



Inducted: 2009

Alice Edwards, a pioneer in the establishment of the Womens' Institute in Ontario during the early 1900's, is remembered for her sound leadership capabilities, her sympathetic interest in the welfare of rural women including their families and their homes, and for her dedication to the growth and development of the institute movement across Ontario & Canada. While most of her achievements occurred in the latter half of her life, she did not tire of the numerous visits to the various Institute branches across the province. Alice Edwards was presented to Kings and honoured by Prime Ministers and statesmen for her service toward the betterment of women.

**ALICE CATHERINE EDWARDS
1860-1951**

Alice was born in Lobo Township, the first of seven children born to parents John and Catherine Edwards. Her father was proprietor of the McKellar Hotel in Komoka. Her early schooling was accomplished at the local school in Komoka. A very clever student, Alice then attended the Girls College of Fine Arts in Woodstock. It is reported that she was a gifted pianist and also very good in sports to the point where she delighted in out-doing many of the local young men her age.

In 1882 she married a local farmer, George Edwards who resided on the 3rd Concession of Lobo. They had two sons – William born in 1884, who graduated from both McMaster and Columbia universities with honours and resided for most of his life in New York State and Homer, who was born in 1890 and he graduated from college and returned home to work in the family business.

In 1897 the first Women's Institute was established by Adelaide Hoodless in Stoney Creek Ontario under the auspices of the superintendent of Institutes branch of the Ontario Department of Agriculture. It was intended that it would be a mirror to the established Farmers Institutes. Once started interest and membership in Women's Institutes grew dramatically.

The Lobo branch of the Institute came into being in February of 1904 with a membership of 15. Shortly after that Alice joined becoming branch president in 1910-1911. Two years later in 1913-1914 she was elected president of the 12 branches that at that time composed the North Middlesex District. Middlesex County was

split into 3 districts as travel distances remained an important factor in organizing and co-coordinating district events. Alice visited branches in the district as requested.

As membership increased the province was split into three areas, Ottawa, Toronto and London. Each area held a convention where delegates from each district could come together to share their views on issues of concern to them as well as to hear the latest speakers on domestic science offered up by the Department of Agriculture. The Western Ontario convention area which met in London was composed of the counties of Essex, Kent, Lambton, Elgin, Middlesex, Oxford, Perth, Huron and Bruce. Its first convention was held in 1914 with Alice as Area President, a position she would hold until 1929. Conventions were held once a year with the expectation that the president would visit member counties in the interim.

During her years in WI she encouraged and lent support to many new branches in Middlesex county – Coldstream, Prospect Hill, Komoka, North Lobo and Ilderton to name a few.

WI at the end of WW1 had evolved from a single branch in 1897 with 100 members into an organization that consisted of 920 branches and a membership of 30,000. In February of 1919 the branches voted to form the Federated Women's Institute of Ontario. This provincial-wide organization with, for the first time, a coordinating committee of women in charge, would guide and organize the policies put forth by the membership. This allowed the WI to now be in a position where they could, as a well-respected organization, lobby politicians on any number of issues (health, social reforms, education, and working conditions) that were of vital concern to them. In the past, the women could only take their concerns to the Superintendent of Institutes, a man, who argued that many of their issues were not within the purview of the Department of Agriculture and furthermore one government department could not and would not lobby another department on how to spend their budget.

Alice Edwards was the second provincial president of the FWIO, elected each year from 1920-24. During this time she showed sound leadership and sympathetic interest in everything pertaining to the welfare of rural women and their homes as well as in the growth and development of the institute movement. She worked 18 hour days, dealt with vast mountains of correspondence and made hundreds of trips across the province to institute branches, districts and areas that wanted to have a personal glimpse of their chief with her keen vision, her breadth of judgment and her fine sense of humour.

She was one of the founders of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada which was also organized in 1919 and was its Dominion Convener of Canadian Industries in 1926. In this position she helped develop a program to stimulate interest and study in consumer education.

Through her work with WI she was also a member of many other organizations – Royal Agricultural Winter Fair Board, executive member of the Navy League of Canada (Ontario Division), Social Hygiene Council, Rural Leadership Conference of Ontario and War Memorial Children's Hospital. Through her efforts, many Institute donations were made to the Children's hospital.

Alice was an active member of the First Lobo Baptist Church for 70 years many of which were spent as its organist and choir leader.

Her hobby was delinquent boys. The worse they were the more Alice saw for them in the way of possibilities.

Alice died in 1951 at the age of 91. She had raised a family, joined the local Women's Institute at the age of 45, progressed through the growing organization to where at 60 years of age she began her 4-year stint as president of the Federated Women's Institute of Ontario representing, the by then, 38,000 members at the provincial and federal levels.

In "Great Women of Canada 1930 edition", Alice Edwards' contribution to Women's' Institute work was described as "monumental". She was presented to Kings, honoured by Prime Ministers and statesmen during her lifetime for her service toward the betterment of women. Alice was revered by all for her fine leadership and untiring interest in the work of the Women's Institute. When asked by a reporter, at her 90th birthday, as to her secret of success she replied "I always put first things first and by this simple rule I found that others were inspired to do likewise".

Today we recognize the life-long contribution that Alice Catherine Edwards made to the social fabric of rural life in the county, the province and the country by inducting her into the Middlesex County Agricultural Hall of Fame.