

and food economy, of caring for and entertaining the wounded and convalescent, of helping in hospitals, providing of bandages and medical supplies, sending parcels to men on the battlefronts, and giving sympathetic help to widows and fatherless families. Contrary to expectations, the time was peculiarly opportune for such a movement. In their wisdom, Institute leaders met the great need for mental relaxation and stimulation by forming dramatic, musical, and literary circles within their groups and by arranging demonstrations and talks on all kinds of subjects from cooking and dress-making to psychological and international problems. Handicrafts have always occupied an important position in Institute life: the activities include horticulture, basketmaking, hand-painting of pottery, brush-work, glove-making, fur craft, skin-curing, rug-making, embroidery upholstery, leather work, woodcarving, spinning, and weaving.

To New Zealand

It was due, indirectly, to an exhibition of handicrafts of those kinds at Caxton Hall, Westminster, that the movement spread to New Zealand. Miss A. E. Jerome Spencer, O.B.E., who was in London doing war work, read the placard outside the hall and walked in. Since the outbreak of war there had always been at the back of her mind the need that would exist in post-war years for something to replace Red Cross meetings in country districts, in order to continue "the spirit of fellowship and co-operation which had grown out of the grim needs of war."

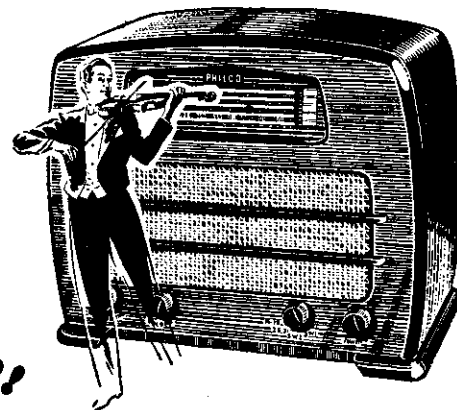
One thing led to another, and soon Miss Spencer had procured sufficient information about Women's Institutes to decide that here lay the solution. When she returned to New Zealand she discussed the matter with Mrs. Francis Hutchinson and in February, 1921, a small group of women met at Mrs. Hutchinson's home at Omatua, Hawke's Bay, and the Rissington Women's Institute was formed. Neighbouring towns soon heard of this and requested Miss Spencer's help to form further Institutes. During the next 12 years her time was spent untiringly travelling to country districts organising this tremendous movement, which now embraces 900 Institutes and 30,000 members.

This year the movement celebrated its Silver Jubilee, and there are hundreds of women throughout this country whose hearts turn to the foundress in gratitude for interests awakened and enlightenment received. In nearly every country district women from every sphere of life meet each month to exchange ideas, to open their hearts, and to learn something fresh—whether it be a new recipe (for which they're notorious, but what matter!), a new stitch in embroidery, or to hear the experiences of a traveller, or the ideologies of a philosopher. Telephones, radios, and motor-cars have improved the lives of country people, but there is no substitute for the human element of companionship.

In 1939 Miss Spencer wrote, "In this rapidly-changing world the 'visibility is poor.' One thing alone seems reasonably sure that so long as the organisation preserves its ideals and its original free democratic principles it will maintain its remarkable vitality; and furthermore, it will continue to render the Dominion valuable service as a training ground in the understanding and practice of those same principles so essential to the preservation of freedom and peace in the world to-day."

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