Entry type: Organisation
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Country Women’s Association of New South Wales, Canberra Branch

(1946 -)

Born	19460101, Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Community organisation

Summary

The Canberra Branch is the oldest of four located in the Australian Capital Territory. All four belong to the Monaro Group of the Country Women’s Association of NSW. The Canberra Branch was founded in 1946. By March 1953 the members had raised enough funds to build their own rooms on the edge of what was then the Central Business District of Canberra. In the early 1980s high-rise office blocks were being built next to the rooms and the branch was able to negotiate the sale of its lease to a developer who provided the branch with a large area of the ground floor of a new building on Barry Drive. The branch provides education, health and social welfare support to its community with the funds it raises and through its crafts and cooking.

Details

The Canberra Branch of the CWA was formed in 1946. At its first meeting on 20 November in the Lady Gowrie Services Hut in Manuka, Wilga Ryrie was elected president. The other founding office-bearers were Mrs A D Campbell, Mrs Jeremy, Mrs G Campbell, Mrs Garrett, Mrs R Reid, Mrs O Dixon, Mrs R N Hancock and Mrs L Baird.

Early activities included food parcels for England and donating books to the Bungendore Library, then run by the local CWA branch. The Canberra Branch started to provide afternoon teas at the annual sheep sales and the races (at a racecourse which is now under Lake Burley Griffin). Other afternoon teas, cake stalls and street stalls raised more funds. A ball raised money for the Seaside Homes and a fete was held at Government House, both within the Branch's first two years of existence.

As early as April 1948 the Branch decided to lodge an application for land on which to build rooms. An offer of a block of land in 1949 had to be refused due to insufficient funds. The Branch met in various places around Canberra, including in the premises of the Young Women's Christian Association. By April 1951 its building fund contained £530. Some of this had been earned from the sale of wool donated by graziers and some came from functions, including a fete at the Prime Minister's Lodge.

The CWA State Executive offered to lend the Branch £600 towards a building, estimated to cost £1360. Bertha Mac Smith, who had opened the Branch's first meeting in 1946, was invited to open the new building on Moore Street, Turner, on 14 March 1953. The final loan from the State Executive was £1000, at bank interest, paid off only two years later.

By 1959 the Branch had so many members and activities that extensions to the building were needed. At this time there were few alternatives for women in Canberra who were not in the workforce. Again, members' fundraising paid for the extensions.

Dame Pattie Menzies was Patron of the Branch from 1955 to 1962. Dame Zara Holt (later Dame Zara Bate) succeeded her in 1967. Alice Pedley held the position from 1974 to 1981, followed by Dorothy Buckmaster in 1986 to 1988 and Joan Huston from 1989.

By the early 1980s high-rise office blocks surrounded the CWA building and the desirability of its location was obvious to all. A committee of the Branch investigated how best to deal with the development pressures. In May 1985 their single-storey building was demolished. This time the Uniting Church Hall in Reid became the temporary home. The Branch was able to move into its new premises on Barry Drive in Civic on 6 February 1988. The opening was performed by the State President, Audrey Hardman OAM.

The Branch now awards grants to Year 12 students and young carers in Canberra. The funds come from the interest derived from investing the bequest to the Canberra Branch by the late Salme Koobakene who was a strong supporter of secondary and tertiary education, and showed a keen interest in the welfare of young carers in the Canberra community. The number of scholarships and carers' grants is dependent on the interest from the bequest in any given year. The interest is divided equally between the Canberra Branch and the Monaro Group. This Group uses its share to provide scholarships along similar lines. These scholarships are additional to scholarships provided by the Canberra Branch from normal funds. A nursing student at the University of Canberra also receives a grant from Canberra Branch funds each year.

More traditional Branch activities include knitting bootees and beanies for babies in the neo-natal unit in the Canberra Hospital and knee rugs for Canberra's hospice and its nursing homes. Members prepare bags for patients admitted to Canberra through its emergency departments. They collect goods for women in country areas affected by drought or floods. They make and bag biscuits several times a year for the St Vincent de Paul Night Patrol Van.

As well, they participate in the activities of the CWA of NSW, including those aimed at changing government policies at the State and Federal levels.

An international program has been a tradition first introduced by the CWA in 1938. The Canberra Branch's early food parcels for England were followed by silver coin donations for Holland. The first country of focussed study was New Zealand in 1947. More recently, members have helped with aid programs in Timor Leste, while Morocco is the latest focus.

Participants in the Canberra Branch's cultural program entertain every Social Day on the first Friday of the month. They can provide their own musical or dramatic presentations or invite in guest speakers and performers. The Canberra School of Music, the Canberra Youth Orchestra and the local Scottish dancers have provided particular enjoyment.

The three younger branches of the CWA in the urban Australian Capital Territory are known as Belconnen, Canberra Evening (formed in 1988) and Gunghalin. A Weetangera Branch existed but had closed before the Canberra Branch started in 1946. A Tharwa Branch was opened in 1957 but closed four years later.

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Book
Country Women's Association of NSW, Canberra Branch, Know Your CWA, 2011

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
History 1959 [manuscript]

Records of the Country Women's Association of Australia, 1945-1969, 2003 [manuscript]

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