

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

**Location:** Alliance, which is located just off Hwy 36, between Hwys 12 and 13.

**Organized:** March 27, 1913, at the school by Mrs. Anna Fleming

**Charter Members:** Mrs. Anna Fleming, Olive Fleming, Mrs. Ricker, Mrs. Standbridge, Mrs. W.P. Smith

**First Executive:** Mrs. Anna Fleming, president

**Disbanded:** current in 2021

**Activities:** [Note that, unless otherwise indicated, most of the following has been extracted from pp 38-41 of *In the Bend*]. The Argyle Women's Institute was one of the first established in the province. It met on the first Thursday of each month. The women saw great advantage in these meetings because they learned a great deal from one another and were comforted by the companionship of other women. In those early days they were visited often by women from the district just to the south: South Bend. So, the decision was made to alternate meetings between Argyle district and South Bend district. At the annual meeting in 1915, it was decided to officially name the branch "Argyle Women's Institute"; at this time, there were 40 members.



In these early days, transportation was a problem and distances were great. Women were taken by their husbands to the meetings in democrats, buggies, or even, on rare occasions, the stone-boat. A few rode horseback rather than miss the gatherings. The WI was about the only gathering in those days where women could really get together and it was a very bright spot in the month. It was the one place where women could see all their neighbours. There was always a program that was well worth listening to and women always came away with good ideas.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, isolation was a real problem. Neighbours were often 3 miles apart; mailboxes were often just as far away. Mail was delivered twice a week. No one had telephones. So, WI day was a big day for many women. To give an idea of how popular these meetings were, at one meeting at the home of Mrs. C. Louis Adley, 60 women were present along with several small children, and their drivers, who usually did their visiting in the barn. Mrs. Adley's living room was only 13 by 16 feet, so some of the women sat on the steps of the open stairway.

Like other WIs, Argyle was very active during World War I. It raised twelve hundred dollars by holding chicken suppers, bazaars, Red Cross teas at the Argyle School, and taking donations. Sedgewick was chosen as the distribution centre for knitting, clothes, and war relief.

Argyle WI was also responsible for many of early community services. In 1917, plans for securing and maintaining a district nurse were underway and, owing to the high rate of infant mortality in Alberta, the Institute chose as their slogan for 1918, "Save the Babies." In addition to baby clinics, the WI sponsored school clinics. In 1928, 94 children were examined for adenoids and tonsils and 92 for tooth decay. "In 1956, Argyle WI donated \$100 to the medical clinic and then raffled a pig which S. Wold had donated, enabling to donate another \$100" [personal correspondence from Clara Johnson to Elizabeth Lefsrud, 1974].

The first of many short courses was held at Moe's Hall in July 1918. But the women were interested in having a place of their own for Institute activities. They decided to pay \$100 to have a small building moved to the Cheeseman lot in Alliance, which the women used as a Rest Room when in town for shopping. In 1919, they secured a room from Mr. Cheeseman, the Alliance Baker, and used that room as the Rest Room. Women not only used this Room to wait in while the men finished shopping, but library books were left here and exchanged as well. A WI Rest Room was opened in Alliance in 1925. Mrs. Freeman kindly offered a room at the back of her Millinery shop, with the WI ladies donating furnishings.

These early years were busy ones for Argyle WI; in 1919, they also organized a girls club called the Excelsior Girls Club. Another aspect of the community service provided by Argyle WI was its relief work for the needy, which was especially important in the 1930s.

In 1920, the Institute decided to start a Public Debating League, with the subjects chosen by a WI committee. The WI gave \$10 in prizes to students from the surrounding schools. It was also in 1920 that the WI arranged for a temperance campaign, appointing committees to canvas for votes and for funds to carry on the work.

In 1921, the WI took on the maintenance of the cemetery. Cemetery days were organized each year, where community members would clean up the grounds. In 1940, the WI put gravel on the roadway through the cemetery using six four-horse teams and wagons to haul gravel.

By 1929, the WI was so popular that there were now seven Institutes and three Girls' Clubs in the district. During the Great Depression in the 1930s, the Argyle WI was busy supplying warm clothing for children of needy families. It was very difficult for women's institutes branches to carry on their work during the Depression. No one had any money; there were no crops. Nevertheless, in 1937 they managed to have nine full meetings. In 1938, Argyle WI celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary; at the final meeting of the year in December, there were 15 paid-up members, they had sent nine fruit baskets to the sick, they had Christmas baskets made up to send to the needy, and they had \$33 left over.

It was during the 1930s, that WI began its radio work. In 1932, Mrs. H. Montgomery, the provincial president, spoke for the first time on Institute work over station CJCA. It was also during 1930s that The Alberta Women's Institutes began to contribute to a Cancer Fund. The purpose was to pay for radiation sticks in the treatment of cancer. In those days, 30 years before the advent of Medicare, most people could not afford such treatment. Many died for

want of medical care. So, the assistance of the Women's Institutes in paying for cancer treatment was significant. In 1939, AWI gave \$2000 to the president of the University Hospital for the purposes of purchasing radium. The objective for the following year was to raise enough money to buy an ambulance to be sent overseas for the care of the wounded.

As part of their war effort, the Argyle WI put on a play in 1940, with the proceeds going to the Institute Emergency War Fund. The Institute maintained a close working relationship with the Red Cross during World War II. In 1941 alone, it sent 28 quilts, 38 sweaters suits of underwear and other articles of clothing to the Red Cross, along with many pairs of socks for adults and children. Since most of the young men in the district were in the services, the Argyle WI send a Christmas package to each one who was overseas.

In 1944, for the first time, Home Economist were stationed throughout the province. Argyle WI made full use of their services. Fifty women were present to hear Miss Esther Anderson of Stettler speak about nutrition and canning methods.

In the fall of 1945, the Women's Institute started a new venture: providing lunches for country auction sales. The first sale was that of Mr. H. Swartz at \$.20 per bag, with \$55 being realized from the sale. In 1946, the women of Argyle WI again to think of a suitable memorial to those who had fallen during the War. It joined with other community groups to build the Alliance Memorial Arena. But it also began to think of re-purposing its library as a memorial.

Library work had always been important for Argyle WI; indeed, the Library is among its best-known accomplishments. In 1922, Mrs. S. K. Johnson was appointed librarian when 15 new books were donated to the Women's Institute. This first library consisted of books donated by members and circulated among themselves. It grew to a Rest Room library, helped by a travelling library from the Department of Extension, University of Alberta – then to a permanent library building: an old schoolhouse, which was moved into town. In 1936, it was decided to make the Institute library available to patients in the local hospital. Other organizations helped in library development and a Memorial Library Fund was established.

In 1947, a motion was passed that the Argyle WI take steps to form a library in Alliance, which would be called the "WI Memorial Library." The first meeting in the new Memorial Library rooms was held on February 26, 1948, with 18 people present. It was decided to move the Institute War Building from behind Spady's Store to the back of a lot now occupied by the library building. In March, at the 35<sup>th</sup> birthday meeting of the WI, the official opening of the Women's Institute Memorial Library took place and books were loaned for the first time. In 1949, a committee was appointed to buy necessary articles for the library and to spend the \$40 donated by T. Eatons Ltd.

"By 1973, the Library had about 3000 books, a kitchen equipped with dishes and a propane stove, a piano, and seating for 30 people. It was a convenient place for small community gatherings, pre-school health clinics, and WI meetings. In a small town, a library would be unable to operate but for the hours of volunteer help. Besides that, the WI paid for the general

upkeep; in 1974, this was about \$200 a year. In 1973, there was a welcome addition of a propane heating unit, but the number of books had increased to the point that there was no room left for more shelves! After a study by a committee, other groups were alerted and it was decided that a recreation centre should be built for the use of senior citizens, with a workshop for crafts, and a library as part of the complex. This was underway in 1974.” [personal correspondence from Clara Johnson to Elizabeth Lefsrud, 1974].

Women’s Institute branches, although operating primarily at the local level, are always mindful of the world outside their own community. In 1950, Argyle WI contributed to the Salvation Army, to the international delegate fund to enable a delegate to be sent to the ACWW conference at Copenhagen, to the constituency fund, to the crippled children’s hospital, and to the cancer society.

### **Notable Members:**

#### **Book of Remembrance:**

- [Maria Bates](#) married in 1886 in England, where she owned and managed an exclusive hotel for many years. The family emigrated to the Alliance district in Alberta in 1914. Maria joined the Argyle WI in 1916, serving as president for 19 years and as Constituency Convenor several times. She inspired others with her integrity, enthusiasm and belief in the aims of the Institutes.
- [Nettie Clough](#) was born in 1904 in Minnesota; she attended teachers college in Camrose. She and her husband settled in the Argyle district near Alliance until 1966. She joined the WI in 1954 and was known for her wit and energy in knitting and crochet.
- [Anna Fleming](#) was born in 1867 in Ontario, where she taught school until her marriage in 1887. The family moved to the Alliance district in 1910. Having been a WI member in Ontario, Anna decided to organize a branch in Alliance, the Argyle WI; she became its first president in 1913. At the first provincial conference in 1915, Anna was elected the first Vice-President of the AWI, a post she held for seven years, travelling many miles visiting WIs in that capacity. When the family moved to Duncan, BC, in 1922, she joined the WI there.

Mrs. Fleming was active in many spheres. She served as a Trustee of the local school board, was an elder of the Presbyterian Church, a Sunday School teacher and president of the Ladies Aid. While at Duncan, the Presbyterian Church gave her a Life Membership in recognition of her services. In the early pioneer days, when doctors were few and far between, Anna could be relied on to help in cases of sickness or accident.

She was a “kindly gentlewoman with a genius for making friends. Her patient understanding and quiet sympathy enshrined her in the hearts of all who knew her” (*Book of Remembrance I*).

- [Mary Heffel](#) was born on PEI of a United Empire Loyalist family in 1876. After her marriage, she and her husband farmed for a while in Idaho before moving to the Alliance district in 1907. A pioneer woman in every sense, Mary raised seven children, provided a home for student ministers, and served as a Sunday School teacher. Mary was a conscientious and hard-working WI member who believed that the WI was an organization for betterment and uplift in the community.
- [Clara Johnson](#) was born in 1897 in New Brunswick; her family moved to the Argyle district in 1907. After completing Normal School, Clara taught for most of her adult life in the area. She was a motivating factor behind the establishment of the Argyle WI Library, serving as Secretary-Librarian for many years. Clara was an active person, enjoying curling and discus as well as whist and bridge and travelling in the summer holidays.
- [Minerva Kenny](#)'s family moved from Ontario to the Alliance district in 1908. Minerva was a member of the Argyle WI for 35 years, serving in most of the positions during that time and as a faithful volunteer at the WI Library. Minerva's special WI task was organizing catering at auction sales. Her love of flower gardening was a testament to her love for the soil.
- [Muriel Remick](#) was born in 1901 in New Hampshire; her family moved to the Alliance district in 1906. After school, Muriel went to Alberta College in Edmonton for vocal and music training. After her marriage, she was very active in the community, joining the Argyle WI in 1913 and remaining a member for 70 years. She held every office in the branch, including treasurer for seventeen years, and enjoyed taking her turn as librarian. Muriel was also a member of the UFWA, served for several years on the school board, was a member of the UCW and the local branch of the Legion. In 1977, Muriel received an Award of Merit from the Cancer Society in recognition of the many years she had convened that campaign.
- [Florence Schofield](#) was born in Lloydminster in 1907; she joined Argyle WI in 1953. She gave freely of her time and talent in the WI Library, in collecting used clothing, in catering and in providing entertainment when required. An ardent handicrafter, Florence could be counted on to enter competitions.
- [Margaret Spady](#) was born in Kansas, but raised on a farm north of Castor. After school, she attended Mount Royal College in Calgary. In 1937, Margaret and her husband moved to a ranch in the Battle River Valley; Margaret joined the Argyle

WI in 1954. Over her 30 years as a member, Margaret served in all the leadership roles, some many times. She believed in the aims of the Women's Institutes and devoted many hours to the WI's work.

- [Edna Towers](#) was born in the district and was a member of Argyle WI for twenty years, during which time she served in all the leadership roles. Edna and her husband were staunch supporters of the WI Library, devoting many volunteer hours there. In addition, Edna was admired for her contribution to the Cancer Society, serving as convenor of the campaigns for many years.

**Life Membership:**

- [Olive Fleming](#) was born in Ontario in 1891; the family moved to Alberta in 1910. She was a charter member of Argyle WI, which her mother organized in 1913. She was member until her death in 1953. Olive was a faithful and energetic WI worker, organizing a WI Girls Club in 1917 and serving as its president and in other capacities. "Olive's personal life was characterized by loyalty to high ideals and love and devotion to her family and inside circle of friends. Shortly before her death in 1953 she was given a Life Membership in the Alberta Women's Institutes by Argyle W.I. as an expression of their love for her."

**Sources:** Alcorn, Phyllis M., ed. *In the Bend of the Battle: A History of Alliance and District*. Alliance, Alberta. 1976; Pottage, B., ed. *As the Wheel Turns: A History of Merna and District*. Sedgewick, AB: Community Press, 1971; PAA 2007.0380/55. Box 2 AWI Branches Vol. 1 [no date]; *Book of Remembrance* Vol. I, II, III; *Life Membership Book; Home and Country* (Summer 2005): 12; PAA 2007.0380/55 Box 2. AWI Branches Vol.1; [AWI About \(May 2021\)](#); private correspondence from Clara Johnson to Elizabeth Lefsrud, 1974.