**Historical presentation to CWL Convention 2022**

Before we begin, I would like us to take a moment to bring into memory the thousands and thousands of women and spiritual advisors over the span of 100 years who served the League on PEI. Together, these women and men, including us, served God in His work by serving others. May their spirit fill this room today and ay they be rewarded of eternal life with Him. So we ask God to bless them!

I’m starting this presentation with a question:

Is it because of our small size that we feel the need to boast about things we are best at? We’re the smallest province, with the smallest population and the smallest cities and towns, so when we have something to brag about, we go all out?

Like: We’ve got Anne of Green Gables!

Like: We have the longest bridge in the world over ice covered water!

Like: The 1st meeting of the Fathers of Confederation happened to be right here on PEI soil ….

….and the 1st meeting of the mothers of Confederation???

And, when it comes to the Catholic Women’s League of Canada, the members from PEI have the real boasting power! We may not be sitting here today if it were not for a young girl from County Line, later named Emerald Junction, Prince Edward Island, Miss Katherine Hughes, who started it all and her sister Lauretta who carried it forward. Their family had moved to Emerald from Hunter River, the older children of the family including Lauretta having attended St. Augustine’s Church in Rustico. In 1912, Katherine was only 36 years old when she launched the Catholic Women’s League of Edmonton which grew into the National Catholic Women’s League of Canada 8 years later.

How did it happen? Katherine is baptized in 1876 at St. Mary’s Church at Indian River where her uncle, Cornelius O’Brien, was parish priest. The seventh of nine children and the youngest girl, she grew up in a household in which education was highly valued and in which the children were encouraged to strive to achieve their goals. Katherine graduates from Notre Dame Convent and Prince of Wales College in Charlottetown with her 1st class teaching degree when she is not yet 15! She and her mother, Annie Laurie, then joined the rest of the family who had moved to Ottawa. Her father, John Wellington Hughes, had left his postmaster and railway position at the Junction to accept a position at the Dept of railway and canals. Upon leaving college, Katherine actively engaged for five years in work for native Indian races and then received an appointment as teacher at St Regis reserve, Quebec, occupied by the Mohawk, one of the 6 nations of the Iroquois. (You may wish to make note of the many 1sts I mention regarding Katherine in this presentation.) In 1901, at the young age of 25, Katherine founded the 1st Catholic Indian Association with the primary goal as seeking to generate employment outside reserves for the graduates of Indian schools. She was critical of the indifference of white people to the natives’ circumstances and was adopted into two tribes. She resigned in 1902 sighting ill health and turned to literary work. She joins the editorial staff at the Montreal Star in 1903, but soon leaves Ottawa to work with the Edmonton Bulletin as the 1st representative in the press gallery of the Alberta provincial legislature. Two years later she was appointed to the position of provincial archivist, the 1st in this position, ending her 5-year professional career as a newspaper woman. She wrote the biography of her uncle, then Archbishop Cornelius O’Brien and the legendary Oblate missionary Father Albert Lacombe published with positive and favourable response. Katherine came on board as the secretary treasurer of the 1st Edmonton branch of the Women’s Press Club in 1908. Premier Sifton removes Katherine from her position as provincial archivist to serve as his private secretary becoming the 1st woman to hold the position.

But…..the high point of her commitment to Catholic activism came later in 1912 when she was instrumental in establishing the Catholic Women’s League of Edmonton, the first Canadian branch, dedicated to the care of immigrant women. She had seen the activities of the Catholic Women’s league while travelling in England. Katherine is then named as 1st secretary to the newly formed unit and at the same time, the 1st secretary to the office of the agent general of Alberta in London.

Visiting her ancestral homeland while in England, she began to direct her energy and abilities to present a case for Irish independence outside the British empire. In 1918 she had addressed Irish Canadians in EVERY province and to have travelled all of America, lecturing to groups on Ireland. She published a book named Ireland and others which sought to promote the cause of Irish independence.

After she was instrumental in establishing the 1st Canadian branch of the CWL in Edmonton, other independent CWL units formed in Montreal, Toronto, and Halifax. With the influx of immigrants of WW1, the department of immigration had called representatives of nationally organized women’s groups to discuss the situation. About that time, Mrs. Lauretta Kneil, who else but Katherine’s sister was employed with the Canadian immigration Dept in Ottawa. She noted that every denomination was represented in the division except Catholic women. That was a call to action, and the Hughes girls were action oriented! She contacted the president of the Catholic Women’s Club of Montreal, Bellelle Guerin who met with the Minister of Immigration and came away from the meeting instilled with an awareness of the great need for a nationally organized body of women. Delegates from seven provinces attended a June 1920 conference, including Katherine and Lauretta. Bellelle was elected 1st national president and Lauretta Kneil was national organizing secretary. In an organizational tour from PEI to BC, Lauretta lectured and recruited on behalf of the CWL, travelling hundreds of miles east and west. Over the course of one year, because of Lauretta’s organizational drive, the CWL established at least 80 subdivisions nationally.

Katherine and Lauretta were later to live in the New York area, Katherine having worked for the Irish League there. The last 3 years of her life saw Katherine largely retreating from public politics, influenced by her deteriorating health, diagnosed with carcinoma of the stomach. While living in the Bronx with Lauretta and another sister Cornelia, she died at the tender age of 48 on April 26, 1925, almost 100 years ago. Her grave, to this day, is unmarked. Katherine found strength and solace in her faith and then her abiding belief in the rightness of the causes that she championed. Despite her hectic life, she retained a strong affection for the ‘healthy acorn of 1912 which would grow into the big oak of the CWL of Canada in 1920.’ Ladies and gentlemen, may we give honor and thanksgiving to Katherine Hughes and Lauretta Hughes Kneil who together as a team of knitted sisters began a movement that we are so privileged to be a part of today.

In true sisterly rivalry, however, look what was written about Lauretta when she passed away in Ottawa at age 83……remember that the older ones of the Hughes family attended St. Augustine’s in Rustico…. Funeral services were held here today for Mrs. Robert H. Kneil, age 83….founder of the Catholic Women’s League of Canada. She formed the 1st unit of the organization 45 years ago. Born in Rustico, PEI, she……so they claimed her and the title to go with it by saying she formed the 1st unit of the CWL! Rustico really tooting its own horn!

Now to celebrate the REST of the members of the Catholic Women’s League on PEI, including you and I, and our faithful priests. During the summer of 1921, the Charlottetown Sub-division of the CWL was organized by, you guessed it, Lauretta Kneil. Reps from Tignish, Alberton, Souris and St. Margaret’s sub-divisions that had also organized that year, met in Charlottetown for the purpose of forming a Diocesan Sub-division with the 1st annual diocesan convention occurring in October of 1923, 100 + years ago in Ch’town. A gale of unusual velocity occurred to the extent that travel from certain directions was not possible. I like to think that Gale of Goodness blew across this Island to cement the good works and prayers of the ladies of the League and their spiritual advisors forever in the history of this province! Mrs. JJ Johnston, the 1st Diocesan President of PEI and Mrs. WJMcIntyre, diocesan secretary, presented a report of the National Convention.

Progress was shown in the organization of 4 more sub-divisions: namely Kelly’s Cross, Vernon River, Hope River, and Burton. Of value was the formation of the “Little Flower Club”, which provided the nucleus for the formation of the Girl Guide Company. The League was successful in having eliminated from an Act respecting the registration of nurses, which were opposed to Catholic interests, discriminating against the Catholic School of Nursing.

A progressive program of active work accomplished was reported on including donations to the parish church, to the poor, to Prince County Hospital, to St. Vincent’s Orphanage providing baskets of food at Christmas, books for children, Catholic literature to foreign missions, boxes of clothing distributed among poor families and most impressive were mentions of “funeral expenses taken care and funds raised to pay for medical treatment for an aged lady in the Ch’town hospital. So, you see, from a very early stage, CWLers on PEI was already becoming advocates for people.

1924 to 26 saw Kensington, Indian River, St. Ann’s, Tracadie, St. Peter’s, Morell, and Kinkora organized. A favorite action was the prize of $10 to the Catholic girl making the highest mark in the Prince of Wales College Matriculation examinations. In 1927 Corran Ban organized and in 1930, St. Brigid’s, Portage. Already 700 members belonged.

Efforts were made through an appeal to the Postmaster General, to have objectionable magazines banned from entry into the province. Of exceptional interest to the diocese was the election of Mrs. W.J.McIntyre of Charlottetown to the office of National President from 1930-32. What an incredible achievement once again for PEI considering the National League was only established 10 years prior and already Mrs WJ had made her mark.

Subdivisions were formed in Fort Augustus, Georgetown, Montague, St. Teresa, Vernon River, and Iona in 1932 and St. Mary’s in Souris was reorganized. They were followed by Little Pond, Miscouche, Cardigan, St. Paul’s/Summerside and St. Felix, Tignish in 1933.

Shipments were made to Missions in the West. All subdivisions in the diocese had been asked to contribute clothing and parish priests had been requested to send used vestments. The result was that 30 large crates were packed with bedding and clothing, with a complete mass set, vestments, missals, candlesticks. Many car lots of our famous potatoes and other vegetables were sent.

Noted among the many charitable works of Social Service was the sending of a boy to the Halifax School for the blind.

In 1935 Mrs Murray was appointed as national convener of Lay Retreats. She urged the CWL to encourage the Retreat Movement quoting sacred scripture, “I will lead you into solitude and there I shall speak into your heart.” Thankfully, National had decided to change the wording of sub-division to council!

1939 St. James, Summerfield organized and St. Bridgit re-organized. A petition in 1938 was drafted signed by the President of the CWL and leaders of 7 prominent organizations, presented to the House and read by the premier. It received front page press and action followed by a check of all bookstores by the RCMP, resulting in several outstanding offensive publications removed from sale!!

And then….war is declared! Steps were taken for members to register for war work. A War Mail Service was established to send home papers on a regular basis and an appeal was made to aid in finding homes for refugee children. In 1941, Grand River organizes.

In 1942 all councils had contributed to war work, namely, Red Cross, Merchant Marine, sale of war saving stamps and the various Relief Funds. Morell organized 1943, the Little Flower subdivision.

The report on war work showed 1,600 garments knitted and sewn, quilts donated and packed to the number of 2,000. And War Saving Stamps and certificates to the amount of $3,365. As a necessary foundation to the morale of the men on active duty, the serving of communion breakfasts by the League was much appreciated, as the 625 men testified. In 1944-Immaculate Conception, Wellington organized.

All councils were very active in Social Service and Child Welfare. Much of the work was directed to our Provincial Infirmary, Falconwood Hospital, St. Vincent’s Orphanage, Precious Blood Monastery, Sacred Heart Home, the Motherhouse for the Sisters of St. Martha. Masses were offered for chaplains and members of the Armed Services and for the repose of the souls of those who made the Supreme Sacrifice. Letters of sympathy were sent to bereaved families. Outstanding along educational lines was the CWL Scholarship for young girls at St. Dunstan’s University, and the sponsorship of several Girl Guides (S) and Brownie companies and the support of Red Cross.

1948- Seven Mile Bay was organized. It also saw an honorary membership of 103 Sisters of Notre Dame and 106 Sisters of St. Martha! Councils across the province continued their “Crusade for Good Reading: A list of best books from a Catholic viewpoint was compiled. A resolution was passed for a lower rental provincial building program. Sound familiar?

1949-North Rustico, St. Mary of the People, Hunter River and St. Lawrence, Morell Rear were organized and in 1951 Mount Ryan. St. Peter’s reorganized in 1953.

Over 400 women made retreats during the year under the Retreat Movement!! Members continued to give their services to many worthy causes such as Cancer Clinics, Social Service, Red Cross, Polio Clinics, etc. Holy Redeemer, Charlottetown organizes in 1954.

Added to our ranks between 1955 and 1957 were St. Pius X/Parkdale, St. Augustine’s/South Rustico and St. Anthony/Bloomfield, and Immaculate Conception, Palmer Road.

The field of Social Action found many members visiting hospitals, preparing Christmas boxes, sewing and knitting. 47 foster homes were found for 60 children and 12 children were placed for adoption. The League insignia was presented to 40 guides, 40 brownies and 8 leaders.

Members made a special effort to have the aged and infirmed women in the parish a part of the CWL. Another council molded and painted 12 pieces of nativity scenes each which were distributed free to all families at Christmas. May I suggest that if a council is looking for great ideas to initiate, they need only look to our history!

From 1957-58 Rollo Bay, St. Charles, St. Columba, Corpus Christi (O’Leary), and St. George’s were organized to make 49 councils with 3,637 members.

Assistance was given to Cancer Clinic, March of Dimes, Red Cross, Institute of the Blind, Mental Health, Retarded Children (we certainly don’t use that term today), Girl Guides and the Orphanage. The League magazine featured a picture and a write up of the Presentation of a Life Membership to Miss Iphigenie Arsenault of Charlottetown.

In 1961 St. Ann’s, Hope River organized followed by Lennox Island and Our Lady of Assumption, Southport in 1962. 7 parishes reported that every Catholic woman in the parish was a member of the League!

It was most fitting that the year 1964, which saw the historic centennial celebrations of Confederation held on PEI, that we had the honor of hosting the 44th National CWL Convention in Charlottetown.

1966-St. Martin’s is the newest council. One of the highlights of the year was the setting up by 35 councils of leadership and public speaking courses.

1966-67. Many councils made an effort to organize groups to study the Liturgy and other documents of Vatican 11. In the words of the Holy Father at the close of Vatican II: “The hour has come in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect, and a power never before achieved. In the spirit of Ecumenism, many parish councils took part in the World Day of Prayer that we continue today. Donations were made to the new alcoholic treatment centre. St. Paul’s in Sturgeon organized. Members were reminded that, as an affiliated member of the World Union of Catholic Women’s Organization, the CWL of Canada is part of a worldwide movement of 40 million women in 65 countries!!

Island CWLers again tooted their horns when Dr. Iphigenie Arsenault was elected National President in 1970, later receiving the Order of Canada for her 70 years of work with the Canadian Red Cross.

Borden organizes in 1970.

In 1972 in a reaction to the national theme: The Role of Women in the Church a program was developed centered on women’s responsibility to those needing assistance in coping with special needs. Members also activated a survey of people who spend their lives in wheelchairs throughout the province. The survey received commendation from the Canadian Paraplegic Association.

In our continuing fight against abortion, each council in 1973 was urged to make an all-out effort to have individual letters written to their MPs demanding protection for the unborn child and protesting the further widening of the abortion laws. Velma Blacquiere, our eldest living Past Provincial President, was elected Diocesan President.

The re-organizing of Montague Council in 1976 and the new council of Cornwall in 1977 brought the number of councils to 51. A leadership workshop was conducted by Freda Muttart, Phyllis Quinn and Mona Doiron, all future provincial presidents.

In 1979 councils responded to raise funds for Vietnamese Refugees of $5,000 in less than 4 months! Letters were written to the PM, MLA’s and MPs disagreeing with their stand on marijuana and abortion.

In 1982 the National Convention is held in Charlottetown celebrating the 60th anniversary of CWL on PEI

During the presidential terms of Elaine Gallant and Helen McIsaac, new emphasis was placed on family life. It was thought that Christian values prove to be the best inheritance you can bequeath your children. Of current news is the bequeathing of $3,000 from Helen McIsaac’s estate for the PEI CWL Scholarship Fund. The 1st Annual Pilgrimage to Seven Mile Bay happened and exists to this day. Helen Turner becomes president in 1988, followed by Lorna MacDonald, as we are concerned about the death penalty, housing for the working poor, welfare assistance review and CPP Survivors benefits. As you see, the women of the CWL of PEI continue to focus on the downtrodden.

Past Provincial Presidents: If you are present when I mention your name, please stand momentarily.

When Myrna Murray occupied the provincial President’s chair, topics discussed and acted on were Sunday shopping, gambling, ethics within the healing ministry, sports competing with religious instruction on Sunday. During the presidential tenure of Mary Sullivan and Margaret Fitzpatrick, members studied Pope John Paul II’s letter on the Dignity of Women and supported Birthright and working women. Brae Council is reactivated. CWL position paper on the elimination of poverty and the Lay formation program are also brought to the membership.

During Agnes MacDonald and Marion Buote’s terms as president there was a call to celebrate Jubilee year, adopt a tree millennium project, interdisciplinary approach to palliative care, Fire in the Rose program on family violence and the WRAP program-white ribbons against pornography.

2000-National Convention held in Charlottetown with 944 delegates. One highlight was the pilgrimage to the designated Jubilee site of St. Dunstan’s Basilica.

A brief on anti-bullying, ethics of stem cell research, the gift of the Luminous Mysteries of the rosary are topics during Bertha Lawless’ and Judy Lewis’ presidencies. Listen to the Whispers video on ovarian cancer, White Ribbon Against Pornography campaign to increase age of consent from 14 to 18 are also actioned.

Mary Hagen and Marian Marshall’s terms saw resolutions on drug facilitated sexual assault and smoking in cars. Excitement was in the air with the Ark of the New Covenant pilgrimage in preparation for the Eucharistic Congress in Montreal. Fall conferences topics were on Alzheimer’s disease, autism, and abuse of older adults.

Topics during Zita Cameron and Barb MacFarlane’s tenure were palliative care home drug program, a workshop on Beatitudes and on Approaches to Social Justice. Members actioned the national theme of “for I was in prison and you visited me”, by their donations of time, money and effort. We celebrated Year of the Priest.

Louise Doiron and Irene Gallant’s presidencies focused was on seniors and their caregivers. Support of the Catholic Family Services Bureau has been ongoing and strong. The importance placed on a memorial service for the deceased CWL members at annual conventions was paramount.

Support was always given to the PEI Right to Life as well, providing them with an opportunity to address the delegation at conferences. Pornography Hurts postcards were made available to members.

2017 saw us once again hosting the National Convention, the 150th anniversary of confederation, with the BEST committee ever, backed by thousands of supportive members adding to the incredible success of this convention. The prayer room was highly praised and gave mbrs from coast to coast an opportunity to meditate, being one with Christ and the women of the Bible.

During Shirley Pierce’s term of office and following the national theme, Care for our Common Home; with the focus on water, a 2019 Action Plan was developed, asking everyone to commit to taking positive actions in our homes, parishes, and communities. Area meetings were held in 4 locations. The National Strategic Plan was introduced.

And now we come to our present provincial president’s term, our dedicated pro-life president, Gay Garvey, who is leading us so well into the NEXT 100 years! Hats off to these ladies and all those provincial presidents before them who have led us admirably over the 100-year life of the League on PEI.

For a lack of time, this one slide represents ALL the fun and patriotism we have had as sisters and brothers over 100 years and will continue to have for each other. It has been a blast!

Believe me, it was extremely difficult to narrow 100 years of dedicated and caring service to God and Canada into a 30-minute presentation! I beg forgiveness from you and everyone who came before you for slicing their life’s work down to mere nothing.

My hat goes off to Mrs Regina Murray who wrote, quite eloquently, the history of the League on PEI from 1921 to 1944.

The next 35-year history of the CWL on PEI was compiled by Helen Turner, Hilda Hickey, Carmelita McQuaid and Mary Sullivan. The history from 1982 to 2005 has no name associated with it but I thank that person(s) for her research and writing. And when it comes to Katherine Hughes, I thank God for a man whose name I have a difficulty pronouncing-Pa-dreg O Sianhail.

May I ask that we celebrate and honor every good and thoughtful deed of EVERY member of the League from 1921 to 2022 and ask Our Good and Gracious Lord and Our Lady of Good Counsel to bless our actions. This honor includes to a great extent the Spiritual Advisors, past and present who have walked this journey with us, in support, in guidance and in great affection.

From Pope Francis: Do not forget that your life is the greatest enterprise in the world. Never give up on people. Never give up on happiness, for life is an incredible show!

Remember that the first message of the Resurrection was brought to the disciples by women; so let us go forward to great accomplishments, greater victories for all that is good. We aren’t proficient at tooting our own horns, really, but we have so many blessings to be proud of!! Thank you for allowing me to honor you in this presentation.