

## Women's Institute a vital part of rural life

WI OFFERED SOCIAL LIFE FOR RURAL WOMEN

By: Andrea Geary

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(From left) Domain Women's Institute members Charlotte Kirkpatrick, Janice Harrison, Pat Manness and Carol Pasieczka

"For Home and Country" is the motto that's been at the heart of the Manitoba Women's Institute for over 100 years since the first charter was granted to the Morris WI in 1910.

While the non-profit organization's focus has shifted over the years, and membership dwindled, that motto is still proudly supported by women across Manitoba. The Manitoba WI is part of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada formed in 1919, and international organization, The Association of Country Women of the World that has members in over 70 countries.



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This photo was taken of the Domain WI members in 1958 for a Maclean's magazine article.

Current Manitoba WI president Ann Mandziuk said, after the initial group formed in Morris, 22 other communities held meetings and by 1911 they all had branches. In 1923 there were 137 recorded branches, in 1934 there were 176, and by 1980 that number was 112.

"Today we have 21 branches with approximately 330 members. We have two membership categories. You can belong to a branch in the community closest to you or you can be an individual member. People chose this category for a variety of reasons. In communities where branches have folded, women who want to stay members become individual members," she said.

### **Domain branch remains**

Branches that once flourished in Oak Bluff, Brunkild, Sanford and Portage la Prairie have ceased to exist and the only one remaining is the Domain branch which received its charter in 1947.

Domain WI president Janice Harrison said the

organization has about 13 members, including charter member Emma Enns, who is



SUPPLIED PHOTO

The Domain WI members are shown at a meeting in 1958.



ANDREA GEARY

The Domain WI members keep an album featuring photos and souvenirs of their activities.

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the only remaining member of the original founding group.

In the early 1950s the Domain members held many fundraising events such as bazaars, card parties and did catering for wedding banquets to bring in the money needed for an addition to the Domain community hall. They were successful in this and a new ticket office, cloak room, kitchen and a club room were added. They also equipped the kitchen and bought folding chairs, curtains, card tables, flooring and a piano.

As a Canada Centennial project, the members complied and published a local history book, *Down Memory Lane*. Pat Manness remembers taking part in a walkathon in 1969 to raise money to finish paying off the book's \$5,790 publishing cost.

"We walked from Silver Plains to Domain," she said, a journey of about 20 miles. Since that time, the Domain WI has also published three cookbooks.

Editor of the Manitoba WI's second history book, *The Great Human Heart*, that covers the period from 1980 to 2000 and editor of the MWI newsletter Dianne Kowalchuk joined the Rivers, Man. chapter in 1986.

"You would join as a young housewife and your mother or mother-in-law would bring you in," she said. Kowalchuk's mother Joyce Johnston served as provincial president from 1990 to 92.

Manness agreed, saying she was a newlywed when her mother-in-law introduced her to the Domain WI. She said her mother also later joined the organization.

Former MWI president Marion McNabb, a 50-year member in Minnedosa, said, as a young mother, her desire for social interaction with other women was what prompted her to first join the WI.

"I've moved from Strathclair and needed to spend time with women in the community."

"For a lot of us, the WI (meeting) was an outing," said Carol Pasieczka, who's belonged to the Domain WI for 43 years.

Attending the monthly WI meeting was the high point of some rural women's social calendar. This sense of camaraderie persists, according to Manness, although she acknowledges that increased access to transportation and communication has lessened the social isolation of most rural women.

"We've changed and the rural scene has changed," Manness said.

### **Dealing with social issues**

Some Manitoba WI branches have spent time researching and raising resolutions at the annual provincial conference. The organization also has the ear of the provincial government as WI executive meet with the Minister of Agriculture, and occasionally other Cabinet ministers, once a year to discuss issues of importance.

"Health care has always been of prime importance," Kowalchuk said. In fact the Canadian organization first began in 1897 when Adelaide Hoodless spoke to Ontario women about the dangers of impure milk following the death of her young son.

Concern about health care and education continue to be important to Manitoba WI members (see Selected resolutions).

"We still represent rural families," McNabb said.

In the past, provincial home economists worked with WI members to deliver educational courses to rural women.

The Domain WI normally doesn't put forward resolutions at the provincial conference but instead focuses on arranging educational speakers at its monthly meetings.

"We have a meeting to plan the coming year," Pasieczka said. A small booklet is printed that lists each month's topic. Speakers have included members' children who are working in various fields and also experts in specific areas such as genealogy.

"You want people to come to the meetings because they're interested in the topic,"

Harrison said.

They also tour local businesses and facilities including the Manitoba Law Courts building and Archives of Manitoba. Manness laughingly said one of the most interesting recent tours was of Emterra Environmental recycling and waste management facility in Winnipeg.

Harrison displayed an album in which photos, programs and other souvenirs show the Domain WI's activities over the past few years, including seminars held by the WI's Eastern Region in which the Domain branch belongs.

La Salle resident Charlotte Kirkpatrick joined the group about five years ago.

"We moved to La Salle and I wanted to meet people," she said.

Harrison said, despite advertising the Domain WI in the Macdonald-Headingley Recreation District's resource guide, it's fairly rare that they get a new member. However, they are pleased to welcome one new member this fall.

The WI members know that many younger women are now working outside the home and are often busy in the evenings with children's activities.

"We're also not very good at tooting our own horn," Kowalchuk said.

The Manitoba WI is presenting a Rural Women's Health Day focussing on mental health issues on Sat., Oct. 14 at the Minnedosa Community Conference Centre (63 Main St. N) in Minnedosa and on Sat., Oct. 28 in the Komarno Community Hall (76 2nd Ave.) in Komarno.

For more information on Manitoba WI, see [www.mbwi.ca](http://www.mbwi.ca)

### **Domain WI involved in community**

In this excerpt from *The Great Human Heart – A History of the Manitoba Women's Institute 1910-1980*, the founding of the Domain unit is described:

During the war years between 1939 and 1945, women in the Domain community organized a group to raise money for Red Cross work and to knit for the men overseas. A year or so after the war's end the group's reason for being came to an end and they wondered among themselves about projects they saw as necessary in their community.

One of them, who had been an Institute member elsewhere, suggested they organize a Women's Institute. Then a flourishing institute in a neighbouring community invited them to attend a W.I. rally. That was all the women of Domain needed. On a cold November day in 1946, 29 women gathered to make a formal application for a charter which they received January 8, 1947. Membership has been as high as 40 but usually hovers in the 30-member range. Numbers, at Domain, have never been as important as individual involvement, an involvement, particularly in community affairs, that earned them the name of "The Goingest Institute" in Maclean's magazine. The Maclean's article appeared in 1958.

— Staff

### **Manitoba WI selected resolutions**

Manitoba WI president Ann Mandziuk provided a list of some of the resolutions brought forward over the past 14 years:

- April 2003 – Wheat City's WI – "urge the Government of Manitoba to enact legislation banning the use of handheld and hands-free cell phones while driving motor vehicles".
- 2010 – Oakridge WI – "urge Canada's Immigration Department, at both federal and provincial levels, to actively publicize and impress upon would-be and new immigrants the content of Canada's Human Rights Laws, especially as they pertain to women and children, so that women's and children's rights are upheld to Canadian standards."

- 2014 – Woodmore WI – "urge the Manitoba Minister of Health to improve the availability of emergency health care for rural Manitoba resident".
  
- 2016 – Silverton WI – "urge Health Canada, Manitoba Health and Manitoba Family Services to develop and implement a policy to improve food security for northern and remote areas".

— Staff

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## The Headliner

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