

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF WOMEN'S HISTORY IN THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS

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In 2009–2010, the Eastern Townships Resource Centre (ETRC) created a virtual exhibition entitled “Through the Looking Glass: One Hundred Years of Women’s History in the Eastern Townships.” This exhibition, accessible online, is an account of the history, ideas and actions of three fascinating women’s groups based in the Eastern Townships. The virtual exhibition was made possible thanks to funding from the Canadian Heritage Information Network and the Virtual Museum of Canada. The Virtual Museum of Canada (VMC) Community Memories Program “is designed to stimulate partnership between museums and their communities in the development of online local history exhibits.”¹ “Through the Looking Glass: One Hundred Years of Women’s History in the Eastern Townships” sheds some light on the evolution of the roles women have played over the past century in our community; it highlights how women in the Eastern Townships have grouped together to share their knowledge, resources and energy to serve important causes both locally and internationally.

Project development

While researching possible topics for an exhibition using ETRC material, the role of women’s groups in the development of this vibrant region emerged as being a particularly interesting and as yet almost unexplored theme. The ETRC’s recent restructuring of its mission as a more community-centered cultural organization made it particularly relevant that a proposal should be submitted to the Community Memories programme of Virtual Museum Canada (VMC). The subject of the heritage of women’s groups in the Eastern Townships appeared to be an excellent subject for such a collaboration.

In our day and age, it is vital that we come to understand that an archive is not simply a repository for the preservation of documents. Archives must be seen above all as places for the transfer and dissemi-

nation of knowledge. It was with a sense of the need to demonstrate the potential of this principle of the 'availability of knowledge' on a local and national level that an exhibition project based on ETRC archival material was developed. The partnership with the 'Community Memories' programme of the Virtual Museum of Canada immeasurably facilitated the achievement of this objective.

The virtual exhibition "Through the Looking Glass: One Hundred Years of Women's History in the Eastern Townships" is not primarily aimed at presenting a historical account of these organizations, but rather at giving the community access to the voices of women's organizations so that its members can become better acquainted with them. The virtual exhibition is an opportunity for visitors to learn and understand how women's organizations have, over the last hundred years, contributed to the well-being of the communities they serve. It explores the separate identities and practices of three distinct women's groups as well as their impact on the well-being of the community.

Three striking women's groups

This exhibition is dedicated to three women's groups: the Women's Institute (WI), the Canadian Federation of University Women of Sherbrooke and District (CFUWSD), and the Lennoxville and District Women's Centre (LDWC). The viewer is given the opportunity to appreciate the differences that distinguish these three groups from one



Figure 1 (P008) Brompton Road Women's Institute

another in terms of transmission and means of action. At the same time it becomes clear that they share or have shared common values and a common aim in promoting solidarity through learning and collective creativity.

This year is the one hundredth anniversary of the presence of the Women's Institute in the province of Quebec. It is also an Eastern Townships anniversary since the first branch to open in the province did so in the Eastern Townships village of Dunham in 1911. The Women's Institute was founded by Adelaide Hoodless in Stony Creek, Ontario in 1897. Over the years, the organization has grown not only regionally but also nationally and internationally. This women's movement played an extremely important role in the improvement of education and health, particularly in rural areas, as well as in sustaining active engagement in a wide range of activities for the benefit of local communities. The W.I. was an important contributor in raising funds and working towards the support of local hospitals, local libraries as well as other causes such as the Cancer Society and the Red Cross.

As one study puts it, "[t]he Women's Institute aims to raise the standard of homemaking, maintain the national tradition of handicrafts, promote education particularly in rural areas, improve the welfare of child and health of the public, teach Canadian Citizenship, have a true spirit of patriotism, promoting world unity and international understanding." ²



Figure 2 "Mansur Schoolhouse": Photographer unknown, ca 1950, Stanstead County Women's Institute fonds, ETRC, P115

In an interview, Gwen Parker, a member of the Lennoxville Women's Institute, discusses the activities of the W.I. during the war years and how its members supported the Canadian troops overseas: "Another thing they did for the help overseas is that (...) the Belvidere Women's Institute had a canning machine, and they canned all their excess vegetables from the garden, these were shipped overseas."³

Another interesting women's group is the Canadian Federation of University Women of Sherbrooke and District (CFUWSD). This women's group is affiliated with the Stephen Lewis Foundation. In 2006, the Stephen Lewis foundation launched the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign to raise awareness and mobilize Canadian support for Africa's grandmothers. This has been enthusiastically taken up by the Sherbrooke and District organization.

Heather Keith, a member of the CFUWSD, explains: "Stephen Lewis started a fund for grandmothers in Africa who were left to their own devices to take care of their grandchildren. In many cases the AIDS epidemic meant that the parents were dying and the grandmothers were left to take care of their grandchildren."⁴ In this way the



Figure 3 "Grandmothers to Grandmothers Project, making angels,"
Sherbrooke and District University Women's Club fonds, ETRC, P123.
 The CFUWSD members at an angel making workshop in Lennoxville, Qc;
 Margie Logan-White, Heather Keith, Janet Cowan Weber and Maggie Tuck.
 Photograph by Heather Keith (c. 2000)

CFUWSD acts as a support network which advocates awareness about the devastating effects of AIDS in Africa and presses governments and private organizations to become more involved in finding solutions to this terrible situation.

The CFUWSD members participate in arts and crafts workshops and sell their products to raise funds toward furthering the cause of Grandmothers in Africa. They also participate in many activities and events such as the AfriGran Caravan, a mobile event organised to raise awareness across the country about turning the tide of AIDS in Africa. The group consistently helps in founding grassroots projects, bringing moral and financial support to the African Grandmothers and their communities.

The Lennoxville & District Women's Centre (LDWC) is a third women's group that plays an equally active role within the Eastern Townships community. Founded in 1981, the LDWC is an organization serving women throughout the Eastern Townships in a broad range of areas. As a community-based organization serving English-speaking women, the Lennoxville and District Women's Centre serves as a meeting place where women can gather to learn new skills, make new friends, and find valuable information on various subjects. The LDWC contributes to the well-being of the community by offering a support system consisting of workshops and various courses available to accompany and support women in their daily life.

Resources

The ETRC Archives are the repository of the following 17 fonds from the various branches of the Women's Institute throughout the Eastern Townships: Belvidere, Denison, Brompton Road, Lennoxville, Sherbrooke, Ascot, Tomifobia, Way's Mills, Minton, Beebe, Orford, Cherry River, Stanstead County, Massawippi, North Hatley, Hatley Centre, Lennoxville and District.

The variety of archival documents used in the exhibition include newspaper articles, journals, scrapbooks, receipts, correspondence, photographs, minute books, accounts, cartographic material and interviews.

In addition to these archival documents from the ETRC Archives, archival materials from other archives were also included in order to give a more complete picture of Women's groups in the Eastern Townships. The following archives contributed material: LAHMS Archives, Library and Archives Canada, McGill University Archives as well as the McDonald Campus College Archives.

The virtual exhibition includes over one hundred photographs in addition to textual material, cartographic material and interviews

conducted especially for this exhibition. In addition to telling the stories of the W.I., CFUWSD, and LDWC, the material displayed in this virtual exhibition provides an interesting source of information concerning the general environmental, social, cultural and economic history of the Eastern Townships region over one century. The historical research, text and digital processing for the exhibition were undertaken by Chloë Southam with the collaboration of Julie Allard. The coordinator of the exhibition project was Jaroslava Baconova, director Ex Officio of the ETRC.

This exhibition is surely worth discovering if you want to know more about the impact of women's organizations in the Eastern Townships or want to know a little more about the history of women's issues and way of life. The exhibition is now available on the VMC website at www.virtualmuseum.ca. It can also be consulted through the following link: http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/pm_v2.php?id=exhibit_home&fl=0&lg=English&ex=749

ENDNOTES

- 1 Gabrielle Blais, Directrice générale, Canadian Heritage Information Network, April 6, 2010. (Letter to Ms. Jaroslava Baconova, Executive Director of the ETRC.)
- 2 A brief history of women's organizations in Lennoxville was compiled by Jane C. Pearson, P.5. (HQ 1910.L4) P4 ETRC Archives.
- 3 Interview with Gwen Parker, a member of the Lennoxville Women's Institute, September 28th 2010, Felton Rd, Sherbrooke.
- 4 Interview with Heather Keith, a member of the CFUWSD, September 27th 2010, Bishop's University, Lennoxville.