

# ADELAIDE HOODLESS

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as a pioneer in adult education



*Mrs. Hoodless was a woman of great personal charm.*

by ETHEL CHAPMAN

WHEN the Associated Country Women of the World met in Copenhagen this September, tribute was paid—as it is at all assemblies of this international body—to the name of Adelaide Hoodless, the Canadian woman who founded the first Women's Institute at Stoney Creek, Ontario, and so started a movement that has spread pretty well around the world. There are now women's institutes in every province of Canada, in Great Britain, Belgium, France, New Zealand, South Africa and India; and no doubt the institute idea has prompted the formation of some other groups that go to make up the world's organized country women.

It must have taken the courage of a pioneer, fifty years ago, to launch an educational movement for women who were right in the thick of their heaviest family responsibilities, most of them farm women with all that this implies in the way of limited leisure time. And certainly it took a pioneer's vision to lay plans so sound that the objectives are still adaptable to changing conditions, the program still attracting women after half a century.

### *The First Woman's Institute*

The story of how the first women's institute came into being is pretty well known. In Ontario, back in the late 1800's, the farmers had what they called Farmers' Institutes. They also had an Experimental Union, very busy just then with a campaign for the health of farm animals. And when the Experimental

Union was planning its annual meeting at Guelph, in 1896, someone had the bright idea of bringing in a woman speaker, a Mrs. John Hoodless of Hamilton, who was creating quite a stir in that city by agitating for the teaching of "domestic science" in the public schools. It is impossible to say whether the Union was particularly interested in Mrs. Hoodless' message or whether they wanted a special attraction for their program, for however queer her views might be, this crusader already had a reputation as an entertaining speaker. At this meeting Mrs. Hoodless heard the men discussing the health of farm animals. When her turn came she argued that the health of their families was more important than the health of their cattle—an approach that is still used by home economists doing rural extension work.

At the Guelph meeting a public-spirited young farmer, Erland Lee of Stoney Creek, was particularly moved by what Mrs. Hoodless said, and he asked if she would speak at a meeting of his Farmers' Institute when they would have the women out to hear her. At that meeting Mrs. Hoodless suggested that the women have an organization of their own to study homemaking just as the Farmers' Institute studied farming. She offered to meet with them to talk this over and a meeting was arranged for the next Friday night. Thirty-five women promised to attend. When the night came, one hundred and one women and one man, Erland Lee, crowded into Squire's Hall in the village of Stoney Creek and there, on February 19th,

1897, the first women's institute was organized.

Why did this organization of farm women, banded together for the simple purpose of better homemaking, grow into something so far reaching and so significant? We have a good part of the answer in the manner of woman who was its founder.

### *Crusader For Household Science*

Adelaide Hoodless—Adelaide Hunter before her marriage—was born on a farm near St. George in Brant county, Ontario, one of thirteen children. Her brothers were university men and Adelaide grew up in a home of culture and uncompromising Presbyterian ethics; grew up, too, with all the social graces that come of natural charm and a gentle background. There is no doubt that her personal appeal helped her over many difficult places, but she never depended on it. I saw a copy of her letter to Sir William Macdonald asking for funds to build Macdonald Institute, and certainly there were no "woman's wiles" in evidence. It was as clear-cut and forthright as a case history; she made her cause plead for itself. Perhaps her experience as one of a large family gave her the emotional hardihood and the perseverance she needed to carry through some of her schemes in spite of criticism and opposition; no doubt her own youth on a farm gave her an understanding of the needs of farm women.

But there was no experience to prepare her for a trouble that struck in the early years of her married life. Her first baby died when he was eighteen months old, and she felt that if she had known more about how to take care of a baby she might have saved him. Also it was discovered too late that the milk delivered to her house was not safe for babies, and she felt that she should have known about that, too. Out of her grief came the resolve to try to save other women from suffering like her own. So she headed a campaign for clean milk in her city, and she began her crusade for home economics education for girls—"domestic science" they called it then. And for women whose school days were over, she started the women's institutes, one of our first Canadian ventures in rural adult education.

### *Her Methods Are Still Modern*

In laying plans for the women's institute, it is to be noted that Mrs. Hoodless, fifty-three years ago, followed adult education principles that are approved by the experts today. Her subject, the home and the family, was of vital and almost universal concern to women. Study was combined with sociability—the women held their meetings in one another's homes and there was always a tea party afterwards. As far as possible, everyone had a part in the program and, because they prepared their own papers and gave their own demonstrations, they "learned to do by doing." They were organized for action as well as study—they not only had talks on recreation and good books; they provided community skating rinks and libraries. Modern adult education tries to break down social barriers and cultivate tolerance; it was understood from the beginning that the women's institutes would favor no race, creed, class or political party.

And how timeless the original homemaking objectives were, how adaptable to progress. "A better understanding of the economic and hygienic value of foods" as it was written in the constitution, now covers not only the most up-to-date knowledge of nutrition, but of food prices and distribution. "The scientific care of children" takes in not only the pediatrician's rules for feeding children but also the whole field of child psychology. It is not surprising that after a year or two there was added to the study of homemaking in the institutes' program "the carrying on of any line of work for the uplifting of the home or the betterment of conditions surrounding community life"; for we notice, (Continued on page 27)