

# *They Also Served: The British Columbia Women's Institutes in Two World Wars*

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**T**he Women's Institutes, an organization of country women founded in Ontario, in 1897,<sup>1</sup> were oriented to serving their home and their country, so their motto declared. Nowhere is this more evident than in the service they gave their country during two world wars.

The most striking aspect of the work of the British Columbia Women's Institutes (BCWI) during the war years is the extent to which it was built on the foundation of the woman's role as housewife. She was responsible for looking after her own needs and those of her husband. Furthermore, she assumed the major responsibility for child rearing. Housework, including cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes, and management of the money expended for household goods and services were also her responsibility. To these basic activities the rural woman added the tasks of raising and preserving fruits and vegetables, caring for some livestock and poultry, and milking.

The members of the Women's Institutes were, with few exceptions, married women who worked in the home. Each was involved in some, if not all, aspects of the housewife's work. As the public sphere was only beginning to open to women, there were few options for women outside of the home and for married women even these limited options were largely closed. Women living on farms and ranches or even in small towns had still fewer opportunities outside the domestic sphere. Under these circumstances, the Women's Institutes based their public actions on what their members knew and contributed in areas requiring the skills they already possessed. By concentrating on home and family related issues, the Institutes could justify their greater participation in public affairs as an extension of women's role in the home. Mrs. J.D. McBride of Cranbrook expressed their organization's philosophy quite aptly when she stated that a woman "must not only be a

housekeeper to her individual home, but a wholesale housekeeper of her community as well."<sup>2</sup> Because, since their founding in 1909, the regular activities of the British Columbia Women's Institutes had been centred around tasks in the home, it is understandable that their war service reflected this bias.<sup>3</sup> Home economics, agriculture, health care and neighbourhood needs received the most attention in peace and in war.

In fact it was not by chance that the membership contributed to the war effort as it did. The role of women in war was debated during the First World War and out of that debate had come a popular belief that women had a particular and appropriate way of participating. Part of the maternal feminist ideology was that women naturally despised the wartime destruction of human life so their participation would be unseemly if it contributed to killing. While some groups of women challenged this belief in World War II, the Women's Institutes, at least in Ontario and at a national level, made this principle a guideline in their activities and in their cash donations to overseas organizations. The WI would not be responsible for buying machine guns, bombs, destroyers or airplanes. After the appointment of the committee in charge of the Central War Charities Fund, "the Board clarified Institute attitude toward war service as one of relieving suffering rather than of providing instruments of destruction."<sup>4</sup>

Food preservation was a most valuable part of Institute work. Very few farms in British Columbia had refrigeration before 1946, and virtually all farm women had to preserve their own meat, fruit and vegetables for future use. During both world wars, the preservation of food on a vast scale became a national priority. In British Columbia, the Women's Institutes were a principle organizer for the accumulation of jam, food parcels, and canned fruit. As Table 1 indicates, the amounts involved were prodigious. With approximate memberships of 2800 in World War I and 4000 in World War II, the BCWI preserved approximately 2.5 pounds of fruit and vegetables per member in World War I and approximately 81 pounds of jam per member during World War II.<sup>5</sup> These figures are not an accurate reflection of the actual work done, particularly in World War I, since exact figures on such contributions were not kept. In World War I, the Institutes organized canning clubs to handle the huge volumes of food. Canning equipment was jointly purchased and used collectively or individually.<sup>6</sup> Some Institutes established jam-canning factories to meet the demand.<sup>7</sup> Both of these procedures suggest that the figures for World War I represent a significant deflation of actual fact.

During World War II the Point Grey WI tested all the jam made in British Columbia before it was approved for distribution overseas. Mrs. A.S. Dennis, president of the BCWI in 1946 and a member of the Point Grey Institute, explained that every four-pound jam tin "was opened and tested by us."<sup>8</sup> Considering that 324,770 pounds or about 81,192½ tins were donated by the BCWI alone, this testing was indeed a formidable achievement.

In peacetime, recipe roll calls were a popular means of exchanging good ideas. Some Institutes published cook books of their favourite recipes as well as their ideas to raise money for other projects. Their experience at adapting

TABLE 1

WAR SERVICES OF BRITISH COLUMBIA WOMEN'S INSTITUTES-  
FOOD, TOBACCO AND MISCELLANEOUS

	World War I*	World War II**
Jam	2,135 pounds	324,770 pounds
Parcels and boxes of food	157	1,289
Fruit and vegetables	3½ tons	½ ton
Tobacco	10 boxes	
Mixed food, candy, tobacco & miscellaneous items	1 box	

TABLE 2

WAR SERVICES OF BRITISH COLUMBIA WOMEN'S INSTITUTES-  
MONEY, CLOTHING, HOSPITAL SUPPLIES, BEDDING  
READING MATERIAL

	World War I*	World War II**
Money donated	\$27,642.89	\$28,651.55
Articles sewn, knitted, made, collected	47,299 articles 158 containers	258,163 articles
Blankets	1	154
Quilts		1,714
Wool-filled comforters		8,284
Magazines, news budgets, scrapbooks	168 2 barrels	

\*These figures are based on scanty information to 1917 only. Many Women's Institutes did their work through other organizations. There were no regular reports on work done.

\*\*These figures are based on information from war work questionnaires filled in by Women's Institutes. Not all Institutes reported and many did not include work which they sent through the local Red Cross or other groups.

Sources: *Women's Institute Quarterly* 1916; *Annual Reports of Women's Institutes* 1914 and 1915; *British Columbia Department of Agriculture Reports* 1915, 1917, and 1946; *British Columbia Women's Institute Bulletin*, June 1946.

recipes to wartime shortages was recognized during World War II when the British Columbia Agricultural Production Committee compiled collections of their ways to process and can foods for distribution to the general public.<sup>9</sup> The average woman, struggling to cook within the boundaries of wartime rations on sugar, butter, eggs and meat, undoubtedly found these collections helpful.

Conservation of food was also a major task during the war years. In World War I, the Women's Institutes were asked to publicize the government's conservation programs and to collect food conservation pledges from women in the community. Each woman who took the pledge received a special button to wear.<sup>10</sup> One can imagine the pride with which these were worn and the embarrassment felt by those who had not yet pledged! Other World War II undertakings included the distribution of ration books and salvage efforts such as saving fats to make soap.<sup>11</sup> The Provincial Board of the BCWI urged the Institutes to stop serving food at their meetings in order to have more available for shipment to the Allies. The Institutes encouraged others to buy British Columbia produce to reduce the amount of money leaving the country to buy costly imports.<sup>12</sup> A pleasant side effect of buying British Columbia produce was the increase in their own farm incomes. In these and other ways the Women's Institutes practiced the virtue of thrift in wartime.

Women's Institutes did not, however, always acquiesce quietly to government war policy. They carried on a running battle with the Wartime Prices and Trade Board during World War II to obtain lower food prices and to persuade them to provide farm households with larger sugar rations during the canning season. Campaigns for additional rations to assist farm wives trying to feed extra farm labourers during harvest time were undertaken. Stella Gummow, president of the BCWI from 1940-44, and Evangeline MacLachlan, superintendent of the BCWI, both served on this Board and supported these requests.<sup>13</sup> In fact, Gummow was nicknamed "Sugar Stella" for her valuable and repeated championing of increased sugar rations!<sup>14</sup> With her help, the Institutes had some success in getting additional sugar for preserves and in having rations made transferable to the farm wife who was feeding workers.<sup>15</sup> Prices, however, were not lowered despite their best efforts.

Both World Wars provided opportunities for Institute members to use their sewing and textile skills in war service (see Table 2). Mended or made-over clothing, quilts, bandages and knitted or sewn garments were contributed to the Red Cross and to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation drive in 1946. In World War II, Margaret Murray enlisted their skills to make comforters filled with local fleeces. These were labelled "A gift of BC wool from the BC Women's Institutes" and were sent to Britain to aid those people who had been bombed out of their homes. At first, they were sent directly to British Columbia House in London for distribution, but as transportation became more difficult, the comforters were sent through the Red Cross or Bundles for Britain organizations.<sup>16</sup> These comforters met a need and advertised British Columbia products. The Women's Institutes in

World War I also promoted crafts as a possible source of income for disabled veterans.<sup>17</sup>

It was a British Columbian, Margaret R. Watt, who made a special contribution to Britain's war efforts and to its rural life. When her husband died in 1913, she resigned as a member of the Advisory Board of the BCWI and moved to England with her two small sons. While they were there, World War I broke out. Watt, seeing the dire need for increased farm production and remembering her skills gained from the British Columbia Women's Institutes, worked tirelessly with some British supporters to establish the Women's Institutes in Great Britain. Because these Institutes increased Britain's food supply by up to sixty percent, Watt was awarded the Order of the British Empire for her work in organizing them.<sup>18</sup>

The shortage of farm labour at harvest time became critical during both wars. With sons, husbands, and, in World War II, daughters, away in the armed forces or in war industries, the women were left to take up the slack. Women's Institutes cooperated with the government to establish Farm Labour Bureaus to encourage urban women to volunteer to spend their holidays harvesting the crops.<sup>19</sup> Farm women and their families carried on alone during the rest of the year. Mr. Scott, superintendent of the BCWI during World War I, noted that "had it not been for this splendid assistance given by the women of British Columbia many of our crops would have rotted in the fields."<sup>20</sup> The work of women enabled British Columbia farms to continue to produce critically needed foodstuffs.

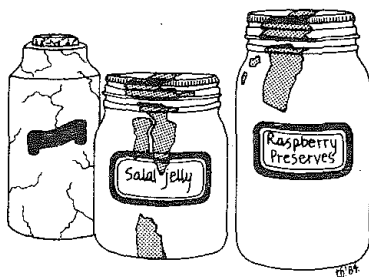
Securing fair prices for farm produce was another matter. WI members were on the Wartime Prices and Review Board and the Institutes also tried to have women appointed to many marketing boards.<sup>21</sup> However, the Women's Institutes' main contribution was the passing of innumerable resolutions. In 1944, Institutes supported potato growers who would not sell below cost price and urged that price floors be established in line with production costs.<sup>22</sup> Reductions in freight rates, the establishment of marketing boards, and restrictions on potato imports were a few of their resolutions.<sup>23</sup> Some of the changes they supported were forthcoming, such as an increased number of marketing boards. It is difficult, however, to determine to what extent their other resolutions affected subsequent legislation.

Women's Institutes included aid to hospitals in their war work. In both wars, bandages and other hospital supplies were donated (see Table 2) and money was raised to purchase ambulances. Institutes also sent books, magazines, newspapers, and packages of special treats to military hospitals abroad and supplied similar services to veterans convalescing in British Columbia. Such aid was a minor part of their contribution.

Meeting needs within their local communities formed a large part of most BCWI work in peacetime. Helping a neighbour was part of their daily lives. During wartime their neighbourhood expanded to include all those in the armed forces. Institutes held send-off and welcome-home parties for soldiers, welcomed war brides, and were in the forefront of efforts to create war memorials. The Institutes asked the government either to establish barracks for women soldiers or to increase their living allowance.<sup>24</sup> Institutes

also wanted women in the services to have the same dependent's allowance as men.<sup>25</sup> Some chapters wanted the rights and privileges of the armed forces to be extended to those men in the Merchant Marine serving on ocean-going ships.<sup>26</sup> Institutes near ports or military installations helped entertain armed service personnel to make them feel at home. One WI member, Mrs. Annie McVie of Esquimalt, entertained over ten thousand service people in her home during World War II.<sup>27</sup> By these and other actions, Women's Institutes extended a neighbourly hand to the armed services of their country.

These are only a few of the ways in which the British Columbia Women's Institutes served their country in wartime. In Women's Institutes across Canada similar efforts were mounted and with the same positive effects. Ruth Pierson, in a recent publication, credits the Women's Institutes of Canada with raising over half a million dollars in cash and making almost as many garments for the Red Cross and other groups in World War II alone.<sup>28</sup> Without a doubt, the Women's Institutes deserve as much credit for war service as any persons engaged in war industries or even the armed forces. Yet this credit, sometimes given during wartime, has been substantially lacking during peacetime. Because work in the home is unpaid in war and in peace, it is ignored: "Housework is invisible work. No one notices it until it isn't done."<sup>29</sup> In both wars, the Women's Institutes and other women's groups made substantial contributions to the fight for peace and freedom.



## Footnotes

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2. Mrs. J.D. McBride, "Civics," *The Agricultural Journal* 3 (November, 1918): 223.
3. British Columbia, Legislative Assembly, *Sessional Papers 1910* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1910): 105-107. For details of the Women's Institutes' peacetime activities, see C.J. Dennison, "The Women's Institutes in British Columbia, 1909-1946: Housewives 'For Home and Country,'" (M.A. thesis, University of Victoria, 1983): 79-178.
4. Annie Walker, Edith Collins and M. Hood, *Fifty Years of Achievement: Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario*, 1948: 83.
5. These figures based on calculating averages of membership totals appearing in British Columbia, Department of Agriculture, *Annual Reports of the Department of Agriculture*, 1914-1918 and 1939-1945.
6. *The Agricultural Journal*, 3 (June, 1918): 105-106; 3 (July, 1918): 129; 3 (August, 1918): 13; and 3 (September, 1918): 176-177.
7. British Columbia, *Annual Report of Women's Institutes 1914* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1915): 44; and British Columbia, Department of Agriculture, *The Women's Institute Quarterly* (Victoria: King's Printer, volume 1, July, 1916): 163.
8. *Country Life* (March, 1946): 26.
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13. British Columbia, Department of Agriculture, *Thirty-Seventh Annual Report of the Department of Agriculture for the Year 1942* (Victoria: King's Printer, 1942): X85, and *Department of Agriculture Report 1944*: S98.
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18. Lady Isabel Margesson, "An Appreciation," *The Agricultural Journal*, 4 (December, 1919): 315; Jill Douglas, ed., *Modern Pioneers 1909-1959* (Victoria: British Columbia Women's Institutes, 1959): 7; *The Agricultural Journal*, 4 (August, 1919): 187; and J.W. Robertson Scott, *The Story of the Women's Institute Movement*

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  21. Elizabeth Bailey Price, "Institutes Want Women on Marketing Board," *Country Life in British Columbia* (March, 1935): 18; *Department of Agriculture Report 1942*: X85 and *Department of Agriculture Report 1944*: S98.
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  26. "Resolutions Passed at the South Vancouver Island District Conference, November 28, 1942," n.p.
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  28. Ruth Roach Pierson, *Canadian Women and the Second World War*, Canadian Historical Association Booklet No. 37 (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, 1983): 17.
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