

**Name of Branch:** Alida Women's Institute

**Location:** near Vegreville

**Organized:** Sept. 17, 1935

**Charter Members:** Mrs. Morton organized the branch; Mrs. Alida Cole, Mrs. R. Jonas, Mrs. Glen Shaw, Mrs. George Johnson, Mrs. George Cole, Mrs. M.W. Cassidy, Mrs. W. Smith, Mrs. Lemuel Cole, Mrs. Mark Atkinson, Mrs. E.H. Langpap, Mrs. Floyd Shaw, Mrs. Martin Cassidy, Mrs. H. Trenhaile, Mrs. R. Jonas, Mrs. L.A. Hulett, Mrs. G.F. Cole, Mrs. E. Gorsline, Miss Marvel Cole, Miss Marjorie Hulett, Mrs. Russell Gorsline, Mrs. Edith Selph, Mrs. W.G. Scott, Mrs. Glen Shaw, Mrs. M.C. Gorsline, Mrs. J.F. Leach, Mrs. M.E. Thomson, Mrs. J.A. Wilson, Mrs. S.B. Kerffer, Mrs. W. Smith, Mrs. J.S. Cassidy, Mrs. W.G. Cole



**First Executive:** Mrs. Alida Cole (Hon. Pres.), Mrs. R. Jonas, pres; Mrs. Glen Shaw, first vice-pres; Mrs. George Johnson, second vice-pres; Mrs. George Cole, sec-treas; Mrs. M.W. Cassidy, auditor; Mrs. W. Smith, auditor; directors: Mrs. Floyd Shaw, Mrs. Martin Cassidy, Mrs. L.A. Hulett, Mrs. J.S. Cassidy.

**Disbanded:** n/a; last deposited minutes with PAA are for 1957

**Activities:** Although the branch seems to have started in 1935, the first Minute book deposited with the PAA starts in 1937. The patchy deposit history here is not unusual. For most of the AWI's history, records were simply passed from person to person and sometimes were discarded partially or completely during the course of the branch history.

In 1937, the Alida WI had 29 members and seemed to be getting 17-19 women out per meeting, which was a healthy number, given the many committees and positions that needed to be filled in an active branch. Once attendance was down to 6-10 women per meeting, then people began to tire out, sometimes holding several positions at once; this was often the breaking point for the smaller WI branches, leading to a decision to rest or disband.

In January 1937, the month when each WI branch planned its year's activities, including the themed papers that would be given, Alida committed to the following: making up a mother's bundle [blanket, shirt, powder and soap would be bought]; holding a bazaar and bake sale; using their funds to buy the material and notions for the articles to be made; preparing the articles to show at the annual Convention; studying English; doing some sewing for a woman who was very ill; entertaining the elderly women of the district; putting on a play in November; making gifts for Christmas cheer; holding a shadow social; and holding a card party at the hall, in addition to a bridge and whist drive (plus entertainment), all in order to generate some

funds. This ambitious program likely would have been fulfilled that year, as were similar programmes spelled out each January by hundreds of other AWI branches across the province.

This indeed would likely have been the historical pattern for Alida WI – it was a very active branch involved in all areas of community life. But the War intervened. Although all WIs contributed to the war effort, Alida's Minutes for the period 1939 to 1945 (and for several years afterward) are very detailed and give a good idea of what many AWI branches chose to do when helping not only military personnel, but needy individuals and communities in Britain and Europe. From the vantage point of more than ½ a century later, it is easy to discount the projects as very small and the sums of money as paltry, but at the time, these were well appreciated. All of the women in the AWI had just come through an economic depression and drought that had dampened or destroyed the hopes for many settlers on the prairies for over a decade. Most of the women had no paid work and cash was very hard to come by. Many had relatives serving either in the armed forces, or family in Britain and Europe who were directly affected by the War, so the emotional stress must have been high. What is more, the outcome of the War was by no means assured, as these women took every spare moment to do what they could to ensure victory.

#### **1940**

April - The Alida WI war effort starts. After having read an article called "Boxes for Boys," the branch decides to send a box to boys who have no family. Then they begin collecting old woollen clothing for refugees, followed by a letter to the Dept. of Health for particulars about getting refugee children; they receive application forms.

August - they are asked by FWIC to donate 5 cents per member for war work – they agree to take it out of their existing fund with the women putting the 5 cents back later; they are asked to save their Crisco, Chipso, and Camay wrappers for war purposes; they also decide to send \$5 to the AWI war fund; they begin to make quilts for the Red Cross.

#### **1941**

February – their membership has shrunk to only 20 women; the Red Cross makes increasing demands for quilts, so the women drop their practice of giving a theme paper each meeting in order to work on quilts at the meetings [Note – they start giving the papers again in 1942 – this is a WI branch that takes their own education and improvement seriously]; they contact the Singer Sewing Machine Company for a demonstration; someone visits the Red Cross in Calgary and reports back on their war work; they seem to be making 3 or 4 quilts a month – and only about 17 people out per meeting; they do not seem to be having as many money-making events – likely not enough time.

June – Mrs. Morton has been named Director of Institute War Work – she asks for "comforts" for the merchant marine.

August – there is a need for farm honey and marmalade for the Red Cross; they also vote to start collecting chocolate bars and cigarettes; they are knitting afghan squares for war relief.

September - they decide that members can contribute on their own to the War Emergency Fund; they decide to fill a "Ditty Bag" for sailors.

October – Provincial Vice-President, Mrs. Morton, visits; they vote ten cents per member to send to the Federated Women's Institute to help purchase a mobile kitchen for overseas; Mrs. Morton asks them to set a monthly goal for Red Cross work e.g. a pair of mittens or socks.

November – They vote to collaborate with other branches on the Red Cross request from Mrs. Morton; they finish an afghan for the Red Cross and start another; they have completed and delivered their ditty bag; they go to a member's house to tie a quilt and cut blocks for another; donate 20 cans of jam and honey to Red Cross; they make \$5 from a travelling basket [a basket that circulates among members, who each contribute some food item or useful article – the baskets are then auctioned off and the money used for WI projects]; so they decide to do the travelling basket again and donate the money to "Milk for Britain."

December - Each month they send a "soldier's parcel" to one of the local boys away at war.

## **1942**

January – advise their members to fill all their sealers with fruits and veg in order to keep their own houses healthy – this is also war work.

March – two members asked to attend the next Red Cross meeting; they have finished a helmet and mitts for the merchant marine and vote to add another soldier to their parcels list; first aid classes are explained and people volunteer; they seem to be completing 1-3 tied quilts each month; they start to get some feedback – "Thanks" from one of the soldiers, a note from someone in the merchant marine to send grey socks rather than blue, which fade, and another from the navy for smaller quilts; they donate \$10 to the Red Cross and seem to have dedicated the \$5 money received for each Travelling Basket to the "Milk for Britain Fund." They have several destinations agreed upon for their work and are assiduous in honouring their commitments: e.g. ditty bags go to the Navy League.

July – they decide not to make more afghans, as new wool is expensive and afghans are not as serviceable as blankets – they have been collecting old woollen blankets and garments to send away to be made into new blankets.

September – Alida WI receives a letter from Mrs. Morton asking them to donate the money for a can of jam this year for Britain and to fill two Ditty Bags in Oct and Nov; they decide to each donate 50 cents for jam for Britain; they hear a paper on handicrafts around the world and an account of the hundreds of air raids sustained by the city of Hull in England; NOTE – due to war-time restrictions, they decide not to serve a lunch at the next dance; they start to ask two women to bring sandwiches to the meetings in order to help with the butter rations.

November – increased pressure from Mrs. Morton to fill more ditty bags as the need is greater than ever; asked to make a garment each month for the Red Cross and any other sewing they can; they get a reminder and a plea each month from the provincial President and Mrs. Morton to continue their war efforts, especially for the navy and merchant marine.

### 1943

February – they decide to send a Ditty Bag every 3 months; they vote to replace the parcels to soldiers with cigarettes because of the cost of postage – each member to donate 10 cents for cigarettes; they receive letters of thanks for the Ditty Bags and parcels and cards.

April - Red Cross is handing out parcels for people to take home and sew.

### 1945

January - they are still making quilts and sending cigarettes and money donations to the Red Cross, but the pace seems less frenetic and they are concentrating on writing and reading educational papers each month once again, as well as maintaining correspondence with WIs in England. They have 24 members, but only about 12 come out to meetings.

June – they receive a note re contents of Ditty Bags – please stop including matches, cherries, coffee, soups of any kind and shaving lotion; please replace tooth powder with tooth paste – would appreciate knitted wear and Christmassy feel to contents and letters; Alida decides to stop bringing cake to meetings because of sugar rationing.

August – it is the “birth” month of the branch and they celebrate it every year with special entertainment and generally a picnic; this year, they decide that everyone will donate 50 cents for jam and the amount will be topped up to \$15 from their bank account.

October – with the War winding down, Alida WI switches to donating clothing for Europe; there is not such a demand for quilts as previously; they donate \$10 for the “Xmas Cheer for Britain” Fund

### 1946

January – Alida WI moves back to business as usual; they are planning to hold a series of card parties to raise funds.

While you read the above account (taken from the Minutes) of how one WI joined the war effort, keep in mind that they accomplished this astounding quantity of work while still fulfilling all their other AWI duties and community projects:

- working to raise awareness of Cancer and serving as one of the Cancer Fund’s principle fund-raisers in Alberta;
- taking courses from the Dept of Agriculture on various home economics topics;
- researching and presenting papers each month on subjects as diverse as Citizenship and Education;

- organizing weekly reports on WI activities to be sent to the local newspaper and radio outlets;
- raising funds for the Red Cross;
- holding fund-raising dances;
- distributing health, wellness and safety materials like “Why Vaccinate your Child?”
- organizing contests and small gifts to keep one another involved in the Institute work
- donating money each year for a Christmas Cheer Fund – serving those who are needy;
- taking First Aid classes and volunteering to provide First Aid services at community events.

**Sources:** PAA. 91.304. Minutes of Meetings, Alida. 1937-1942; 1949-1957; 1952-54; 1955-57; 1937 Convention Report, p. 20; PAA 2007.0380/55 Box 2. AWI Branches Vol.1