer Fair<sup>16</sup>. In 1966, the newly elected President was Mrs Jos Archambault<sup>17</sup>.

During the winters of 1956 and 1957, Onslow had a skating rink and the ladies of the Wyman Women's Institute served coffee, beans and buns to help keep skaters warm, but also to raise

<sup>12</sup> « Quyon WI », *The Equity*, April 1, 1965.

<sup>13</sup> « Beechgrove W.I. », *The Equity*, April 6, 1967.

<sup>14</sup> « Breckenridge W.I. », *The Equity*, May 1, 1952.

<sup>15</sup> « Breckendridge W.I. », *The Equity*, May 4, 1962.

<sup>16</sup> « [Women's Institute Meetings](#) », *The Ottawa Citizen*, October 23, 1962.

<sup>17</sup> « Breckenridge W.I. », *The Equity*, March 23, 1966.

funds. In 1964, because of the decline in population in the Elmside area, the existing Women's Institute was dissolved and certain of the members joined the Wyman branch. The following year, the ladies from Wyman took on the task of creating a road park along Highway 8 (currently 148), in order to serve travellers between Aylmer and Shawville. The area chosen is located half-way between the Village of Quyon and Wyman, on a property belonging to the Ministry of Transport (would this be the current PPJ's starting point?). The ladies, with the help of volunteers, worked the soil, sowed the lawn and were responsible for planting and maintaining a flower bed. The Ministry would add trees, install a few picnic tables and the site would be ready for celebrating the Centennial of Canada's Confederation (1957). At the opening, dressed in period costumes, the Wyman Women's Institute members would greet visitors and passers-by, centennial flags in hand. Afterwards, they continued seeing to the maintenance of the park; but in the 1980s, the Ministry of Transport seemingly was no longer interested<sup>18</sup>.

Several members from Wyman have stood out for their service in the community and have been entrusted with the title of "life-time member" by the Women's Institute. We are speaking of Mrs Thomas Graham (President of the Wyman Women's Institute for 12 years), Mrs J. Nelson McLellan, Miss Abbie Pritchard, Mrs. Roland Graham and Mrs S. Wyman MacKechnie. The latter was an active member of the Wyman W.I. for 50 years. Miss Hilda Graham and Mrs Muriel Kelley also received the "life-time member" title in 1971, for their years of service, notably as President of the Pontiac Women's Institute<sup>19</sup>. In 1993, during the 80th anniversary of the Wyman branch, other members were honoured as life-time members for their years of service, that is Marjorie Smith, Carol Clarke, Nancy Mayhew, Marlowe Campbell, Nine Steward, Gena Graham, Irma Trudeau, Evelyn Duff, Isabel Graham. The organization held their meetings in the home of a Wyman member or at the Bristol Town Hall.

In Quyon, the W.I. meetings were usually held in the home of one of the members, but in 1972-73, a few meetings were held at the Municipal Hall, sometimes also referred to as the "Community Hall" »<sup>20</sup>. This is perhaps the building currently known as the Bert Kennedy Hall, an old model school which the children of the village attended at the beginning of the Century in the 1950s. Later, the meetings were held again in one of the members' home or another. Meanwhile, the Municipality proceeded with the renovation of the hall and, as of September 1976, it was where the Quyon W.I., and several other community organizations (including groups of senior citizens) held their meetings<sup>21</sup>. Quickly, the Quyon Women's Institute claims ownership of these premises, and as early as the following month, in the minutes of the

<sup>18</sup> Pontiac Archives, *History of Wyman W.I., 1913-1996*, typed manuscript, s. d.

<sup>19</sup> Pontiac Archives, *History of Wyman W.I., 1913-1996*, typed manuscript, s. d.

<sup>20</sup> « Quyon W.I. », *The Equity*, March 21, 1973; « Quyon W.I. », *The Equity*, May 16, 1973.

<sup>21</sup> Ruth Woolsey, « Quyon Women's Institute », *The Equity*, September 22, 1976.

meeting held on October 20, 1976 it is stated that “The Quyon W.I. meeting was held at the W.I. Hall in Quyon »<sup>22</sup>. The Community Hall became the Women’s Institute Hall.

Moreover, these womens’ groups did not work in isolation. Not only did the various branches of the W.I. organize common activities (fundraisers, meetings, movie nights, conferences, etc.), but the various womens’ groups in presence of the Municipality supported one another. Thus, the Quyon W.I. members took part in the Poppy Campaign, organized by the Ladies auxiliaries (Royal Canadian Legion). During the Quyon W.I. annual supper (or anniversary), the Ladies auxiliaries welcomed them on the premises of the Legion and served them a meal<sup>23</sup>.

## Conclusion

The concerns of the W.I. evolved over the years, at the mercy of the Quebec rural societies’ transformations. If the members of the various W.I. branches have long aimed their interventions towards promoting child health, the dissemination of farming knowledge to schools (especially by holding school fairs), the transmission of domestic skills from one generation to the next, they also made a stand on the use of growth hormones in cattle and organized information sessions pertaining to the industry and the environment<sup>24</sup>. If the movement at the very beginning, did not support the claims of the suffragettes, its members nevertheless have always had a strong interest in the issue of women’s legal rights. In 1988, the members of the Pontiac County W.I. supported the fundraiser, initiated by the Alberta Women’s Institute, to erect a monument in Alberta and another one on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, commemorative of the “Famous Five” women, which was done in 2000<sup>25</sup>. One of these “Famous Five” women was a native of Alberta, Emily Murphy, an active member of the Alberta W.I.

## A few female figures who stand out

(the \* and \*\* refer to suggestions for the name of the Bert Kennedy hall building)

It is difficult to establish a list of all the women who, through their involvement in the Women’s Institutes, have given their time and believed in the improvement of their rural community. If several names came up regularly in the reports and in the previous text, certain of these

<sup>22</sup> Ruth Woolsey, « Quyon W. I. », *The Equity*, October 20, 1976.

<sup>23</sup> Pam Komm, « Quyon W.I. », *The Equity*, March 21, 1979.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Wills, « Pontiac Women’s Institute focus on industry and the environment », *The Equity*, February 28, 1990; Paul McGee, « Women’s Institute supports ban on BST », *The Equity*, April 29, 1995; « W.I. takes up fight against growth hormone », *The West-Quebec Post*, May 15, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> «WI will help fund statue of Albert’s famous five women », *The Equity*, December 2, 1998.

women have been recognized by their peers during the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Women's Institutes creation in the province of Quebec<sup>26</sup>. Here is the profile of a few of these ladies.

**Annie Lusk (born Scott)** born on March 14, 1868 in Lakefield, Quebec. She arrived in Eardley as a teacher, and married Fred Lusk who was from the area. In 1916, she became a member of the Wyman W.I. A few years later, on May 20, 1920, she became President of the W.I. of Pontiac County, position that she held until 1929. In 1922, she played an important role in organizing a school fair in the Eardley schools, supervised by the Department of Agriculture. The students were called upon to grow five vegetables and two flowers. The seeds were given them in the Spring, and once reviewed by the judges, the prizes were awarded in the Fall. In 1924, she was honoured as a W.I. "life-time member". The following year, she became the 3<sup>rd</sup> provincial President of all W.I. in Quebec (the 1<sup>st</sup> being Sophia Armstrong of Bristol, another Pontiac resident). She would hold this position until 1927.

**Annie Maria Cornu (born Sally)** was born in Eardley, Quebec, in February of 1883. She married Francis Henry Cornu in 1902, and the couple settled on the 4<sup>th</sup> Concession in the Township of Onslow. During the First World War, Mrs Cornu was very involved with the Canadian Red Cross and actively participated in the war effort by fabricating bandages and knitted goods for the soldiers on the front line. This involvement, in accompaniment with other women, brought about the Onslow Homemakers' Club, who organized kitchen classes, needlepoint and quilting for the ladies. Mrs Cornu was also among the founding members of the Eardley Women's Institute and was one of the first exhibitors at the Quyon Agricultural Fair. In addition to her involvement within the Women's Institute movement (of which she became a life time member in 1924), she was very active in the St. Luke Anglican Church and for several years, assisted Dr Dowd and Dr Hudson during child delivery.

**\*Abbie Pritchard** was born in Wyman, Quebec in 1883. Following a stenography course in Ottawa, she returned home to help her parents with the family store and the Wyman Post Office, where she was postmaster for several years. She took a course in domestic science at the Macdonald College in 1911 and in 1913, helped set up the Wyman Women's Institute, first chapter of the W.I. in the Pontiac County. In 1919, she became the first secretary-treasurer of the entire W.I. in the province of Quebec, alongside another Pontiac resident, Sophie Armstrong of Bristol. After four years, the responsibility of this position was divided in two, and she served for 16 years as the provincial W.I. secretary. She was also secretary of the Pontiac County W.I. from 1913 to 1933 and President from 1946 to 1948. She was the first woman in all of the Pontiac County to receive the distinction of "life-time member" in 1923 and was made honorary member of the Federation of Women's Institute of Canada (FWIC). From 1914 to

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<sup>26</sup> See *QWI Pionneers, 1911-1981* (Quebec Women's Institute, 1981).

1960, she also attended all of the Macdonald College W.I. annual conferences. Also, because of her involvement, she had the honour of reading the minutes at the very first convention, during the celebration of the QWI's 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Shortly before her death, she was nominated honorary Vice-president of the Quebec W.I. Deceased in August of 1960, she bequeathed her belongings to the QWI.

**Hilda Graham** was born in Wyman, Quebec in 1911. She was the daughter of Mrs Thomas Graham, first President of the Wyman Women's Institute founded in 1913. A teacher, Hilda Graham was President of the entire Women's Institutes in the Pontiac County (in the 1960s) for two years, and was responsible on the provincial level, for publicity and education for the W.I. of the entire province of Quebec, as well as President of the Gatineau and East Aylmer Counties. She was honoured with the distinction of Women's Institute "lifetime member".

\*\* If one were to go with a representative of the Quyon W.I., I would propose **Muriel Bronson**. Her name returns regularly as President of the organization and she played an important role in organizing the Agricultural Fair. She was also President of the Pontiac County Women's Institute. In December of 1983, various citizens (300) of the Municipality paid her tribute<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> « Mrs Muriel Bronson », *The Equity*, December 1983.