

Name of Branch: Ray Lake Women's Institute

Location: Demmitt, on the border of Alberta and British Columbia, on Hwy 43, about 77km northwest of Grande Prairie

Organized: 1960

Charter Members: Mrs. Annie Bartsch, Mrs. Susie Bartsch, Mrs. Margaret Bully, Mrs. Brita Harpe, Mrs. Mary Kaplan, Mrs. Margaret Keeping, Mrs. Joan Keeping, Mrs. Dorothy Keeping, Mrs. Elizabeth Peters, Mrs. Emma Sipe, Mrs. Joyce Sipe, Mrs. Kay Schwartz

First Executive: Mrs. Margaret Bully, pres; Mrs. Emma Sipe, vice-pres; Mrs. Dorothy Keeping, sec-treasurer

Disbanded: current in 1997



Activities: In her 1974 Branch History sent to Elizabeth Lefsrud, Brita Harpe writes that the first order of business for the Ray Lake WI in 1960 was to buy “the now empty schoolhouse with 3.03 acres and the teacherage from the county to be used as a community hall. Thru the years and together with the later-formed square dance group, the Ray Lake Dancers, this hall was improved – enlarged, got a new roof, power, and propane heating. For this we also had help from the county with grants. We are still working on it.”

Like all WI branches, Ray Lake had a number of money-making schemes for supporting their activities: “card parties, quilt and other raffles, bingos, family-fun nights, dances, rummage-sales, bake sales, [they] sold donated articles at a local auction, [had] bazaars, sold vanilla, catered to weddings, rented the hall out for elections and a civil defense course.”

The AWIs served a vital service for their communities, in providing opportunities for all age groups to socialize together, something that is less and less evident in today's society. Brita describes how this aspect of the WI's work evolved in Demmitt over time. The WI had “annual Christmas parties; first it was separate ones for the children, the teens and a supper, mostly with speakers from outside, for the adults. Since our community is much smaller now, we have one community Christmas with a pot-luck supper, a program put up by and for the children, a sing-song and later dancing for all. Everybody may invite friends. For the last Christmas concert, we had 105 people, the most we have ever had in our little hall!”

In addition to the Christmas party, the WI organized “an annual picnic and wiener roast for the children before the school closes for the summer holidays. In the beginning it was a big picnic with different races for all ages and people from outside coming to visit, but now it is mostly a wiener roast with the bigger children and their friends.”

One of the least recognized roles for the AWI is its advocacy for rural communities with the Alberta government. Ray Lake WI asked for several years for gravel to improve the “road that leads off the highway into Demmitt and on which the school bus travels daily, bringing our children to and from school. We have been fighting and writing from councillor to minister and even the Premier to have the hill straightened out – it had two curves in it - in September 1964, this situation had gotten so far, that we were forced to put an ultimatum to the then councillor, Mr. Stickney, that unless he gave the order for the brush on the sides of the road to be cleared away before Sept. 20, 1964, we women would do it ourselves, with our children, signs and a lot of publicity! We would then send the bill to the county, proceeds to go to the AWI. It worked, and we got the hill cleared. In 1969 we had another councillor, Mrs. O. Stickney, and at long last got the hill straight.”

But, the WI was not always successful in its attempts to make their community a safe place. Mrs. Harpe says “we tried to get a better guarded railway crossing – there had been a number of fatal accidents in a relatively short time – but did not succeed to more than promises and one new sign!”

Sources: [PAA 91.3041/ 10 AWI Branch Listing and Contact 1944-1961 [for Districts 1,2,3,4,5]; Cole, Catherine and Judy Larmour. *Many and Remarkable: The Story of the Alberta Women's Institutes*. Edmonton: Alberta Women's Institutes, 1997. 125-131; Personal correspondence with Elizabeth Lefsrud from Mrs. Brita Harpe, 1974]