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FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S INSTITUTES

(Established in conjunction with the Women's Branch of the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries).

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WOMEN'S INSTITUTES.

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By Mrs. ALFRED WATT, M.A.

WOMEN'S Institutes in general are unions of rural women, whose work is for the betterment of homes and communities, whose ideal is to raise the standard of living in the country and to stimulate agricultural development through the creation of a better social order as well as by engaging directly in agricultural industries.

Aims and Objects.

The aims and objects of the Women's Institutes in England and Wales are :—

To improve conditions of rural life by—

- (a) Stimulating interest in the agricultural industry.
- (b) Developing co-operative enterprises.
- (c) Encouraging home and local industries.
- (d) Studying home economics.
- (e) Providing a centre for educational and social intercourse and for all local activities.

Historical Note.

The first Women's Institute was formed in Ontario by a group of farm women nearly twenty-five years ago. Other near-by small communities heard of the good results and formed Women's Institutes of their own. The movement spread just in this way without propaganda or central organization for many years. Subsequently the various provincial governments and in some instances, the colleges, became aware of the economic and educational value of the Institutes and gave official and authoritative encouragement to the movement. They formed central organizations in government departments, provided expert lecturers, helpful literature, money grants and official backing.

Very shortly the United States imitated the organization and in many states of the Union, Women's Institutes were formed, often retaining the name. A special feature of their work is the excellent literature they publish. Some years ago the Belgian Government sent a Commission to Canada to inquire into the working of Women's Institutes. On their return the Commission recommended their formation in Belgium, under the general title "Les Cercles des Fermieres." They have proved successful and have won a place for themselves in the farm village life.

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Women's Institutes were started in England and Wales in 1915, by the Agricultural Organisation Society. It is a tribute to the success of the work that its propaganda has now been undertaken by the Women's Branch of the Food Production Department.

How Organized in England and Wales.

The Executive Committee of the National Federation of Women's Institutes, which acts in an advisory capacity to the Women's Branch of the Food Production Department, is prepared to give the fullest information as to how the Institutes are formed, to furnish speakers, to supply model rules and helpful literature, and to assist in securing expert demonstrations and lecturers when required and generally to give the movement every encouragement. But the Institutes manage their own affairs, control their own funds, and undertake whatever work seems to the members best suited to their locality. Anyone who wishes to organise a meeting at which the desirability of starting an Institute in a particular village can be discussed, should write to the General Secretary of the National Federation of Women's Institutes, who will put the correspondent into touch with the local committee responsible for the propaganda work in connection with Women's Institutes in the county.

What the Women's Institutes do.

They hold regular monthly meetings of a social and educational nature where matters of interest to the home and community are discussed. Members contribute papers and bring samples of work done at their homes, such as home-made clothing for children, well-dressed poultry, bottled fruit, etc. Demonstrations are given by members in cookery, needlework, etc. Sometimes musical or dramatic items are given. Refreshments are served by members in turn.

They hold other meetings, entertainments, lectures, parties for young people and children, to which the neighbourhood is invited.

They organize exhibits of Women's Institute work at the big Exhibitions, and compete for medals and prizes offered by Agricultural Associations, and often hold Exhibitions and Flower Shows of their own.

They buy household supplies, seeds, bulbs, etc., co-operatively, and manage co-operative jam factories, laundries, creameries, egg depôts, etc. They maintain certain expensive household implements such as vacuum cleaners, knitting machines, etc., for the use of members.

They test new household appliances and labour saving devices in the homes of members who report results of experiments and give demonstrations of their use at monthly meetings.

They subscribe to magazines and papers dealing with Home Economics and Agricultural topics and exchange these among members.

They work to increase production of food supply and to preserve food by best methods.

They provide a room or building which is used for meetings, and which frequently becomes the women's club of the neighbourhood, affording a centre for neighbourhood activities.

They encourage home and village industries in order to provide occupation and interests for women in rural districts.

They work with farmers' associations to develop and stimulate agriculture in their districts.

They do all they can to encourage buying of home and local products.

They maintain "rest rooms" in convenient towns where farmers and their wives can have club privileges while in town.

They work in every way to increase the efficiency of the home by discussion among the members, by competitive work, by reading courses, by demonstrations of household work, by co-operative expedients, by circulating pamphlets of home-tested recipes and of menus for country homes, by personal examinations into cost of living and so forth.

They take charge of Loan Libraries and form libraries of their own, chiefly consisting of technical and other works relating to the home and agriculture.

They do neighbourhood work, improve roads and parks, have "fly" extermination campaigns, rouse public opinions against unsightly advertisements, dirt and dust dangers and insanitary conditions generally.

They disseminate information among members on questions dealing with sanitation and hygiene and have lectures on many departments of household hygiene and public health, or on ingredients of patent medicines, pure food needs, etc.

They do general and specific work among rural schools, elect a woman representative on local school boards, form vocational and care committees, help with school gardens, urge domestic science and agricultural teaching, improve sanitary conditions of schools and get better water supplies; draw the school mistresses into closer touch with the parents, urge extensive medical inspection of schools, encourage children's flower shows, etc.

They form a link between the rural population and academic instruction in agricultural and domestic science by establishing close connection between Institutes and the Agricultural colleges, and by providing local centres of an attractive social nature for University extension, County Council and other educational work.

Some Results.

The efficiency of the home is increased, with definite results on national health and morals.

The co-operation of representative women living within a rural area is secured.

Agricultural development is stimulated.

Technical education is taken right into the rural home.

Home, neighbourhood, and national interests are shewn to be interdependent.

Women and girls in country districts have new interests and occupations.

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As these new ties and interests unite women, social intercourse becomes more of a factor in country life.

More people from cities come into the country when conditions are thus more pleasant and profitable and fewer people leave the country.

Relations with other Societies.

The Women's Institutes are non-sectarian and non-party.

Committees are appointed to deal with lines of work brought forward by members of other organizations dealing with development of country life. A definite co-operation is thus established between all agencies working together for the benefit of the community.

A Women's Institute provides an organization and meeting place which can be utilized for any neighbourhood good, or in case of initial or emergency work.

Local Activities of Women's Institutes.

They draw attention to possibilities in country life for women.

Increase the food supply.

Support the Women on the Land Movement.

Cultivate waste lands.

Teach suitable lines of agriculture for women.

Buy seeds, plants and garden implements co-operatively.

Take care of the children of women workers on the land.

Teach how to develop and conserve our resources.

Inculcate thrift and economy.

Teach less wasteful household methods.

Form rural centres for public work.

Explain and encourage participation in State Loans and National Savings Schemes.

Extend a welcome to those sufferers from the war who are trying new ways of living in country places.

Develop home and village industries for country women and girls.

Their part in reconstruction.

Women's Institutes whilst carrying on war work were consolidating their position as rural centres of women's activities. They will be a permanent factor in country life. Practically all their war activities are continuing and expanding, in some cases energy is translated into slightly different channels to suit the organisation of peace. They have learned how to work together for "Home and Country." They have linked up agricultural and domestic interests and knowing local needs, conditions and possibilities, they are in the best possible position to take their full part in the great period of reconstruction.

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