

Name of Branch: Youngstown Women's Institute

Location: Youngstown is located at the junction of Hwys 9 and 884, about half-way between Hanna and Oyen.

Organized: July 27, 1915 as Sounding Creek Women's Institute at a meeting in the Rex Theatre. The name was changed to Youngstown WI in 1924 (*Youngstown Memories*, 94).

Charter Members: 20 women, including Mrs. George Campbell, Mrs. C. McNaughton, Mrs. Wm. Robinson, Mrs. Tony Anderson, and Mrs. Karl Hettler

First Executive: Mrs. George Campbell, pres; Mrs. C. McNaughton, vice-pres; Mrs. Wm. Robinson, sec-treas

Disbanded: n/a – the branch was operating until at least 1983.

Activities: Note that all branch records prior to 1925 have been lost. The following accounts of Youngstown WI prior to the mid 1920s have therefore been re-constructed from memory by community members. Subsequent sources for the history of this WI branch are listed below.

At its inaugural meeting, the Youngstown WI proposed to build a Rest Room. In the summer of 1915, the members started fundraising, with suppers, bazaars, card parties, vegetable markets, bake sales, tag days, dances and teas; local businesses and municipalities contributed to the fund. By the spring of 1916, the WI had bought land for \$160 on which to build the Rest Room. The 20' x 24' building cost \$1200 to build and was completed in 1917 in time for the fall fair (*Youngstown Memories*, 94). The loan was paid off quickly during the prosperous years from 1915 to 1929. Furniture was donated and Mrs.

Sherman Coat donated a radio she had won in a raffle. The Rest Room was always open as a safe, clean, warm refuge for rural mothers and their children. Tea and lunch could be had anytime for 10 cents.

Mrs. R. Smith was hired as the first live-in caretaker and served in that position for five years until her death. She sold cookies and tea for 10 cents. "At last there was a warm place for country women to rest, and care for children when in town" (*Youngstown Memories*, 94). The



25th Anniversary Youngstown W.I., June 1940.
Left to right: Mrs. Geo. Gordon, Mrs. Geo. Campbell, Mrs. Janswick, Mrs. Annie McNaughton, Mrs. Ira Barton, Mrs. Tom McKeage, Mrs. Paul Auld, Mrs. Jim Martin, Mrs. Jerry Beamish, Mrs. Tony Anderson, Miss Mary McLean, Mrs. Chas. Donaldson, Mrs. W.C. Gordon, Mrs. James Bickle Sr., Mrs. Pete Davey, Mrs. Jim Knudson, Mrs. Roy Wells, Mrs. Frank Schofield, and Mrs. Alex eishman, (seated) Mrs. Mac McCulloch, Mrs. Ken Walker, Mrs. Norman Hall, Mrs. Walsh, and Mrs. Reynolds.
Children in foreground - Marlene Gordon and Joanne Bignell.

Rest Room was supported by other WIs as well. Roseacre WI contributed \$20 in 1920 to the Youngstown Rest Room (*Prairie Rose Country*, p. 309). Youngstown had a large and vigorous membership, rising quickly to 77 members by 1917, only 9 of these from the town itself. The annual fee was 25 cents per person.

Women's Institutes were often instrumental in bringing [Chautauqua](#) to their districts, as happened in Youngstown. Chautauqua was originally an American concept connected to Methodist summer camps. This accounts for the moral high ground maintained by all its entertainment. In Canada, Chautauquas were a frequent summertime occurrence between 1917 and 1935. This travelling tent show brought plays, soloists and choirs, dance, orchestras, lectures, humorous skits and inspirational addresses to rural communities. Families would load up their wagons and travel up to 50 miles, camping out for a week, so that they would not miss any of the fun.

The Chautauqua was an excellent way to raise money, which is likely why the WIs were so often involved. The lead organization in each town signed a contract guaranteeing the Chautauqua company at least \$1500 in revenue for a 5-7 day stay. Anything earned over that goal was divided equally between the organization and Dominion Chautauqua (the Canadian company). In preparation for the coming of Chautauqua, a team would arrive to help in the preparations, a large part of which was selling season's passes at \$2.00 and single tickets at 25 cents each. School children were coached in learning the Chautauqua "yell," and then participated in a costume parade where they got to practice their yells. Chautauqua declined in the mid 1930s because of the economic depression, poor crops, the advent of radio and the increasing prevalence of the automobile (*Youngstown Memories*, p. 90; "Chautauqua," [The Canadian Encyclopedia](#))

During the Depression, the "Women's Institute suffered as well [as other organizations], not having much of a reserve and the little Bank account soon dwindled. Lights had been installed but proved very expensive – rates running from \$3.00 to \$6.00 per month. As the WI kept the caretaker in coal and lights, they made a motion to ask Paul Auld to put them on a special rate. This he did, charging \$1.75 per month, but even this was too costly, and coal lamps were again resorted to. Coal and wood, too, were a problem, and it was felt that the Rest Room would have to be closed. However, the Businessmen and Municipalities again came to the rescue, donating money, coal, etc. to keep the Rest Room open, at least on Saturdays.

At one time in 1935, the Government offered to give a course on Food Values. The course was only \$1.00, but the WI felt they could not afford it, so Mrs. McNaughton paid the \$1.00! At that time, just prior to the Annual Old Time Dance, the YWI was \$8.00 in the RED. The Old Time Dance was started by the WI in 1924 and was a great success for many years. It was enjoyed by young and old alike. The charge was only 50 cents per couple, with lunch, and the Hall was always filled to capacity. It was not unusual to clear from \$100.00 to \$140.00.

Provincial dues were only 50 cents per member, but with the large membership, it was impossible for a lot of them to pay it and they just quit. The Branch was soon informed by

Headquarters that unless a minimum of \$8.00 was paid, the Youngstown Women's Institute would lose its Charter. District dues were cancelled [in order to pay the Provincial dues.]

However, the 'Stick-to-it-ness' of the hardy Pioneers also made itself felt in the YWI and it was not all darkness. Red Deer Constituency send garden seeds, roots and bulbs, which were distributed among the members.¹ Meetings in those days were very interesting. No meeting was held without at least one solo or duet. Readings were quite common. Teachers often brought their whole classes to the meetings for entertainment – to be sure the classes were not as large as today.

Many were the demonstrations – such as weaving, rug making, fret work, spinning, cheese, cake and soap making. One member even demonstrated the proper way to iron a man's shirt. She was Mrs. Knudson. Mrs. Anderson showed us how to make lotions, creams and bath salts, etc.

Along with their Old Time Dance, they held a fiddler's contest, and prizes for the best waltzing couples, etc. It must be remembered there was a lot of talent in the districts. Mrs. Donaldson and Mrs. McCullough were great pianists. Mrs. Lottie Williams, Doris and Edith Laight, and the Tobin girls, Ruth, Mary, Ida, Florence, Edith, and Olive could always be counted on for a song. Then we remember Mrs. Eli Hughes, Louise and Albert Shaw, who were great elocutionists. Somehow, it seems we have slipped a lot in our meetings of late" (correspondence with Elizabeth Lefsrud).

During the two World Wars, the Youngstown Rest Room was the centre of Red Cross activity. During WWII the WI gave the "Red Cross Club the use of the Rest Room, with the Red Cross Club to share all expenses. It became a beehive of activity. Scores of quilts were made and endless supplies of wool and material made into sweaters, socks, pyjamas, etc. Fifty Ditty bags were filled for sailors, scrap books made for Navy League hospitals; cigarettes were sent to local boys overseas periodically. In 1941, eight Christmas parcels were sent to local boys overseas; in 1942, twelve, in 1943 eighteen, and in 1944, twenty-four parcels were sent. Teas, dances, etc. were held to raise funds to cover the expenses for these ventures. Care parcels were also sent to Greece and Holland. At one time, each of the 22 members donated \$1.00 toward the bombed-out victims in Britain. On the boys' return, the Women's Institute and the Red Cross joined to put on a huge banquet (turkey, ham, and all the trimmings) for the returned lads, their wives and parents. The World War I vets and their wives and families were also included. It was a tremendous undertaking, but by catering to a bonspiel, and a dance, most of the expenses were covered. It cost each organization only \$1.50.

¹ Youngstown would have qualified as a "dried out" area during the 1930s. Not only was there a worldwide economic depression during this decade, there was a crippling drought on the Prairies. WI members from areas not as badly affected by the drought made it a program to assist those women living in the dried out areas where, quite literally, there were several years in a row without rain. The Editor's father used to say that the only place the grass grew was where the horses urinated.

Our membership at that time reached a high of 44, as the Red Cross group also became WI members. However, with the advent of peace, the group dropped again to its original number” (correspondence with Elizabeth Lefsrud). Nevertheless, the Rest Room continued to be a focus of community affairs for decades after the War. For the 65th Anniversary of the Youngstown WI in 1980, the Rest Room was renovated as one of Youngstown’s historic sites.

Notable Members:

Book of Remembrance:

- [Catherine Campbell](#), born in Ontario in 1866, married in 1903 and settled at Youngstown with her husband in 1910. Active with the Presbyterian Church, Catherine was also an early organizer of women in the area, being a charter member of the WI and its first president.
- Augusta Hettler, born in 1895 in Germany and settled in the Youngstown area with her husband in 1915. She was active in the Catholic church and a charter member of the WI. Augusta was well known for her needlecraft.

Sources: *Youngstown and District Pioneers*. Youngstown, AB: The Youngstown Women’s Institute, 1962; *Youngstown Memories Across the Years: 1909-1983*. Youngstown and District Historical Society, 1984; 1928, 1930, 1931 Convention Reports; *Book of Remembrance* Vol. I; Cole, Catherine C. and Judy Larmour. *Many and Remarkable: The Story of the Alberta Women's Institutes*. Edmonton: Alberta Women's Institutes, 1997. 125-131; private correspondence from Helen Gordon to Elizabeth Lefsrud, 1974; *Prairie Rose Country*. Spondin and Area History Book Society, 1982; Photocopied from *Youngstown Memories*, 94).