

Name of Branch: Sylvan Lake Women's Institute

Location: Sylvan Lake, is located 25 kilometres (16 mi) west of Red Deer, accessed from either Hwy 11 or 11A. The town lies on the southeast edge of Sylvan Lake a popular lake resort.

Organized: 1925 by Mrs. H. R. MacDougall of Penhold

Charter Members: Mrs. Faulkner, Mrs. McCrimmon, Mrs. Dingwall, Mrs. Appleton, Mrs. Mann, Mrs. Jamieson, Mrs. McKechnie, Mrs. McCaskill, Mrs. Steele, Mrs. Bardwell, Mrs McWhitter, and Mrs. Lindsay.

First Executive: Mrs. H.S. Mann, pres; Mrs. M.B. Faulkner, first vice-pres; Mrs. H.H. Jamieson, second vice-pres; Mrs. F.D. McCrimmon, sec-treas; Mrs. A. McCaskill, Press Reporter; Mrs. J.A. Dingwall, Mrs. A.M. Steele, Mrs. J. McKechnie, directors

Disbanded: still active in 1997

Activities: The Sylvan Lake WI was an active branch, best known for its building and maintaining a large pier on the lakeshore near the Boathouse from 1928 until 1953. Since Sylvan Lake was such a popular resort, this business of having a good pier was important. In "Sylvan Lake Piers and Boathouses," Michael Dawe writes about early attempts to get a viable pier for the town:

The first piers were small, rather shaky affairs, put up in the summertime by the local cottage owners and campers. The Loiselles family built an early floating boathouse, out in the water in a rudimentary marina, which the Loiselles created by the family-owned Alexander Hotel (now the site of the Golf Course parking lot).

This early boathouse had to be dragged to shore each fall before freeze-up.

In 1913, Mr. Joe McCluskey, a colourful local businessman, built a large pier and a small boathouse east of the end of Main (Centennial) Street.

The boathouse contained small boats and canoes which were available for rental to tourists.

The pier provided lake access and dockage for those rentals.

McCluskey also used the pier as a dock for a motor launch from which he provided tours of the Lake.



Unfortunately, McCluskey's building skills did not match his ambitions. Some of the sections of his pier were rather unstable and occasionally fell into the water, with whoever happened to be walking on them at the time.

The boathouse, although two-storey, was also quite rudimentary.

A concession stand was created in a lean-to annex on the east side of the structure.

In the spring of 1928, the newly-formed Sylvan Lake Women's Institute initiated a project to build a large new public pier to replace McCluskey's effort.

A significant financial contribution came from the Federal Government, who accepted the W.I.'s contention that Sylvan Lake was a navigable waterway.

Meanwhile, J.P. Simpson, a C.P.R. station agent, bought the McCluskey boathouse. He had the old structure hauled out to the Palmer farm, west of the town.

He then built a large, new boathouse at the foot of the W.I. Pier. This new building was ready for business when the Pier officially opened on July 12th, 1928.

The W.I. Pier proved to be a big boost to tourism at the Lake. In turn, Simpson's new boathouse did a booming business, not only with the boat and canoe rental but also the large concession stand included in the building.

In 1938, another pier was constructed to the west, in line with Sylvan's Main Street.

A piece was built at the end to connect this new structure with the W.I. pier.

Although the AWI is a non-partisan organization, the building of the Pier had a close tie-in with federal politics. The story is told in "History of the Sylvan Lake Pier," by Michael Dawe in the Red Deer Express:

As Sylvan Lake became more and more popular, the newly formed Women's Institute began a push to have a sturdier, public pier constructed. A key person in this effort was Mrs. Catherine Dingwall, who operated a boarding house with her husband James on what is now 46 (Sesame) St. (the current Hazzard County Inn).

The Dingwalls were well-connected politically. They were able to elicit support for the proposed W.I. pier from R.B. Bennett, national leader of the Conservative Party and a member of parliament from Calgary.

Normally, the leader of the opposition in Ottawa does not have a large influence on the decisions of the federal government. However, in the 1920's, the national Liberals were governing in a minority.

Thus, Bennett, along with Alfred Speakman, Red Deer's MP and a prominent member of the Progressive Party, were able to get the federal government to contribute funding to the project.

Nevertheless, with another federal election pending, Bennett was not going to pass on an opportunity to make political points with the completion of the new pier. Consequently, at the official opening ceremonies on July 18, 1928, it was R.B. Bennett who cut the ribbon.

Assistance was also provided by George Wilbert Smith, the local MLA who represented the provincial government and Alfred Speakman, the local MP.

In 1938, another pier was built out from the end of Main Street. It was connected to the W.I. pier with a cross pier, lined with benches so that people could sit and enjoy the views of the lake.

Ice damage was an ongoing problem. In 1951, the piers were badly damaged in the spring break-up. While interim repairs were done, the federal government constructed a new pier in 1953.

It is uncommon to have personal stories connected with the building of community infrastructure, but Brenda Allan has written a charming reflection on her own feelings about summers at Sylvan Lake as a child and the role played by the WI Pier:

The thick wood of the boards sloped gradually up and over the sand and the seaweed sludge at the edge of the lake and levelled off over the water. The 4 x 4's forming the edge of the pier were held in place by huge iron bolts. When I first toddled along that wooden walkway those timbers were knee-high. The last time I saw the pier intact was on a



(An aerial view of the pier and town of Sylvan Lake)

late-night stroll in 1972 to say good-bye to friends.

The structure was an integral part of the life of the town. When walking the pier you could go up the whole length, double back, cross over to the south arm and continue on down to the Boathouse where there was a concession at one end selling ice cream, cotton candy, hotdogs and postcards.

On a hot summer day we kids would grab our towels from the line where we had hung them to dry the day before and head out to walk the three blocks to the lake. Most times we were barefoot or if we could find our flip-flops (or thongs as they were called then), we wore those.

Anyway, the bottoms of our feet were as tough as leather. Sometimes we took a couple of empty pop bottles along. That way we could stop at Long's confectionary, just past the bank, and trade them in for black jaw-breakers or the paper straws sealed at both ends that held powdered sugar, flavoured lime or strawberry. Then it was on past the hardware store, the movie theatre, the Dutch bakery, the pool hall and Kanten's 5 & 10¢ store.

When I got older I would usually cross the street before the pool hall because only the older boys and men were allowed in there. Sometimes they would stand in the doorway holding a pool cue. It made me feel shy and nervous. So I would cross the street and pass Turner's Meat Market and then the hotel which was the last building on the main street. The barroom that was attached sometimes revealed a dark and mysterious interior if the door was opened and an odd odour would waft out, a blend of stale tobacco smoke, bitter beer and alcohol.

After that we could cross the road that ran along the lakeshore, scoot through the sharp grass growing up through the sand ... and we had arrived ... at the beach.

Not every day was a carefree day, though. After our family had moved to Sylvan Lake as year-round residents, Mom insisted that we take swimming lessons. The lessons were held in the mornings in the early summer. Those mornings were nothing like the summer days I remembered from our holidays, when the sand and the wood of the pier radiated a heat most appreciated by those coming out of long northern winters; when you'd have to pick up your feet quite quickly to avoid that slow burn, and you could spread your towel on the hot sand after emerging from the fresh water, lay down and let the warmth soak through to the whole front of your body.

No ... the same sand and the same water took on quite a different quality. Swim lessons taught me endurance and they taught me tolerance but they didn't really teach me how to swim well. The two weeks of lessons were always the coldest of the summer. I don't remember them ever being cancelled, and ... was it fair that the swim teacher got to stay up on the pier with a sweatshirt on while we kids shivered our way through jellyfish floats, treading water and dog-paddling with blue fingernails and lips? The best part was climbing up onto the pier when the lesson was over and the relief of wrapping my skinny body in a big towel. When our teeth stopped chattering, my sister and I would walk home and hope that the next day would be warmer.

This began my relationship with the pier. The pier observed me growing up, trying out my first two-piece bathing suit and hoping a certain boy would try and push me into the water. The pier stood solid in winter when we skated on the frozen lake and in spring when we dared each other to test the ice 'til we broke through and then sloshed home with icy soaked socks inside our boots.

The pier provided a home for the muskrats who built their twiggy nests under the ledges and we loved to watch for them and stop the boys from dropping rocks on their tiny swimming heads.

The pier absorbed our adolescent angst when the girlfriends would go storm-walking and scream into the white-capped waves that surged over the boards splashing us with cold spray.

The low edge of the pier, down by the boathouse, hid our secret packs of cigarettes that no one knew we smoked.

The pier witnessed my first kiss and soaked up later tears shed for real or imagined boyfriends.

That old pier gave many, besides me, a destination, a starting point, a gathering place and was a recognizable part of the history of the town.

It stood for many years. Walking the circuit over the water, arms linked with friends, on those wooden planks that snagged bathing suits and absorbed suntan oil, is something I will always remember.

Brenda Allan (nee Anderson) is a former resident of Sylvan Lake. Her family lived in the town from 1963 to 1976 and ran the Steam Baths built by her grandfather in the late 1940s. Brenda moved to Edmonton and now lives in Powell River, B.C. on the Sunshine Coast.

The Sylvan Lake WI was also responsible for building the WI Hall. This building was maintained by the WI from 1934 until 1974, when the Friendship Club bought it; WI members were allowed subsequently to use the Hall for free whenever they liked. Like so many of these WI-sponsored community halls, the WI Hall in Sylvan Lake was a centre point for decades for the Scouts, Brownies, for music lesson, for school lessons, church meetings, wedding receptions, card parties and town meetings.



Women's Institute Hall, 1934.

Notable Members:

Book of Remembrance:

- [Jean Learned](#) joined the Sylvan Lake WI in 1939 and served as its president for nearly eleven years, during which time the branch expanded and prospered. Jean is remembered as an active schoolteacher and an inspiring leader. She was a WI Convenor for six years. During her time with the WI she was largely responsible for obtaining gowns for the Junior Presbyterian Choir.
- [Martha Martin](#) joined the Sylvan Lake WI in 1932 and is well remembered for her musical contributions to WI and the community. Mattie played piano for WI conventions and conferences. She was the first organist at the Leslieville Church

and belonged to an orchestra for many years. Mattie played at a church service at the Sylvan Lake Lodge just four days before her death at the age of 101.

- [Lily McCrimmon](#) came to Alberta from Ontario, took Normal School in Calgary and taught school at Gwynne. She was so well loved that the school held an 80th birthday party for her in gratitude for her work there. Lily married and eventually settled in Sylvan Lake, where she joined the WI and served for many years as secretary. “Her writing and records were a joy to read and her advice was greatly appreciated.”

Life Membership:

- [Catherine Dingwall](#) was president of the Sylvan Lake WI when the decision was made to build the pier. She was also instrumental in purchasing and moving the building that later became known as the WI Hall.
- [Mary Falkner](#) became a member of WI before moving to Sylvan Lake; it was largely due to her efforts that the branch was formed. She was treasurer for many years and then Convenor for Education. She was awarded a Life Membership, along with her sister, Mrs. Dingwall, the first time the WI had done so. A real tribute to the McCrimmon sisters.
- [Martha Martin](#), originally from Toronto, the family came west in 1903; they were noted as entertainers and were in demand all through the region. Mattie was known as an organist and pianist. She was a member of the Beaver Flat WI, serving as president and secretary as well as Constituency Secretary. When the family moved to Sylvan Lake in 1950, she joined the WI there where she served as president and secretary. Mattie played the piano at AWI conventions for many years.
- [Lily McCrimmon](#), a former teacher from Ontario was honoured for her municipal, church and social work. A charter member of the Sylvan Lake WI in 1925, she served the branch as secretary, treasurer, and director as well as constituency secretary.

Sources: Sheila Jarvin, ed. *Reflections of Sylvan Lake*. Sylvan Lake, AB: Sylvan Lake Historical Society, 1984; Alberta Women’s Institutes. *History Supplement of the Alberta Women’s Institute, 1956-75; 1928, 1930, 1931 Convention Reports; Book of Remembrance Vol. I, II; Life Membership Book; PAA 91.3041/ 10 AWI Branch Listing and Contact 1944-1961 [for Districts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5]; Dawe, Michael. “History of the Sylvan Lake Pier.” *Red Deer Express*. (May 11, 2011); Dawe, Michael. “Sylvan Lake Piers and Boathouses.” *Red Deer Express* (June 27, 2018); Allan, Brenda. Remembering – Town’s old pier was integral part of life.” *Sylvan Lake News* (Mar. 21, 2013). *Many and Remarkable* 125-131; Photo of the Sylvan Lake WI Hall taken from Jarvin, p. 50.]*

