

A Vision for the Past

50 Years and Counting

THE ORIGINS OF THE ELGIN COUNTY MUSEUM can be found in the work of the Women's Institute branches that began to compile the history of Elgin's communities in the 1930s. Across Ontario the Women's Institute branches, the first of which was founded in 1897 by Adelaide Hunter Hoodless, thrived in an era when the province was still largely rural in character. The organization mounted campaigns for pasteurization, farm safety, and improved nutrition and safety in the home and have been instrumental in the improvement of cultural life for those in small rural communities.



Mrs. Dorothy Futcher

It was a logical step for the branches which had already preserved the written record of their communities to begin a movement to preserve the artifacts of everyday life. The WI's had played a role in the establishment of museums in other areas such as Grey County where they had opened a museum in an old stone house in Owen Sound.

Elgin's WI branches soon found themselves at the forefront of the county museum movement thanks largely to the leadership of one-time Middlemarch branch president Mrs. Dorothy Futcher. Mrs. Futcher had served as president of the Ontario Federation of Institutes and had represented the Federation at a meeting of the Associated Country Women of the World in Denmark in 1950. In 1954 she brought together a group of people who shared a vision for a county museum and led them through three years of planning, fundraising and collections development.

Her greatest achievement was the extensive community support she was able to generate. She promoted the idea of a museum through her own column in the *Times-Journal* where she reported on the development of plans, donations that had been offered, and the status of the campaign once it started. One of the first events the museum committee held was an exhibition in Anderson's department store of artifacts borrowed from various parts of the county by the historical research conveners of the WI branches. The exhibition generated considerable interest and when the owners of a small tourist home on Talbot Street saw a report on the display, they offered their house to the committee as a home for the museum. 32 Talbot had been built by Dr. Elijah Duncombe in 1848 as a home, office and apothecary where he lived until his death in 1870. The museum committee offered the owners \$10,000 for the house which was accepted prompting the opening of a fundraising campaign.

Mrs. Futcher intended that the museum would represent both the County of Elgin and the City of St. Thomas. To gather support in the city she invited to city's Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire chapters to assist with the initial fundraising drive. A mainly urban women's group formed in 1900 in Canada, the IODE had a record of supporting community initiatives such as hospitals and assisting the education of young people in a variety of ways. The IODE-WI partnership, unique perhaps in Ontario, undertook an extensive canvass of both the county and city which raised \$16,000, allowing for the purchase of the house and its complete renovation.

Among those who joined Mrs. Futcher's committee was Warren Miller, the city engineer, who as a trustee of the then moribund Elgin County Historical Society helped to direct the society's artifact collection including the Susan Paul gown to the new museum. Other community leaders came to the assistance of the museum including former STCI principal George Gray, Dr J. W. Crane as well as Dr. James D. Curtis, who assembled a medical room in the museum, and John Ker, owner of the Talbot Estate who chaired a committee which created a Talbot Room in the museum in 1960.

As the news of the museum spread descendants of many old Elgin families began to offer artifacts and documents for the permanent collection. Among the largest were gifts from the descendants of the Duncombes, the Ermatingers, and the Silcox family, founders of the community of Frome.

When it opened in 1957, the museum featured a tea room for visitors and two live-in curators, Mr. and Mrs. Murray Wilson, a retired farming couple from Vienna. The museum's hours were 2 to 5 and 7 to 9 every day including Sunday and admission was 25 cents.

Later that year, Elgin County Council voted unanimously to take over the ownership of the museum making it eligible for provincial funding. An executive committee was established made up of two members of council along with representatives from city council, the WI branches and the IODE chapters. The city and county would each provide a \$500 annual grant and the province would contribute \$600 through their new community museum programme. The balance in any given year would be met by fundraising. Council's motion establishing the museum stated that its objective was "to collect, preserve and display items relative to the history and development of the County of Elgin and the City of St. Thomas and to encourage public interest therein."

Mrs. Futcher remained museum committee chair until 1979 overseeing an addition to the museum in 1963 and the construction of an agriculture display building in 1973.

The suitability of the Duncombe House for continued use by the museum came into question after a fire in 2001 which was followed by accessibility problems leading to two temporary relocations. In 2003 a firm was retained to conduct public consultations on options for the museum's future and while it was concluded that the house was no longer a suitable location for the museum, agreement on an alternative location was not immediately forthcoming. Ultimately the one option which met all criteria, the fourth floor of the county building, was chosen. Only here could adequate exhibition and storage space be environmentally controlled at a reasonable cost. The new museum opened in its present location in fall of 2006. Today, the WI and the IODE, as members of the museum's Advisory Committee and as volunteers, continue to make an important contribution to the operation of the museum.

