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OMATUA HOMESTEAD, at Rissington, Hawke's Bay, where the first New Zealand Women's Institute was formed in 1921; and (below, right) MISS A. E. JEROME SPENCER, O.B.E., who introduced the movement to this country

COMRADESHIP AMONG COUNTRY WOMEN

Silver Jubilee of Institute Movement in New Zealand

(Written for "The Listener" by BARBARA HARPER)

IN the life of mankind one of the strongest urges is for companionship. Few town people fully realise the loneliness which surrounds the lives of some country people, particularly women who have not the same advantages as men of coming in contact with their own kind. Desperate loneliness can often warp the minds, narrow the outlook, and take the zest from the lives of those compelled by circumstances to live in isolated places. For these reasons rural movements have been advocated and successfully established in this land, and "country bumpkinism" has been defeated to a great extent. Happiness and progress in country communities are largely due to country schools, Adult Education, the Country Library Services and men's and women's farming, social, and philanthropic organisations.

No movement has done more for the spiritual harmony of the country women of the world than Women's Institutes. It is coincidental—yet rather significant, too—that the first Women's Institute was formed in 1897, the year of the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. Though this organisation really belongs to the 20th Century (and this century might well be termed "a century of organisations") the Institutes "pride themselves on preserving all that is best in the ideals of Victorian days." And though it is, distinctly, a movement for women, men have on various occasions assisted in its progress. Indeed, one man played a large part in its foundation.

Erland Lee was a prominent member of a Farmers' Institute of the Hamilton Saltfleet district of Ontario, Canada. After attending an "Experimental Union" of his organisation at Guelph, the capital of Ontario, he realised there was far more in country life than just farming. A woman called Mrs. Hoodless, who spoke at the conference on "domestic science and sewing," was, to a great extent, responsible for his conclusions. What a grand idea it would be, he thought, for Mrs. Hoodless to come to Stoney Creek, his own native village of 800 people, and address not only the men but the women too—the women, whose lives, on the whole, were stunted, dull, and complacent. And Mrs. Hoodless did this the following year. She had ideas, too, and could foresee the advantages of an Institute for women. Her suggestion was put before the meeting and received with enthusiasm. On February 19, 1897, Mrs. Hoodless held her second meeting, which was attended by exactly 100 women and one man, the progressive Mr. Lee. Six days afterwards the first regular meeting of the first Women's Institute was held, and unknown to the inhabitants of Stoney Creek, a world-wide country women's movement was launched.

Like Mushrooms

Looking back over the 50 years' growth of the movement, the rules which have been drafted and redrafted are not of such vital consequence as the comradeship, humanitarianism, learning in arts and crafts, and interests in national



S. P. Andrew photograph

and world affairs which have entered the lives of thousands of women.

As the result of a visit by the Belgian Director of Agriculture to Canada (where Institutes were popping up like mushrooms), the "Cercles des Fermières" were formed in Belgium in 1906, and thence spread to France. It was not until nine years later that the first Institute appeared in Britain; and in 1924 Miss Mavis D. Hay, an M.A., of Oxford, formed 900 Country Women's Circles in Poland. By degrees, similar rural movements developed in Holland, Germany, Austria, and Russia.

It was probably the traditional conservatism of the British which hindered the establishment of Women's Institutes in the United Kingdom. Some scoffed at the idea and others thought it inopportune in wartime (1915). But others were ardently enthusiastic and were not deterred. Several of the leading lights (again, including men) of Llanfairpwll, Wales, held a meeting, and the first Institute in Great Britain came into being—the first of many. The stress of war brought women and their organisations face to face with many special problems. It is well known, from bitter experience, that periods of national turmoil cannot properly be met without careful local and national organisation. In addition to those societies already in existence, many Women's Institutes were formed to meet the problems of food production