Entry type: Organisation
Entry ID: AWE0792

The Country Women’s Association of Western Australia (Inc)

(1924 -)

Born	19240101, Western Australia
Occupation	Lobby group

Summary

The Country Women’s Association of the Western is a non-sectarian, non-party-political, non-profit lobby group and service association working in the interests of women and children in rural areas. Although ostensibly non-party-political, in practice the group has tended to bolster conservative politics and has supported traditional family roles for women. Historically, it was, however, also a progressive force in many ways, particularly in its encouragement of country women to take an active part in public affairs, and also in its lobby for and provision of services to rural areas.

Given its size and scope, it was arguably the most influential women’s organisation in Western Australia in the twentieth century.

Details

The formation of a country women’s association in Western Australia was first proposed in 1923 by Lady Forster (wife of the then Governor General). While visiting Perth she addressed a meeting of the National Council of Women at the Karrakatta Club about the recently formed New South Wales Association. A provisional committee was formed to set about establishing a Western Australian Association. Mabel Craven-Griffith sent hundreds of letters and travelled extensively to arouse interest in the proposal. The first meeting was held in Perth in early 1924 and by the end of the year four branches were operating. The first conference was held in March 1925, attended by the four founding branches, at which Craven-Griffiths was elected as the first state president. The original motto, ‘Honour to God, Loyalty to the Throne and Empire, Service to the Country, Through Countrywomen, for Countrywomen, by Countrywomen’ was also adopted.

The first objective of most branches was to establish a Rest Room, where children could be fed and tea made when women from rural areas had to visit town, and as a space for meetings. By 1934 the Association claimed 124 branches, of which 24 already had Rest Rooms. Many were also used for a wide array of other purposes, for example: baby clinics and kindergartens; card evening and other social events; meeting rooms for Guides, Scouts and other groups; wartime canteens; polling booths; and some also provide accommodation. From 1933 into the 1940s the CWA arranged for the distribution of free fruit to children in outback areas where it was not grown and was too expensive to purchase. They also arranged holiday camps for outback children.

From 1934 they produced their own newsletter, the Countrywoman of Western Australia, which became a formal monthly publication in 1940. They have also produced numerous cookbooks and local histories.

Membership reached a peak of 12,000 across about 250 branches in the mid 1950s, declining to 9,000 by 1970, although the number of branches had increased. From 1928, Younger Sets (for girls and young women) were also established, reaching a peak of 50 ‘Sets’ by 1942, but these steadily declined and were eventually disbanded in the early 1960s.

During the war years, as in other states, much of the Association’s energy was directed towards supporting the war effort. They initiated a War Relief Fund, which purchased materials that were made up into various garments for those in war-devastated areas by members of local branches. Some Rest Rooms were used as ‘spotting stations’ for Japanese attacks, often manned by CWA members during the day. They arranged accommodation, meals and entertainment for soldiers who were in training or transit. They launched a training scheme for girls to undertake work in rural areas where male labour was in short supply. They contributed to the CWA’s nationwide camouflage net making contract, as well as

making up various woollen garments and other items, as well as sheepskin vests .After the war they continued to send food parcels and clothing to Britain.

They assisted particularly with the Women's Land Army, the nationwide CWA camouflage net making contract (of which 20,000 were made). Thousand of pounds were raised and donated to purchase medical equipment for the army, a trainer plane for the RAAF and to provide meals and other 'comforts' for soldiers in training camps, as well as large donations to the Red Cross. Almost every branch had an Emergency World Circle which made up various woollen garments and other items, as well as sheepskin vests. They also supported 'Food for Britain
Nationwide, CWA members made over 150,000 camouflage nets, as well as sheepskin vests for flight crews, and numerous other woollen garments. They also established a 'Comforts Fund' for soldiers and sent clothing and bedding to women and children in London.

In the postwar years the Association's activities expanded considerably. In 1946 a Club House was rented in Perth to provide both meeting rooms and accommodation, and in 1953 separate headquarter were built. Numerous holiday homes were also purchased and since the 1960s it has also established aged care homes for members. Handicrafts had been a strong feature of the Association since the 1930s, with numerous statewide exhibitions being held. In the 1940s and 1950s various handicraft schools were organised and the central Handicraft Committee sent out numerous packages of materials and instructions to outlying branches. In the 1950s numerous Association choirs were established, and from 1953 statewide drama contests were held. In 1974, to celebrate the Association's golden jubilee, over two hundred histories of local branches were written and sent to the central office.

A variety of welfare activities were also undertaken, with a welfare fund having being established in 1934, to assist members in need or times of emergencies and natural disasters. Various funds have also assisted rural children to attend high school, and have been donated to causes both in Australia and abroad. In 1935 an Emergency Housekeeper Scheme was established. This became a separate in 1937, but in 1969 was taken over again by the Association. From the 1930s it established and ran several hostels for country school students who needed to live away from home in regional centres in order to attend high school. Most of these were transferred to government control in the 1960s.

The Association has also worked closely with numerous other organisations, particularly the Travellers' Aid Service. It has also had representatives a diverse range of groups, including, for example, the State Housing Authority, the Good Neighbour Council, the Keep Australia Beautiful Council, the Health Education Council, the Royal Flying Doctor Service, the WA Association for Children's Films and Television.

As of 2004 the Association's aim is: 'To improve the well being of all people especially those in country areas by promoting courtesy, co-operation, community effort, ethical standards and the wise use of resources.' It maintains holiday accommodation and retirement units; welfare and education funds; and an emergency home help service. Recently it has focussed particularly on the issue of aged care. Since 1988 it has run a rural information service, which monitors and disseminates information on rural services and assistance particularly relating to health, education and aged care.

Published resources

Book

The Many Hats of Country Women: The Jubilee History of the Country Women's Association of Australia, Stevens-Chambers, Brenda, 1997

Getting things done : the Country Women's Association of Australia, Country Women's Association of Australia, 1986

60 years of the Countrywoman of Western Australia : official publication of the Country Women's Association of W.A. (Inc.), 1934-1994., [1994?]

She's no milkmaid : a biography of Dame Raigh Roe, D.B.E., Erickson, Rica, Haywood, Rona and Oldham, Jan (sketches by), [1991?]

A History of the South Eastern Division CWA, 1953-1996, Money, Louie, 199?

Dalwallinu Branch History, 1974-1983, Country Women's Association of Western Australia, Dalwallinu Branch, 1984?

Salmon Gums CWA, 1938-1978, Country Women's Association of Western Australia, Salmon Gums Branch, 1979?

Country Women's Association of WA Inc., Wubin Branch History, 1974-1984, Country Women's Association of Western Australia, Wubin Branch, 1984?

A History of the Jibberding Branch of Country-woman's Association of Western Australia, 1974-1984, Bowen, Rose, 1984?

Country Women's Association, Buntine Branch History - 1974 to 1984, Country Women's Association of Western Australia, Buntine Branch History, 1984?

Pithara Branch, 1974-1984, Country Women's Association of Western Australia, Pithara Branch, 1984?

Carnarvon, November 1938- / C.W.A, W.A., Country Women's Association of Western Australia. Carnarvon Branch, 1993?

Grass Patch, 1952-2002, Country Women's Association of Western Australia. Grass Patch Branch, 2002

History of Southern Cross Branch of C.W.A., 1934-1971, Forrester, Erna L.

Silver Years in the Golden West, 1924-1949, Country Women's Association of Western Australia, 1949

Journal Article

CWA : celebrating 75 years., 1998

Newsletter

The Countrywoman of Western Australia, 1940-

Journal

South Coast Calling/CWA WA, Country Women's Association of Western Australia, Albany Branch, 1981?-1998

Edited Book

A Continuing Story, Kelly, Barbara [et. al.]., 1999

Her Name is Woman, Erickson, Rica, Gibbings, Beatrice, Higgins, Lilian, 1974

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

Australian Historic Records Register
Gairdner Country Women's Association

State Library of Western Australia
Papers, 1902-1966 [manuscript]

Papers 1990 [manuscript]

Records, 1948-1980 [manuscript]

Papers, 1887-1969 [manuscript]

Country Women's Association of Western Australia : collection of ephemera material

Papers, 1882-1966 [manuscript]

[Interview with Winifred Kastner] [sound recording] / [interviewed by Jean Teasdale]

Minute books, 1937-1954 [microform]

History of Yerecoin Branch of the Country Women's Association, [198-] [manuscript]

Country Women's Association of Western Australia records

Papers, 1877-1951 [manuscript]

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection
Dame Raigh Roe interviewed by Gail O'Hanlon in the Australians of the year oral history project [sound recording]

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