

CULTIVATING DOMESTICITY:  
THE HOMEMAKERS' CLUBS OF SASKATCHEWAN,  
1911 TO 1961

by

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## ABSTRACT

On January 31, 1911, the Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan became an official organisation under the direction of the University of Saskatchewan. Established to provide isolated rural women with companionship, access to education, and the opportunity to carry out community service, Homemakers' Clubs appealed to thousands of farm women because they provided the means by which they could improve themselves, their farm homes, and their communities. Its appeal also lay in the fact that the organisation remained non-political and non-sectarian, focusing instead on women's primary responsibilities to their homes and their families. To that end, Homemakers' Clubs embraced a domestic ideology that institutionalised notions of gender and celebrated women's roles in the home. Given that the nature of farm women's work was not restricted to the household, however, Homemakers' Clubs allowed rural women to redefine an urban domesticity to include their farming responsibilities. Moreover, in a setting where gender lines were often blurred and the division of labour was not always strictly defined, membership in an organisation that reinforced gender roles, promoted family and community life, and embraced a traditional mandate provided farm women with a level of respectability and femininity that was often lost in a farming setting. Finally, the domestic ideology under which the Homemakers' Clubs operated allowed its members to find recognition and validation in their work, and, in their goals to elevate home life, to legitimise their work, and to adjust domestic ideology to include their farming responsibilities, the organisation became a space in which its members discussed, debated, explored, and, in some cases, challenged common perceptions of women; they subtly challenged the status quo and demanded validation and recognition for their work in and contributions to their farms and communities. As such, an organisation that may outwardly appear to be a traditional women's organisation devoted strictly to the exchange of recipes and household advice, was, in actuality, quietly political and provided farm women with a sense of identity that enabled them to contribute fundamentally to their rural homes, families, and communities.

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To my grandmother, Lillie (Leard) Milne,  
the hired girl from the city who became the  
quintessential farmer's wife,

and

To my grandfather, the late Clifford Milne,  
who taught me that love for the land is not learned.  
It just is.

To both of you, I dedicate this work.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE .....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iv
DEDICATION.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
ABBREVIATIONS.....	vii
CHAPTER ONE: Reconstructing Domesticity.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: Beginnings.....	25
CHAPTER THREE: Foundations.....	45
CHAPTER FOUR: Challenges.....	68
CHAPTER FIVE: Contextualising the Homemakers' Clubs.....	92
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	100

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

RG 11 s.1	Extension Division Fonds
RG 11 s.4	Saskatchewan Homemakers' Clubs and Saskatchewan Women's Institutes Fonds
RG 2001.3	Presidential Series
R 236	Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life Papers
SAB	Saskatchewan Archives Board
SHC	Saskatchewan Homemakers' Clubs
USA	University of Saskatchewan Archives

## CHAPTER ONE:

### Reconstructing Domesticity

*"Women on the farm are called housewives,  
farm wives, or farm women,  
but rarely are they called farmers."<sup>1</sup>*

Women's contributions to farming have been fundamental to prairie agriculture from the early days of settlement. Their contributions, however, rarely received acknowledgement from their male contemporaries or society in general since the western Canadian farming venture was usually defined as strictly a male enterprise. Though farm women contributed their time and labour to the farming venture and invested much energy into their local communities, their responsibilities on the farm were accorded little economic value; rather, their contributions fell into the realm of traditional women's work when, in reality, farm women performed the dual roles of housewife and farmer. Only recently, however, have farm women been credited with the dual nature of their roles on prairie farms; historically, they have been idolised as sturdy, diligent labourers on family farms or have been revered for assuming the traditional role as housewife under, more often than not, severe prairie conditions. Rarely, however, have farm women been contextualised as a group that created a unique identity that balanced nineteenth-century ideologies of "true womanhood" and the responsibilities of farm life.

The Association of Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan, established in 1911, illustrates the ways in which a certain group of farm women embraced a domestic ideology in

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<sup>1</sup> Nettie Wiebe, *Weaving New Ways: Farm Women Organizing*. (Saskatoon: National Farmers' Union, 1987), 4.



the context of farm living and rural life; that is, neither were their daily experiences the same as their female urban counterparts, nor did they exist in a cultural vacuum in which nineteenth-century womanly values did not influence them. Rather, the pervasiveness of nineteenth-century domestic ideology, which categorised women as nurturers and sustainers of the home and dictated that "true women" embraced their roles within the domain of the home, meant that many rural women sought to live up to this philosophy. But farm women, who existed in a setting where gender lines were often blurred and which often forced them to accept non-traditional responsibilities such as dairy and poultry production, as well as field labour, did not so easily fit the urban domestic ideology. The fluid division of labour under which rural women operated meant that they would never be like their urban counterparts; consequently, they turned to the Homemakers' Clubs, an organisation devoted specifically to the interests of rural women and which promoted the importance of home and farm life, education, and community service in a rural context. Ultimately, this rural organisation, which reinforced the nineteenth century doctrine of separate spheres, allowed its members to redefine an urban domestic ideology to include their farming responsibilities and enabled them to assert their femininity and respectability in a setting that was rarely, if ever, defined by womanly characteristics.

Homemakers' Clubs, however, went beyond simply providing a level of respectability for farm women; rather, the organisation brought the work of rural women into the public realm and demanded the recognition and validation for which their contributions to the home, farm, and community were so deserving. Rarely perceived as partners in the farming venture, farm women seldom received recognition for their contributions to the family farm, often seen as merely helpmates to their farming husbands. An organisation such as the Homemakers' Clubs, then, legitimised, both publicly and privately, the work of farm women and validated their contributions to farming and rural life in a way that demanded recognition and respect. Homemakers' Clubs were not a one-dimensional organisation that focused solely on recipes and household advice; rather, the demand for recognition inevitably paved the way for its members to explore, expand, and challenge common perceptions of women.

Homemakers' Clubs, then, must be examined in a context that both acknowledges and accepts their traditional mandate but whose analysis also delves more deeply into the organisation in order to better understand its intricacies. From their inception, Saskatchewan's Homemakers' Clubs have played a pivotal role in the lives of innumerable rural women and their communities; yet, the organisation has been virtually neglected within the historical discourse. Moreover, what does exist is sparse and is limited to basic discussions of the organisation's activities over the years; the scholarship does not, nor does it attempt to, fully deconstruct or analyse this fundamental group of women or the organisation to which they belonged. Undoubtedly, this disregard stems from a perception that Homemakers' Clubs were little more than a traditional women's group that operated within a confining and narrow definition of women; as such, scholars have perhaps overlooked this organisation as just another turn-of-the-century women's group whose history is passé.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Homemakers' Clubs have been pivotal in the development of the province and its rural communities and to disregard the organisation is to leave the organisation understudied, misunderstood, and a significant element of Saskatchewan's history untold.

The first publications that acknowledge the Homemakers' Clubs have come from the organisation itself, which has published valuable celebratory works for their tenth, twenty-fifth, fiftieth, and seventy-fifth anniversaries; while they provide thorough discussions of the organisation's activities and praise the accomplishments of the clubs and its members, they do not historically contextualise the influence of the Homemakers' Clubs in shaping rural women's

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<sup>2</sup> This statement is not meant to suggest that early twentieth-century women's organisations have not been studied; indeed, I am suggesting that the opposite is true—that, as Canadian women's history began to flourish in the mid-1970s, the first areas of study focused specifically on women's organisations, especially those that related to the suffrage, reform, and temperance movements. Thus, it is *because* these organisations have been so well studied that, as scholars moved beyond urban, middle-class women's organisations, Homemakers' Clubs have been neglected.

identities.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Lorne Paul conducted a study of the Extension department at the University of Saskatchewan and while he devotes one chapter to the Department of Women's Work and the Homemakers' Clubs, there is no real analysis of the clubs themselves.<sup>4</sup> Though his work is valuable for its basic discussion of the organisation, it does not go beyond a simple description of club activities over the years. Likewise, in Michael Hayden's history of the University of Saskatchewan, the author makes mention of the Homemakers' Clubs as part of the Extension department in two paragraphs, in which he incorrectly states that the organisation had begun independently of the university.<sup>5</sup> Finally, historian Georgina Taylor provides a somewhat more thorough discussion of Homemakers' Clubs but her analysis is contextualised within a discussion of the isolation of rural women and their participation in a variety of organisations in Saskatchewan. She does not focus specifically on Homemakers' Clubs, to which she dedicates only two pages, nor does she examine the organisation with any depth, arguing that the clubs "accepted a narrowly defined role for women."<sup>6</sup> This perspective, however, does not paint an accurate picture of the organisation. While such studies certainly acknowledge the existence of Homemakers' Clubs, they do not incorporate any serious analysis, nor do they sufficiently speak to the historical significance of the organisation.

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<sup>3</sup> See *Homemakers' Clubs, 1910-1920* (Saskatoon: c.1920); *Retrospect and Prospect: The Silver Cord and the Golden Chain* (University of Saskatchewan, Extension Division, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 1936); *Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan, 1911-1961* (Saskatoon: 1961); *Legacy: A History of Saskatchewan Homemakers' Clubs and Women's Institutes, 1911-1988* (Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Women's Institute, 1988). For a discussion of Women's Institutes in other provinces, see Linda Ambrose, *For Home and Country: The Centennial History of the Women's Institutes in Ontario* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills Press, 1996); Manitoba. Historic Resources Branch, *The Women's Institutes of Manitoba*, 1983; Catherine Cooper Cole and Judy Larmour, *Many and Remarkable: The Story of the Alberta Women's Institutes* (Edmonton: Alberta Women's Institutes, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Lorne Paul, *Extension At the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, 1910-1970: A History* (Saskatoon: Extension Division, University of Saskatchewan, 1979).

<sup>5</sup> Michael Hayden, *Seeking a Balance: The University of Saskatchewan, 1907-1982* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983), 68, 124.

<sup>6</sup> Georgina Taylor, "'Should I Drown Myself Now or Later?': The Isolation of Rural Women in Saskatchewan and Their Participation in the Homemakers' Clubs, the Farm Movement and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, 1910-1967" in *Women: Isolation and Bonding: The Ecology of Gender*, Kathleen Storrie, ed. (Toronto: Methuen, 1987), 90.

In 1987, Master of Education student Kerrie Strathy conducted what is likely the first thorough examination of Saskatchewan's Homemakers' Clubs; however, not unlike the celebratory works of the organisation itself, the goal of her study is to "document the accomplishments of the largest and longest surviving adult education movement for rural women."<sup>7</sup> She endeavours to "critically examine" the relationship between the Homemakers' Clubs and the University and to "provide insight into the role rural women played in Saskatchewan's development."<sup>8</sup> However, while Strathy provides a decent examination of the relationship between the clubs and the University and has obviously conducted extensive research, it is a top-down study of the organisation with little analysis of the organisation itself, nor of the women who were involved.

A closer examination of Saskatchewan's Homemakers' Clubs is essential in order to better understand the intricacies of an organisation that ran much deeper than previous scholars have suggested. Certainly, that the organisation provided rural women with invaluable information about rural homemaking and the opportunity for human contact was fundamental to the clubs' popularity, particularly in their formative years when farm life was virtually synonymous with isolation. But this in itself does not sufficiently explain what caused the Homemakers' Clubs to continue to flourish, especially in subsequent years when farm life was less isolated and rural communities were better established. Rather, a deeper examination reveals that Saskatchewan's Homemakers' Clubs carried with them a feminist ideology for which they have not been duly credited. Though this feminist ideology differs from a modern-day understanding of feminism, that which defined the Homemakers' Clubs is no less important than that which has influenced women of subsequent generations.

Defined by academics as maternal feminism, this early twentieth-century ideology with which Homemakers' Clubs identified is most often connected to the suffrage movement which,

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<sup>7</sup> Kerrie A. Strathy, *Saskatchewan Women's Institutes: The Rural Women's University, 1911-1986* (M.Ed. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Strathy, ix.

according to historian Linda Kealey, "refers to the conviction that woman's special role of mother gives her the duty and the right to participate in the public sphere."<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Carol Bacchi argues that the mostly urban, middle-class suffragists "justified their entry into the public sphere by emphasizing the benefits to be gained from women's traditional virtues"<sup>10</sup> and that "the whole purpose of enfranchising women was to extend their maternal influence into society."<sup>11</sup> Essentially, the suffrage campaign based its political ideas on the virtuosity of women, arguing that political power, along with their participation in public life, would create a stronger nation based on women's inherently "moral superiority" over men. Consequently, public policy would be based – in theory, at least – on the morality of female voters and, by extension, would result in a positive feminine influence in the public sphere. But while they challenged the exclusivity of male privilege in public life, what the suffragists did not dispute, says Bacchi, was the "conventional allocation of sex roles" because they wanted to "strengthen the family, not disrupt it."<sup>12</sup> As such, the feminism of this generation reflects an affirmation of the domestic and maternal nature of women and illustrates the ways in which this ideology was used to advance the status of women. In essence, the suffrage movement did not challenge the ideology of men's and women's separate spheres.

Nor did the Homemakers' Clubs. Though the organisation did not officially participate in the suffrage campaign, or in other public or potentially controversial issues, they did embrace the virtually identical ideology that women had a specific role to play at home and in their communities, one that would progressively improve society and the nation. Unlike their suffrage-motivated counterparts, however, Homemakers' Clubs did not focus primarily on reform and participation in the public sphere as the means by which to improve society; rather, Homemakers emphasised the value of home life as the avenue by which to improve themselves,

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<sup>9</sup> Linda Kealey, ed. Introduction to *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s – 1920s*. (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979), 8.

<sup>10</sup> Carol Lee Bacchi, *Liberation Deferred?: The Ideas of English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), vii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

their families, and, by extension, the nation's citizenry. As such, the organisation celebrated women's domesticity and underscored the importance and value of their work in the home. Not unlike the suffragists, then, Homemakers' Clubs did not challenge or contradict domestic values but, rather, eulogised them as the means for recognition.

While some have criticised maternal feminism as a narrow and restrictive role for women, it is important to understand this ideology in the context of early twentieth century standards. As Wendy Mitchinson argues, for example, "few Canadian women in the nineteenth century perceived this [ideology] as a limitation."<sup>13</sup> Rather, it enabled women to demand recognition for their domestic roles. Moreover, that the Homemakers' Clubs embraced this ideology illustrates that the organisation provided its members with much more than basic homemaking education; first, membership in an organisation that embraced and celebrated the domestic nature of women provided both public and private validation that women's work on the family farm was legitimate and fundamental to the success of western Canadian agriculture. As American scholar Dolores Hayden argues in her definition of domestic feminism, the celebration of domestic life "demanded women's control over all aspects of domestic life"<sup>14</sup> and "dignity in domestic work."<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the validation of work in the home meant that women "gain[ed] power in and for the domestic sphere."<sup>16</sup> That Homemakers' Clubs celebrated women's domestic roles, then, brought a level of respectability to rural women and as well, enabled them to find a sense of femininity in the midst of the less-than-feminine nature of their farming responsibilities.

Second, despite their official non-involvement in partisan politics or in the prominent issues of the day, to say that Homemakers' Clubs were not political or feminist is to limit those

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<sup>13</sup> Wendy Mitchinson, "The WCTU: 'For God, Home and Native Land': A Study in Nineteenth-Century Feminism," in *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s*, Linda Kealey, ed. (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979), 167.

<sup>14</sup> Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 55.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

terms to a narrow interpretation. Rather, in their goals to elevate home life, to legitimise their work, and to adjust domestic ideology to include their farming responsibilities, the organisation became a space in which its members discussed, debated, explored, and, in some cases, challenged common perceptions of women. While this fits neither the common definition of political, nor of feminist, it exemplifies what historian Veronica Strong-Boag calls the "feminism of the workplace, of day-to-day life."<sup>17</sup> For Strong-Boag, who is critical of historians who have "reduced feminism to the struggle for power in the public realm,"<sup>18</sup> it is essential that "we reexamine our understanding of what is political, where it occurs and who is involved."<sup>19</sup> Most significantly, she maintains that "private life can be very political indeed, involving important struggles over power and authority."<sup>20</sup> Thus, while Homemakers did not, like their rural sisters in the Women Grain Growers' Association, seek changes to marketing and grain handling practices or to agricultural policy, or, like their counterparts in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, campaign for suffrage and temperance, they did demand equality under the law, legal recognition of their unpaid work, and recognition of their contributions to agriculture, to name a few. As such, an organisation that may outwardly appear to be a traditional women's organisation devoted strictly to the exchange of recipes and household advice, was, in actuality, quietly political and feminist.

At the core of the quietly political Homemakers' Clubs lay the fundamental belief in the domestic nature of women and an overall of acceptance of a gendered division of labour, thus exemplifying the concept of the "doctrine of separate spheres"<sup>21</sup> and how its pervasiveness contributed to the ways in which Homemakers constructed the family farm in turn-of-the-

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<sup>17</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, "Pulling in Double Harness or Hauling a Double Load: Women, Work and Feminism on the Canadian Prairie" *Journal of Canadian Studies* Vol. 21, No. 3 (Fall 1986), 34.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Ruth Roach Pierson, "The Politics of the Domestic Sphere" in *Canadian Women's Issues, Volume II: Bold Visions*. Ruth Roach Pierson and Marjorie Griffin Cohen, eds. (Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1995), 3.

century Saskatchewan. The ideology of "true womanhood,"<sup>22</sup> to which Homemakers' Clubs aspired, originates in urban, middle-class North America, which defined Victorian women by their piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, it asserted that women had a "special nurturing quality"<sup>24</sup> and were highly respected for their "'womanly' qualities of selflessness and their skill in household management."<sup>25</sup> These definitions of womanhood are a somewhat recent appearance in western society and emerged from the rapid industrialisation of Britain and North America, which began in the mid-eighteenth century and caused a gradual shift in ideology as work and home became increasingly separate.<sup>26</sup> In the pre-industrial setting in Britain, for example, work and home were intricately linked both in location and ideology; that is, both men and women entered marriage with the expectation that each would continue to carry out productive work.<sup>27</sup> For women, this often entailed work in agriculture, textiles, or other trades such as spinning, brewing, milling, innkeeping, butchering, and shopkeeping, to name a few. Neither were women economically dependent on their husbands nor did their husbands expect them to be. And for the most part, work took place in, or very nearby, the home setting. Pre-industrial marriage, then, was an "act of profound importance to the social structure. It meant the creation of a new economic unit, as well as a lifelong association of persons previously separate."<sup>28</sup>

Industrialisation fundamentally altered this familial economic unit by removing the workplace from the home. As men "went out" to work, and as technology transferred pre-industrial working class women's occupations to the factory, women of the burgeoning middle class became increasingly defined by their relationship to the home. As a result, the pre-

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<sup>22</sup> See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860" *American Quarterly* Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer 1966): 151-174.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Kealey, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Kealey, 6.

<sup>26</sup> See for example, Ann Oakley, *Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974); Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work For Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1983).

<sup>27</sup> Oakley, Chapter two.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London: Methuen, 1965), 90, as quoted in Oakley, page 21.



industrial family became divided along gender lines and exacerbated stricter divisions between men and women.<sup>29</sup> Ruth Schwartz Cowan (1983) argues that "one of the most profound effects of industrialisation was, and is, the separation of 'work place' and 'home place'—and the attendant designation of the former as the 'place' for men and the latter as the 'domain' of women."<sup>30</sup> Moreover, as the developing middle class assumed a more affluent position in society, the construction of a feminine domesticity came to symbolise a new, leisurely, and somewhat aristocratic lifestyle and firmly entrenched patriarchal ideologies within the urban, Victorian setting. Ann Oakley argues, for example, that "the idleness of a man's female dependants at home became a mark of prosperity for the Victorian middle-class male."<sup>31</sup> More importantly, however, is that the transition from the pre- to post-industrial conditions created a perception of gendered domains—that is, the association of a particular sex with certain values: women became biologically defined by a moral and nurturing character while men became associated with work, aggression, and immorality.<sup>32</sup> Marjorie Griffin Cohen summarises various academics' perspectives of British and European industrialisation: "as income-earning activities were withdrawn from the household, a sharper distinction was made between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of economic life."<sup>33</sup> She further suggests that as women were "confined to the household, their world and work became increasingly privatized and isolated, and the new ideology that women's rightful place was in the home gained currency."<sup>34</sup> Thus, not only did a biological determinism relegate women to the bonds of home

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<sup>29</sup> Cowan, 18-19.

<sup>30</sup> Cowan, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Oakley, 49.

<sup>32</sup> Cowan, 19.

<sup>33</sup> Marjorie Griffin Cohen, *Women's Work, Markets, and Economic Development* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 22.

<sup>34</sup> Cohen, 22. Cohen, however, argues that British industrialisation "does not fit the pattern of development in Ontario" and is critical of those who attempt to integrate the Canadian and British experiences. In fact, she argues that in Ontario, a "rigid division of labour by gender [was a] common feature of the pre-industrial period." See Cohen, 23-4. This argument, however, does not relate to the experience in western Canada since a rigid division of labour did not exist. Almost immediately upon their arrival on the prairies, women were contributing more than just their traditional responsibilities to the farming venture.

life, but the ideology also became firmly embedded in urban, middle-class thought and quickly evolved into the dominant ideology in Victorian Britain and North America.

These Victorian notions of domesticity, however, did not readily translate into reality for farm women in western Canada where the division of labour was more fluid; thus, Saskatchewan's Homemakers' Clubs sought to reconcile these different expectations of farm women. Though theoretically based on the division of labour, in which women were responsible for the home and its surroundings, in practice, the establishment of many Saskatchewan farms required women to assume non-traditional roles that often involved heavy manual labour such as ploughing or stooking grain. For Homemakers' Clubs, then, although they identified with the predetermined role of housewife, the reality of the family farm dictated that they would remain fundamentally different from their urban sisters. Thus, Homemakers' Clubs allowed its members to expand the definition of domestic ideology to include their outside work.

That the farm women of the Homemakers' Clubs sought to reaffirm the notion of domesticity, and believed fundamentally that their role as women was to improve home life, communities, and the nation, indicates that they internalised society's biological determinism of their proper place in society and embraced the dominant ideology of the time. What is more, the Homemakers' Clubs and the University of Saskatchewan, under which the organisation operated, reinforced the cult of domesticity by confirming that women's responsibilities to the farming venture were part of farm women's proper role in rural society. Though Saskatchewan farm women were, in fact, much like their pre-industrial counterparts in that their responsibilities did not strictly limit them to the household, a study of the Homemakers' Clubs indicates that members of the modern-day organisation defined themselves explicitly as wives and mothers and, through the clubs, reinforced this definition on the farm. Moreover, even though the nature of the family farm in western Canada tended to blur the gendered notions of labour, the language that is inherent in the Homemakers' Clubs indicates that they were indoctrinated with the ideology that men and women had different roles at home and in society.

The ideology of gendered work was carried to the prairie region with visions of vast wealth and immediate agricultural success, which had been virtually guaranteed by the Canadian government's national policy. Considered by many as Ontario's backyard, the west became the proverbial Garden of Eden in which the Anglo-Canadian Protestant values of Ontario could be firmly established in a new and virtually untouched region.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the leaders of the young Dominion proclaimed that the prairies symbolised agricultural prosperity, territorial expansion, and national economic growth; agriculture, and subsequently the family farm and its rural way of life, was the means to empire. To fulfil this vision, western Canada required a population of millions that would undertake this responsibility. Much to the alarm of the Canadian government, however, the western region did not experience the much hoped for population explosion; consequently, the government opened its door to millions of potential farmers, not concerning itself with the ethnic make-up of the incoming settlers.<sup>36</sup> For the federal government, national economic growth was key and assimilation of the newly-arrived immigrants could come later. As a result of this open door policy, western Canada grew from a "near-vacant land with fewer than 300,000 in 1896 to a region with a population of over one and half million by 1914."<sup>37</sup> In less than twenty years, Canada's western population increased by 500 percent.<sup>38</sup>

The establishment of the prairies, however, was anything but easy for those who ventured west. Moreover, the west was not the utopia that had been promised by government propaganda, which had enticed determined immigrants with images of bountiful harvests,

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<sup>35</sup> For more discussion of western settlement and Ontario's vision for the west, see Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984); Doug Owsram, *Promises of Eden: The Canadian Expansionist Movement and the Idea of the West, 1856-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980); John Herd Thompson, *Forging the Prairie West* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998); Cecilia Danyusk, *Hired Hands: Labour and the Development of Prairie Agriculture, 1880-1930* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1995).

<sup>36</sup> Friesen, 245-6.

<sup>37</sup> R. Douglas Francis, *Images of the West: Responses to the Canadian Prairies*. (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1989), 108.

<sup>38</sup> Whether it was Sifton's campaign that attracted immigrants or external forces that impelled people to leave their homelands is not the debate here. The emphasis, rather, is on western Canada's population explosion.

plentiful gardens, and modern farm homes. Rather, for the newly arrived immigrants, the myth of the prairie west quickly met reality. Historian John Thompson briefly illustrates the realities of the west: "best remembered is the shock of the prairie weather: intense cold that turned water to stone, early frosts that cut down crops before they could be harvested, sheets of lightning that touched off prairie fires, hail that flattened a family's dreams as quickly as it levelled their grain."<sup>39</sup> Moreover, many new arrivals had little more than a few possessions and very little money with which to purchase farming implements necessary to establish their homesteads;<sup>40</sup> thus, in order to "prove up" their land within the three-year requirement meant that new homesteaders turned to their wives and children to assist with much of the labour-intensive responsibilities of homesteading. Again, Thompson briefly mentions that "building a family farm in the West required so much hard physical work that the gender of the worker became less important" than it had been elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> For the most part, however, historians have, until recently, overlooked the contributions that farm women have made to the development of prairie agriculture.

Early examinations of western Canadian agriculture all but ignore the role of prairie women in the establishment of an agricultural society and focus primarily on the national policy, agricultural markets, settlement patterns, railway policies, and national economic development.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, they are fundamental works that analyse the establishment of western Canadian agriculture. While essential, however, they do not fully depict, if at all, rural women's experiences, nor do they account for the labour that women contributed to the establishment of agriculture. And certainly, they do not provide any insight into the daily lives of farm women,

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<sup>39</sup> Thompson, 81.

<sup>40</sup> Friesen, 310-11.

<sup>41</sup> Thompson, 83.

<sup>42</sup> For traditional analyses of Canadian agriculture see, for example, V.C. Fowke, *The National Policy and the Wheat Economy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957); Chester Martin, *The Dominion Lands Policy: History of Prairie Settlement* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1938); George Britnell, *The Wheat Economy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1939); Paul Voisey, *Vulcan: The Making of a Prairie Community* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

who have been just as important to the establishment of agriculture as men—even if their role has been an invisible one.

The distinct role that farm women played in the development of prairie agriculture stems from the unique setting of rural life itself. That is, the family farm did not (nor does it now) completely conform to the prevailing patterns of an industrial capitalist society. For instance, farmers are both the owners and the primary workers in their farming venture; they own the means of production, yet rely on their own labour. Moreover, farms are unlike most institutions in an industrial capitalist society, where home and work occupy the same space.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, it is inherently difficult to contextualise farm women and their contributions because the boundaries between work and home, productive and non-productive labour, and women's traditional roles and farm roles are fluid. Rural sociologist Carolyn Sachs (1988) maintains that "in their daily lives, women often crossed the boundaries of these categories"<sup>44</sup> and that "the invisibility and undervaluing of women's work [has] created the need to develop new categories for understanding farm women's work."<sup>45</sup> She further argues that "the amount of time women devote to market versus subsistence activities, production versus reproduction, or farm work versus home work is difficult if not impossible to measure accurately."<sup>46</sup> It is this fluidity that renders analyses of farm women complex. An awareness of this fluidity, however, contributes to a better understanding of the Homemakers' Clubs because its members, who crossed the boundaries between traditional men's and women's work, used the organisation to maintain a level of femininity.

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<sup>43</sup> In many ways, small business owners can identify with the farm setting in that both combine the modest ownership of capital while contributing one's own labour. Similarly, women and children contribute to a small businesses much like farm women contribute to agriculture. Take, for example, Chinese restaurants, confectioneries, or laundries, where families operate within a combined household and business.

<sup>44</sup> Carolyn E. Sachs, "The Participation of Women and Girls in Market and Non-Market Activities on Pennsylvania Farms" in Haney, Wava G. and Jane B. Knowles, eds. *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures*. (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1988), 124.

<sup>45</sup> Sachs, 124.

<sup>46</sup> Sachs, 132.

Veronica Strong-Boag's oft-cited "Pulling In Double Harness or Hauling a Double Load: Women, Work and Feminism on the Canadian Prairies" (1986) provides a window into the daily lives and responsibilities of farm women and helps to illustrate the less-than-feminine nature of their work. She outlines the "gruelling, almost constant labour"<sup>47</sup> of farm women in the context of how their work has been undervalued by a male-dominated, patriarchal society and highlights the drudgery of farm women's work by illustrating that the lack of electricity, indoor plumbing, and labour-saving technology contributed to the "primitive conditions"<sup>48</sup> in which they worked. She quotes a 1922 survey conducted by the United Farm Women of Manitoba:

...no water in kitchen; no sink; no bath; the use of lamps for lighting; no power in house for even washing; no labor savers beyond cream separator; the well one-eighth of a mile from the house; the woman does all the sewing; she helps stook and haul grain; gets no spending money; no telephone; house heated by stoves; woman cans all she can afford to; keeps no domestic help.<sup>49</sup>

Strong-Boag also illustrates that farm women also conducted "extensive outside work"<sup>50</sup> in addition to their traditional responsibilities of food preparation, canning and preserving, housework, and child care and suggests that these contributions were considered a labour of love rather than an economic contribution to the farming venture.<sup>51</sup> In reality, laundering, sewing, gardening, cooking, and food preparation in the form of canning and preserving formed an indirect contribution to the family farm when one considers that women often had to provide room and board for hired help and the yearly threshing crews. Oral historian Susan Armitage (1986) reflects this point: "the household activities of women, especially the cooking and processing of food, sustained the laborers in the enterprise. Since the operation and especially the hired hands were offered board and room rather than wages, food preparation ought to be

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<sup>47</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, "Pulling in Double Harness or Hauling a Double Load: Women, Work and Feminism on the Canadian Prairie" *Journal of Canadian Studies* Vol. 21, No. 3 (Fall 1986), 37.

<sup>48</sup> Strong-Boag, 37.

<sup>49</sup> Strong-Boag, 38.

<sup>50</sup> Strong-Boag, 38.

<sup>51</sup> Strong-Boag, 36.

considered as a direct contribution to the enterprise."<sup>52</sup> Though in the Canadian context, hired men were generally not offered room and board exclusively in exchange for wages, the cost of their board was nonetheless included in their wage. In essence, however, since the responsibilities of room and board fell to farm women, hired men essentially exchanged their labour for women's labour. In a similar vein, cultivating garden produce, canning and preserving vegetables, sewing clothing, and raising dairy and poultry produce, to name a few, provided sustenance, the result of which meant that farm families did not have many of the expenditures that non-farm families did. Armitage defines these activities as "work which contributed directly to the family economy by making cash expenditure unnecessary."<sup>53</sup> Thus, farming ventures essentially saved money because of farm women's contributions to the enterprise. In this respect, however, Marjorie Griffin Cohen (1988) argues that attempting to distinguish between women's direct and indirect economic contributions to the household is moot:

This division of women's labour into productive and unproductive spheres is not particularly helpful in trying to determine the extent of change in women's labour...Recent examinations of housework stress that women's unpaid labour in the home has economic significance, even if this activity is solely confined to reproductive activities centred on the household and the care of children. In fact, the very nature of capitalism is seen to be dependent on the existence of this form of labour, and to perpetuate it...The main point to be made, then, is that shifts in the production of tangible goods to intangible services do not amount to a reduction in productivity *per se*.<sup>54</sup>

More than simply helpmates to their farmer husbands, farm women contributed significantly to the farming venture, as well as to the establishment of agriculture in western Canada. Like Sachs and Strong-Boag, who emphasise the invisibility and undervaluing of farm women's roles on prairie farms, sociologist and agricultural economist Richard W. Rathge (1989) expands upon their arguments and explodes the common perception that farm women

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<sup>52</sup> Susan Armitage, "Farm Women And Technological Change," in *Plainswoman: An Anthology* (Grand Forks, ND: Plainswoman, Inc., 1986), 42.

<sup>53</sup> Susan Armitage, "Household Work and Childrearing on the Frontier: The Oral History Record," *Sociology and Social Research* 63, no. 3 (April 1979): 469.

<sup>54</sup> Cohen, 25.

were simply helpers in the farming venture. He maintains that not only does the concept of invisible labour disregard the central roles that women played on farms but that it "deemphasizes the interdependence of farm and family activities."<sup>55</sup> Stating that the family farm is (and was) an "economic organization,"<sup>56</sup> he argues that tasks performed by the entire household "cannot be easily separated without distorting the true nature of farm labour."<sup>57</sup> Though written about modern-day farming families, his argument nonetheless has merit in the historical context of rural Saskatchewan. Inasmuch as farm women have been perceived as mere assistants in the enterprise, they have rarely been accredited with either their direct or indirect economic contributions to the family farm; rather, the "enormous volume of productive labour" they contributed to the family farm was seen as an extension of their "wifely duties."<sup>58</sup>

In addition to the traditional responsibilities performed by farm wives, women's contributions often crossed into their husbands' traditional sphere, as they often performed traditional men's labour such as ploughing fields, stooking grain, and threshing wheat. Sandra Rollings-Magnusson (2000) expands on previous studies of farm women by examining the flexibility of farm women's contributions to the family farm. Like the above-mentioned authors, she maintains that "prevailing patriarchal attitudes, legislation and economic principles obscured women's contributions in productive and non-productive labour."<sup>59</sup> She argues that, in reality, farm women's "flexibility was critical to the survival of family farms, and thus to the success of the wheat economy."<sup>60</sup> Like Strong-Boag, the author provides a detailed list of traditional farm women's roles but Rollings-Magnusson goes further and suggests that, without women, most homesteaders would have failed, arguing that "for those with wives, the potential for labour

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<sup>55</sup> Richard W. Rathge, "Women's Contribution to the Family Farm" *Great Plains Quarterly* 9 (Winter 1989): 36.

<sup>56</sup> Rathge, 36.

<sup>57</sup> Rathge, 36.

<sup>58</sup> Kathleen Storrie, "Introduction: The Ecology of Gender" in *Women: Isolation and Bonding: The Ecology of Gender*. Kathleen Storrie, ed. (Toronto: Methuen, 1987), 4, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Sandra Rollings-Magnusson, "Canada's Most Wanted: Pioneer Women on the Western Prairies" *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 37 (2) May 2000: 223.

<sup>60</sup> Rollings-Magnusson, 223.



division and the flexibility to overcome unexpected difficulties increased the chances of success" and that the "flexibility of women in performing a wide variety of seemingly ordinary and small scale activities was vital to the success of farming operations throughout the period of settlement in Canada."<sup>61</sup> This flexibility of women's roles illustrates that farm women's roles moved beyond the traditional responsibilities of urban women and "might require that [they] assist in the planting of the crop, stooking the harvested sheaves and carrying the dried sheaves into the barn. Before the development of threshing machinery, women would also participate in separating the grain from the chaff."<sup>62</sup>

The dual nature of the farm wife's role is effectively summarised by one prairie woman's perspective of farm life, which stated that: The want of household and field help is the only bug bear in farm life. I myself have for six seasons ridden the binder beside my husband, who handled the other[,] and I can do my 15 acres in a day too! I do this work because men are scarce and getting the crop off the field is a first thought. I do all my own housework, besides milking a dozen cows, churning and making every week a hundred pounds of butter for market.<sup>63</sup>

This woman's account of her life on the farm speaks to a couple of issues: it first illustrates that the responsibilities of farm women did not bind them to the household but rather required them to assist in the laborious work of field labour. Second, her memory of farm work indicates the inherent inequality on the farm – that "getting the crop off the field is a first thought," suggesting that the enterprise overrides housework. Though the farm wife may have felt like and acted like a partner in the business, her contributions were deemed less important. As Rollings-Magnusson states: "much of the burden of adapting to survive on the prairies fell on women due to the variety of the skills that they possessed or developed through necessity."<sup>64</sup>

The above reflection also provides a window into the distinct nature of the farm setting with respect to the division of labour—a division that was not a rigid one because farm women

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<sup>61</sup> Rollings-Magnusson, 225, 228.

<sup>62</sup> Rollings-Magnusson, 230.

<sup>63</sup> Linda Rasmussen et al, *A Harvest Yet To Reap* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1976), 52. The context of this quote was not given in Rasmussen's collection. There is no date or location given, nor did she indicate the author.

<sup>64</sup> Rollings-Magnusson, 235.

crossed the boundaries of traditional men's and women's work. Anthropologist John Bennett (1982) studied the southern Saskatchewan region in the 1960s and 1970s and argues that analyses of the family farm are incomplete if limited to the "usual economic terms" and must be contextualised in "cultural and behavioral terms" as well.<sup>65</sup> That is, economics does not solely account for the patterns of a family farm that undertakes both production and reproduction. Instead, a more comprehensive examination must combine the woman-centred farm household and the male-operated agricultural enterprise, which exist on a "behavioral continuum, separable for some purposes; inseparable for others."<sup>66</sup> He argues that this continuum, what he terms the *agrifamily system*, better integrates the social, cultural, and economic forces of agriculture and allows for a better understanding of the family farm. Furthermore, he maintains that, like the preceding authors, farm women and their contributions to the enterprise have been overlooked and undervalued. Though Bennett delineates between the household and the enterprise, designating women and men as "household" and "farm" managers, respectively, he nonetheless argues that past research has "failed to recognize the high degree of integration" between the enterprise and the family.<sup>67</sup> He emphasises that despite the separate roles of farm men and women, the latter's responsibilities, including their domestic work, must be factored in as economic contributions to the family farm; women are both "'household manager' as well as a partner in enterprise management"<sup>68</sup> in a setting in which the division of labour is not fixed.

While Bennett's *agrifamily system* is one of the first studies that calls for a better integration of the family and the enterprise, American rural sociologists Lorraine Garkovich and Janet Bokemeier further his analysis and argue that "one can view the farm family and the farm enterprise as interdependent social subsystems linked through the agrifamily household."<sup>69</sup> This

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<sup>65</sup> Bennett, 6.

<sup>66</sup> Bennett, 6.

<sup>67</sup> Bennett, 148.

<sup>68</sup> Bennett, 17.

<sup>69</sup> Lorraine Garkovich and Janet Bokemeier, "Agricultural Mechanization and American Farm Women's Economic Roles" in *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures*. Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles, eds. (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1988), 212.

perspective moves beyond the traditional economic/non-economic, productive/unproductive dichotomies of the family farm, defining it more as an entity than as a static, economic enterprise: "the agrifamily household is a social institution situated within a particular historical, social, and cultural milieu and composed of a complex network of interpenetrating and mutually dependent roles."<sup>70</sup> This theoretical framework is characteristic of the agricultural setting in Saskatchewan and, when applied to the Saskatchewan setting, helps to illustrate the dual nature of farm women's roles and that farm families did not always follow strict gender roles. Historian Julie Dorsch (1995) provides some context for Garkovich and Bokemeier's theoretical approach by highlighting the daily routines, perspectives, and experiences of four Saskatchewan farm women.<sup>71</sup> While somewhat limited in scope – a result of the minimal four interviews – her study nonetheless provides some insight into the daily lives of "ordinary"<sup>72</sup> farm women by going beyond the written record. Like other studies of farm women, Dorsch provides the standard discussion of their daily activities, including the early mornings, late nights, meal preparation, housework, and child care, but she also provides a discussion of the women's non-traditional roles. According to the four interviewed women:

To an already heavy household workload these farm wives added field work, barn chores, fixing machinery and building (usually as helper and parts "go-fer") and they were constantly on call to chase cattle or fill in when needed. Taken together, this group of farm women did all the tasks that farm men did. These women were clearly involved in activities usually defined as "farming."<sup>73</sup>

Most significantly, perhaps, Dorsch suggests that the "oral evidence contradicts the usual division of labour that describes the farm wife as responsible solely for the nurture, maintenance and reproduction of farm labour."<sup>74</sup> Thus, the realities of farm life did not lend themselves well

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<sup>70</sup> Garkovich and Bokemeier, 212.

<sup>71</sup> Julie Dorsch, "'You Just Did What Had to be Done': Life Histories of Four Saskatchewan 'Farmers' Wives" in *"Other" Voices: Historical Essays on Saskatchewan Women*. David De Brou and Aileen Moffat, eds. (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1995): 116-130.

<sup>72</sup> Dorsch, 116.

<sup>73</sup> Dorsch, 123.

<sup>74</sup> Dorsch, 123.

to domestic ideology and Homemakers' Clubs sought to remedy the inconsistencies between farm life and domestic ideology.

An analysis of Saskatchewan's Homemakers' Clubs illustrates that the rural women who joined the organisation were able to create for themselves a sort of rural middle class in order that they could attain a certain femininity and respectability in a setting that was often not conducive to doing so. Though their daily responsibilities and way of life differed from those of urban women, the members of the Homemakers' Clubs sought validation based on urban domestic ideology. As a result, nineteenth-century ideas of domesticity and definitions of true womanhood provide an interesting context in which to understand the farm women of the Homemakers' Clubs, their gendered role, and their contributions to farming and agriculture.

The study of Homemakers' Clubs in Saskatchewan contributes to an already well-established area of study that examines the roles and responsibilities of rural women. The goal of this study, however, is not to reiterate what has already been examined; rather, it is to look at farm women through the lens of the Homemakers' Clubs. This organisation was more than a mere group of women who met to exchange homemaking advice and provide a social setting for isolated farm women, though certainly that element did exist. Instead, they sought to improve the difficult conditions of their homes and communities through education and social activism. Certainly, Homemakers operated within the framework of a clear acceptance of women's predetermined roles in society—the name itself speaks to that; but membership in such an organisation also allowed them to integrate the realities of farm living with traditional notions of true womanhood, and thus created for themselves a respectable and feminine space in rural Saskatchewan.

Certainly, there are weaknesses in a study such as this one. On the surface, it would appear that this is just another study of a white, middle-class, Anglo-Canadian organisation and, indeed, that argument has merit. Club membership was predominantly white and Anglo-Canadian, despite their claim of remaining non-partisan and non-sectarian. As a result, there is no discussion of the lives of farm women in ethnic communities or bloc settlements, for

example, whose experiences would have been fundamentally different from the Homemakers. Nor is there a discussion of any women who were not members of the organisation. Thus, this study is not a comprehensive examination of farm women in Saskatchewan, nor does it claim to be one. It is an analysis of an organisation that has received very little study in its own right.

What is also missing from this study is men. By that I mean that, in discussions of the farm family and the emphasis on women's roles, responsibilities, economic contributions, and their undervaluation in the farming venture, the other half of the family equation is missing. A "family" farm in turn-of-the-century western Canada did not exist without the farmer himself and to focus exclusively on farm wives is to ignore half of the enterprise. It is unfortunate that there are very few, if any, analyses of men on Saskatchewan farms. Certainly there are economic analyses of the structure of western Canadian agriculture that examine marketing, grain handling, railway monopolies, and settlement patterns; however, these are not investigations of the farmer himself, nor of his masculinity, which is as much a social construction as is femininity. Questions beg to be answered: have academics just made assumptions about how men experience farming and rural life? How did definitions of masculinity contribute to men's perceptions of their roles on family farms? How much did they internalise the external issues related to agrarian capitalism, such as markets, prices, environmental concerns, crop failures, or debt? Did the blame for the failure of a farming venture fall on those external factors? Or did men perceive themselves as personal failures who were unable to support their families through agriculture? For many rural men, farming was not simply a business, but a way of life that defined them; it would be invaluable to have a better understanding of masculinity in the context of farming enterprises.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Cecilia Danysk examines masculinity in a western Canadian context but does not focus specifically on the farmer himself. Rather, she examines the role of farm labourers and their experiences in the prairie west. See *Hired Hands: Labour and the Development of Prairie Agriculture, 1880-1930* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1995). For a specific study of masculinity in a prairie context, see R. Rory Henry, "Making Modern Citizens: The Construction of Masculine Middle-Class Identity on the Canadian Prairies, 1890-1920" in *Toward Defining the Prairies: Region, Culture, and History*. Robert Wardhaugh, ed. (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2001): 79-89.

The following chapters trace the ideologies and activities of the Homemakers' Clubs from their origins in 1911, to their peak in the interwar years, and culminate in a post-war setting that was fraught with concern about a changing rural scene and evolving ideologies about the roles of women in society. Chapter two examines the formative years of the organisation and demonstrates that for many farm women, the Homemakers' Clubs filled the void of isolation and the need for social contact. It also illustrates how the University of Saskatchewan undertook a rural campaign to provide educational activities for farm women that served to legitimate women's roles as farm wives. Furthermore, in its goal to professionalise farm woman's responsibilities, the university reinforced gender divisions between men and women and promoted a domestic ideology for farm women. Finally, this chapter connects the philosophies of the Homemakers' Clubs with the popular suffrage and reform campaigns of the day and illustrates that while their objectives were based on the similar ideology of extending a maternal influence into the public realm and promoting the interests of home and country, they diverged in their approach toward this turn-of-the-century Victorian ideology.

Chapter three furthers the connection between the University of Saskatchewan and the Homemakers' Clubs and addresses the central role that the university played in administering the rural organisation. Moreover, it examines the clubs' educational foundations and illustrates how, with direction from the university, the Homemakers' Clubs were able to flourish, since the university provided local clubs with guest lecturers, educational pamphlets, and short courses that would improve their homemaking and farming skills. Moreover, the support from a respectable institution such as the university also served to legitimate and professionalise farm women's work. At the same time, however, and despite much control by the university vis-à-vis acceptable topics of discussion and education, the organisation also became a space in which Homemakers began to explore political topics such as birth control, dower laws, the status of women, and legal recognition of their work. This chapter, then, examines those topics and illustrates the ways in which Homemakers were more than just a traditional organisation that exchanged recipes.

Chapter four traces the rapid agricultural change that occurred in Saskatchewan in the post-war years, assesses the impact of that change on rural life, and examines the ways in which the Homemakers' Clubs confronted it. Concern within the organisation grew, for example, as the arrival of new technologies, such as radio, television, and better automobiles, began to alter the face of rural Saskatchewan and threatened traditional family, social, and community values. The organisation also grew concerned as their membership began to decline. In response to these challenges, Homemakers' Clubs turned inward and continued to emphasise their pivotal role as farm wives, mothers, and community agents. In order to understand these challenges, chapter four examines the organisation in the context of a growing modernity and argues that, while the prevailing domestic ideology had sufficiently served the organisation in its first forty years—and was, in fact, embraced and celebrated by Homemakers—by mid-century, the clubs struggled to maintain a membership based on that traditional perspective. Moreover, this chapter illustrates that, despite the decline in membership, the organisation continued to embrace a domestic ideology and ideals of true womanhood.

Most importantly, the following chapters seek to explode a potential misconception that Homemakers' Clubs operated only to discuss recipes, housework, and child care when, in fact, local clubs took their discussion and activities much further. Because the women of the Homemakers' Clubs adjusted and redefined an urban domestic ideology to include their farming responsibilities, they created a space in rural Saskatchewan that served their specific needs. Moreover, while certainly the organisation's members operated within a traditional framework, they also pushed the envelope, so to speak. They subtly challenged the status quo and demanded validation and recognition for their work in and contributions to their farms and communities. As such, Homemakers' Clubs can no longer be perceived as just another traditional women's organisation that operated under a narrow mandate for women. Rather, they were quietly political in their own right and, as a result, merit further study.

## CHAPTER TWO:

### Beginnings

*"Any record of pioneer activities in Saskatchewan would be incomplete without the story of the Homemakers' Clubs."<sup>1</sup>*

*Miss Bertha Oxner, Director  
Department of Women's Work*

On January 31, 1911, the Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan became a formal organisation under the direction of the University of Saskatchewan's Department of Agriculture, providing isolated farm women with the opportunity to leave the household and farmyard and enjoy the companionship of other rural women who shared similar experiences. More than just social contact, however, defined the burgeoning organisation; rather, Homemakers' Clubs also provided farm women with access to homemaking education that not only assisted them in the operation of a farming household but also emphasised that the enrichment of home life would benefit both themselves and their families. Under the banner of "For Home and Country", this rural women's organisation promoted the popular turn-of-the-century notion that men and women functioned in separate spaces—a separation in which women were specifically suited to the household. Their commitment to home life would also contribute to a strong citizenship. This chapter, then, examines the establishment of the Homemakers' Clubs and provides an

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<sup>1</sup> Lorne Paul, *Extension At the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, 1910-1970: A History*. (Saskatoon: Extension Department, University of Saskatchewan, 1979), 78.



understanding of the intrinsic relationship between the organisation and turn-of-the-century domestic ideology that celebrated and embraced women's traditional roles. Moreover, it connects the feminist ideology of the day to the mandate of the Homemakers' Clubs and illustrates how the organisation reinforced notions of gender in a rural setting in the name of a quality home life and better society.

On February 19, 1897, the "world's first Women's Institute" was organised in Ontario – an organisation that established the foundation for future clubs across the country and which evolved into an international rural women's movement that continues to operate world-wide.<sup>2</sup> The impetus for establishing a rural women's organisation came from Erland Lee, a founder of the Ontario Farmers' Institutes who believed that "rural organizations were of benefit to both men and women."<sup>3</sup> Committed to the philosophy that farm women played an essential role in farming and, thus, deserved a formal organisation like that of their farmer husbands, he invited "domestic crusader"<sup>4</sup> Adelaide Hoodless to speak at the inaugural meeting. Well-known for her public campaign to educate women in their domestic responsibilities, Hoodless promoted the dominant Victorian ideology that men and women had separate, but equal, roles in society and, just as men required education to succeed in their ventures, women also deserved a proper education. Moreover, she did not believe that women had an inherent knowledge of domestic responsibilities; rather, she believed that "girls should be educated to fit them properly for that sphere of life for which they were destined...homemaking."<sup>5</sup> Thus, at the founding meeting of the Women's Institutes, she spoke to over one hundred women on the need to "concentrate on rural living from the women's point of view, to elevate the job of homemaking to the same level

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Ambrose, *For Home and Country: The Centennial History of the Women's Institute in Ontario* (Erin, ON: Boston Mills Press, c.1996), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ambrose, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Cheryl MacDonald, *Adelaide Hoodless: Domestic Crusader* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Ambrose, 19. Quoted from *Stoney Creek Women's Institute Tweedsmuir History*, Book One, p. 14.

as that of farming."<sup>6</sup> Following her speech, the Women's Institutes of Ontario (WI) became a formal organisation that became the forerunner to all provincial, national, and international Women's Institutes and Homemakers' Clubs.

At the founding meeting of the Ontario WI, Hoodless situated herself securely within the traditional, urban, middle-class Victorian ideology when she emphasised that farm women, like any other women, had separate responsibilities from their farming husbands. Monda Halpern argues, however, that "the promotion of separate spheres had little relevance on the farm, where the farmer and his wife both laboured, and where farm women compromised their unpaid domestic pursuits with some farming and income-producing work."<sup>7</sup> She illustrates, however, that the home economics movement that "pervaded North America at the turn of the century [and] addressed the nature of women's work in the domestic sphere"<sup>8</sup> met a receptive audience in the WI women. Thus, even if rural Ontario women did not specifically identify with Hoodless' belief in strict, separate spheres for men and women, Halpern maintains that this "feminized character of domestic science appealed to farm women who had long valued female networks and rituals."<sup>9</sup> As a result, the rural women's organisation was founded partially on the growing popularity of scientific household management and partially on the ideology of the separateness of men and women. Given the pervasiveness of these perspectives at the turn of the century, it is not surprising that they were easily transplanted to the Saskatchewan setting. What is more, even amidst the challenges inherent in establishing the prairie region, these philosophies were flourishing by the early twentieth century.

That Ontario farms had already been well-established upon the organisation of the WI suggests that rural women's experiences in turn-of-the-century Saskatchewan would be fundamentally different from those in rural Ontario. That is, given that prairie agriculture was

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<sup>6</sup> Ambrose, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Monda Halpern, *And On That Farm He Had a Wife: Ontario Farm Women and Feminism, 1900-1970* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 59.

<sup>8</sup> Halpern, 52.

still in its relatively early stages, Hoodless' ideology of the separateness of men's and women's roles did not readily translate into the reality of establishing a farmstead, since women's labour was such a fundamental component of homesteading. That is not to say, however, that Saskatchewan farm women did not believe in a distinction between men and women, for it was this ideology upon which the Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan was based and allowed the women of this organisation to mould an identity for themselves that integrated their responsibilities on the farm with Victorian ideas of domesticity.

The most recent publication honouring Saskatchewan's Homemakers' Clubs indicates a simple reason for establishing an organisation for farm women: "They were lonely, and they needed help."<sup>10</sup> Given the scattered nature of the province's settlement pattern, farm women were especially prone to the deep feelings of loneliness and isolation – more so than men, who were more likely than their wives to travel to town, whether to purchase supplies, deliver grain, repair farming implements, or to participate in local organisations, all of which provided avenues of social contact. For farm wives, however, isolation and loneliness were serious realities of farm life. Upon the first anniversary of the Homemakers' Clubs, for example, the *Regina Leader* reported that "a large number of women than may be imagined have been lifted out of ruts; have been rescued from the utter loneliness and despondency of the stranger in a strange land."<sup>11</sup> Mrs. Emma Ducie, provincial club president from 1926-1929, also recalled that "for the pioneer women, the snows of the prairies stretched stark and seemingly endless as if shutting out the world. Just to hear the sound of another voice, to drink a social cup of tea, and to feel again the impact of personality on personality was what women wanted so much."<sup>12</sup> Ten years after the official organisation of the clubs, University of Saskatchewan President Walter

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<sup>9</sup> Halpern, 52.

<sup>10</sup> *Legacy: A History of Saskatchewan Homemakers' Clubs and Women's Institutes, 1911-1988*, (Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Women's Institute, 1988), 1.

<sup>11</sup> "A Year's Progress of Saskatchewan Homemakers," *Regina Leader*, May 3, 1913. Magazine section, page 1.

<sup>12</sup> Paul, 76.

Murray recalled that "the social features of the Homemakers' Clubs bring hope and happiness into the lives of many who would otherwise be left to fight their battles alone."<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the Hawarden District Homemakers' Club recalled that "the longing for companionship, for exchange of ideas and for contact with others in the arena of life was fulfilled by active membership in the Homemaker's [sic] club."<sup>14</sup> Consequently, when the University of Saskatchewan organisers sought to implement a rural women's organisation, they did not have to look to far in order to discover a pre-existing need in rural Saskatchewan.

In addition to the isolation, many women, "unfamiliar with the conditions and customs of a new country,"<sup>15</sup> were forced to adjust to an entirely new way of life and found themselves "thrust into a situation...where a lot of [the farm's] self-sufficiency depended directly on the efforts of the farm wife."<sup>16</sup> Particularly for women who had arrived from urban areas, the operation of a farming household was significantly different than life in an urban setting. Aside from the traditional responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing, farm wives' responsibilities expanded to outside work such as gardening, which also included the canning, preserving, and pickling of the produce, as well as dairy and poultry production and field labour. For many farm wives, this new life required not only companionship, but advice and education in order to successfully operate a farming household. Moreover, given the intense isolation from the scattered nature of Saskatchewan's farms, the majority of rural women did not have the advantage of either a formal or informal group developed specifically to their needs as farm wives.

By 1909, the administration of the newly-founded University of Saskatchewan began to examine ways in which the university could reach rural Saskatchewan and, like many newly-established land-grant universities in the western United States, sought to extend agricultural

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<sup>13</sup> *Homemakers' Clubs, 1910-1920*. (Saskatoon: c.1920), 5.

<sup>14</sup> SAB, Hawarden District, *History of Hawarden District Homemakers*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> "A Year's Progress of Saskatchewan Homemakers," *Regina Leader*, May 3, 1913. Magazine section, page 1.

services and information to rural areas of the province.<sup>17</sup> As a result, the University administration, under University president Walter Murray, Dean of Agriculture W.J. Rutherford, and Extension Director F. Hedley Auld, began working to include rural women's education within the recently-created extension department, formed under the administration of the College of Agriculture. What is more, however, is that in their commitment to the education of rural women, the university administrators essentially institutionalised the dominant ideology of Victorian Canada, which reinforced gendered notions of men's and women's space. American rural sociologist Sarah Elbert, for example, maintains that "land grant colleges in the West enthusiastically took up domestic economy and domestic science....It Americanized, promoted a single middle-class standard for home life and institutionalized the notion of woman's proper, indeed her professional, place in household economics."<sup>18</sup> The fact that the University administration believed so strongly in the importance of and need for a rural women's organisation suggests that their commitment to rural women stemmed from a concern that farm women would not properly occupy their space. Thus, an educational program was needed in order to ensure that, as Elbert suggests, farm families attained a middle-class standard of living. This is not to suggest that these professional men had purely self-serving motives in the establishment of the Homemakers' Clubs; President Murray, for example, stated in 1920 that "kindliness, helpfulness, sympathy and appreciation become, through the Homemakers, unflinching sources of happiness and usefulness."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Murray's commitment to rural Saskatchewan was not limited to solely to the education of women; rather, as Michael Hayden

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<sup>16</sup> *Legacy*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Hayden, *Seeking a Balance: University of Saskatchewan, 1907-1982* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1983). Hayden summarises the establishment of the university by stating that it "had been a unique institution. It was developed as a university that was state supported but not state controlled. [President Murray] wanted a traditional university which taught the classics, literature, languages, philosophy, and history but which also emphasized the development of professional colleges...Through its associate course in agriculture, it serve in addition as a technical college; through its Department of Extension, it served as a community college." See page xvi.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Elbert, "Women and Farming: Changing Structures, Changing Roles" in *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures*. Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles, eds. (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1988), 253.

illustrates, "Murray was convinced of the importance of extension work by all members of the faculty both as a service to the state and as publicity for the university."<sup>20</sup> As a result, short courses and other events conducted for rural residents by the Department of Extension targeted both men and women of rural Saskatchewan. That the president saw Extension as a "service to the state" illustrates his commitment to the growing educational movement of the province. What is more, President Murray's enthusiasm toward the burgeoning education movement undoubtedly contributed to the institutionalisation of women's work by professionalising not only their roles on family farms, but men's agricultural pursuits in general. Certainly, Murray saw an importance in the organisation that went beyond the institutionalisation of women's work and which spoke to the social nature of the Homemakers' Clubs. Nonetheless, the administration's ideology reinforced the philosophy of gendered space in turn-of-the-century Canada and it is this ideology that became firmly established in the formation of the Homemakers' Clubs.

Whatever the University administration's motivation, however, farm women were the primary beneficiaries of the University's initiative and in order to determine the level of interest in a women's organisation, Auld organised a series of meetings for the winter of 1910-11 along the CPR main line, east of Regina, working in conjunction with local agricultural societies. This initiative also led Auld to work with Lillian Beynon, writer for the *Manitoba Free Press* women's pages and who had for some time been advocating for an organisation similar to Ontario's Women's Institutes. Upon Auld's invitation to work temporarily for the Extension Department, Beynon took leave from her newspaper and organised Auld's campaign throughout southern Saskatchewan. Over the course of late winter 1910, she visited eleven communities, talked to women about the idea of establishing an institute, and helped start the first official

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<sup>19</sup> *Homemakers' Clubs, 1910-1920*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Hayden, 68.

Homemakers' Club at Broadview in late November 1910.<sup>21</sup>

By January 1911, after extensive travels throughout southern Saskatchewan and many discussions with farm women, it had become clear that the need for a formal organisation existed among rural women since they responded enthusiastically to the organisers and subsequently formed the grassroots membership fairly quickly. Beynon, for instance, wrote to Auld from her travels, stating that she was finding people "eager to organize"<sup>22</sup> and that there existed "districts where both men and women wish to organize & I'll be blest if I know what to do with them. It is the rural districts especially that need and wish these clubs."<sup>23</sup> The 1988 celebratory publication also maintains that the "speed with which the Homemakers' movement came into being in Saskatchewan was a reflection of the need, and the readiness of the women to organize"<sup>24</sup>—a readiness which suggests that, as women responded eagerly to the possibility of a rural women's organisation, they also realised that they required assistance. They needed someone to effectively organise and coordinate on their behalf in order to successfully institute the clubs on an official level. Beynon received a letter from a Lloydminster-area woman in the summer of 1911 with such a request:

The women of the Southminster School District would be glad if you would kindly tell them how to organize, and carry on a branch of the Homemakers' Clubs in a large rural district. We have already obtained permission to hold meetings in the school, and most of the women for four or five miles around have promised to join, if a club is organized. In what way will the department of Agriculture lend assistance in subscribing for [*sic*] Household magazines and how can we obtain that assistance? Can you tell us any practical plans for distributing same [*sic*] quickly and fairly? What is the charter granted by the University of Saskatchewan and how can we obtain it[?]<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, the need for such groups is also illustrated by the establishment of local groups that predated the university's initiative. In the south-east corner of the province, for example, the Rocanville-area women had organised an informal meeting group called the

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<sup>21</sup> *Legacy*, 2. Broadview was the first of eight clubs organised on Miss Beynon's trip.

<sup>22</sup> *Legacy*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Legacy*, 2. Quoted from SAB, Ag.Soc., HC, R26D, I.169, Beynon to Auld from Broadview, 19 November 1910.

<sup>24</sup> *Legacy*, 2.

Prosperity Homekeepers Society in 1907, where six women met at one's home to "consider the forming of some sort of women's society, of which they all felt the need,"<sup>26</sup> and, "very quickly," the club grew to fifty members.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the Open Door Circle of Mair was established in 1909, while the Broadview Women's Club has been named the "first forerunner of Homemakers' Clubs in Saskatchewan."<sup>28</sup> That farm women had created these local groups illustrates the need in rural Saskatchewan for a social outlet, as well as an opportunity to exchange strategies necessary to survive in the developing agricultural communities. While small groups suited many women's needs for companionship and advice, a provincial organisation provided access to resources and a "formal" education. Thus, when the Homemakers' Clubs became an official organisation, these already existing local groups amalgamated with the new association because, as the Mair women's group stated in 1920, "the rules did not need much changing as they were not much different."<sup>29</sup>

The demand for a formal women's group resulted in a convention at the end of January, 1911, when forty-two delegates from eighteen centres across the province travelled to Regina and united the scattered rural women's clubs under the banner of the Association of Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan, whose administration fell under the Department of Extension. Director of Women's Work Bertha Oxner recalled in 1939 that "Strictly speaking, they came as representatives of a number of isolated women's clubs and went home as members of a provincial organization."<sup>30</sup>

The January conference had an impressive slate of guest speakers and Hedley Auld had "left no stone unturned," choosing the speakers "with care [for] their expert knowledge."<sup>31</sup> They included the organiser, Lillian Beynon; E. Cora Hind, agricultural and livestock editor of the

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<sup>25</sup> *Legacy*, 4. Quoted from SAB, Ag. Soc., HC, R26D, I.167, Ivy Street to Lillian Beynon.

<sup>26</sup> *Homemakers' Clubs, 1910-1920*, 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Paul, 77.

<sup>29</sup> *Homemakers' Clubs, 1910-1920*, 13.

<sup>30</sup> *Retrospect and Prospect: The Silver Cord and the Golden Chain* (Saskatoon: c.1939), 21.



*Manitoba Free Press*, Mrs. Catherine (W.R.) Motherwell, occasional writer for *The Grain Growers' Guide* and wife of Saskatchewan's minister of agriculture; Mary Mantle, writer for the *Nor'West Farmer* and sister of Saskatchewan's deputy minister of agriculture; and Nellie McClung, writer and political activist. Not only were all the speakers well-known public figures but they were also well-known suffragists; and while they did not address the suffrage movement at the Homemakers' convention in any way, their maternal feminist ideology was nonetheless apparent. As such, while they emphasised the fundamental role of women in farm life and stressed that their contributions to the family farm were integral not only to the success of the farming venture, but also to the establishment of agriculture itself, the speakers were also clear that the success of the farm depended upon the specialisation of wives and husbands in their areas of expertise. To that end, the speakers promoted the rapidly growing and very popular home economics movement that pervaded North America at this time and addressed the specific roles for which farm women were responsible. Moreover, by advocating the growing professionalisation of household work, these speakers brought to the convention a level of validation to farm women's work by elevating it to professional status. Thus, the presence of these well-known speakers at the Homemakers' Clubs' inaugural convention not only served as an endorsement of this newly-formed women's organisation but also served to reinforce the ideology of separate spheres to which they adhered. Conversely, these well-known suffragists undoubtedly welcomed the opportunity to speak to these rural women because, as Carol Bacchi maintains, Homemakers' Clubs were the "rural counterpart of the urban domestic science courses that most suffrage societies endorsed."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> "Homemaker Clubs Get Away to Splendid Start," *Regina Leader*, February 4, 1911: 8.

<sup>32</sup> Carol Bacchi, "Divided Allegiances: The Response of Farm and Labour Women to Suffrage," in *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s*, Linda Kealey, ed. (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979), 104.

Consequently, when Lillian Beynon addressed the audience about "the study of scientific homemaking,"<sup>33</sup> she promoted not only a gendered division of labour but also insisted that women's responsibilities in the home were equally as valid as men's; consequently, women required professional training in household management just as farmers needed to study soils and crops.

There are no doubt advantages in having men and women work together, but we find in life that if we are going to succeed we must specialise. Farming and housekeeping are no exception to this rule. The farmer will not have time to learn all the secrets of housekeeping, nor will his wife have time to learn about farming, if she is to master her own profession of homemaker. So that the idea in separating the men from the women is merely to save time, a commodity rather scarce in this western land.<sup>34</sup>

Clearly for Beynon, farm women's roles existed within a context of functionality in that the separation of men's and women's roles was utilitarian and that a division of labour was a matter of convenience, which would contribute to the success of the farming venture. What is more, Beynon's emphasis on the specialisation of men's and women's roles provided validation that farm women's work was, in fact, a profession in its own right. Not only could farm women now define themselves as according to a professional standard, but membership an organisation that validated farm women's work served to legitimate their responsibilities on the family farm. They were no longer simply "helpmates" in the farming venture. To reinforce her philosophy that homemaking was a profession in its own right, Beynon further argued that if farmers needed training in their profession pursuits, so too did farm women, thus raising the standard of homemaking to that of farming.

It is not long since agriculturalists discovered that farming is a profession. It is not long since they laughed at the book farmer—laughed at the idea of going to college to learn to farm. Now these same men send their sons to agricultural college and their daughters to take a course in domestic science. In the women's institute movement we find the recognition by the women of the fact that housekeeping is also a profession, and also that woman is *not* a natural born housekeeper. If men need to study how to feed the stock, how much more do women need to know how to feed their families. If men need to study the preparation of the soil for seed, much more should women study the minds

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<sup>33</sup> "Sask. Homemakers' Clubs to promote the interests of home and country," *Regina Leader*, April 15, 1911: 10.

<sup>34</sup> *Homemakers' Clubs, 1910-1920*, "Women's Clubs: Their Nature and Purpose," 25.

of the children that the soil there may be prepared to learn rightly the lessons life is every day teaching.<sup>35</sup>

The realities of farm life certainly did not lend themselves very well to a strict division of labour between men and women; however, Beynon effectively reinforced the fact that, through Homemakers' Clubs and the growing professionalisation of housework, farm women could define themselves by a profession and could create for themselves a respectable occupation that would contribute to family enterprise. Moreover, her emphasis on specialisation reinforced the gendered notions of men's and women's work.

Mary Mantle also sought to raise the value of homemaking but with a slightly different approach than Beynon; she equated it to another occupation traditionally held by women:

In the past a woman's work in the home did not always receive its fair meed of recognition. The wider outlook and the broader education which is ours today, should not result in weaning us away from the home, but rather in helping us to elevate its manifold duties to the rank to which their importance entitles them. Housekeeping is as much a profession as nursing.<sup>36</sup>

The professionalisation of homemaking signified that the role of farm wives was a veritable one. It also legitimised homemaking and reinforced the dominant notion that women were best suited to certain occupations.

Catherine Motherwell's address to the Homemakers' Clubs inaugural convention took a different approach and emphasised the importance of partnership between farm wives and their husbands, contending that it was an integral part of the farming venture:

Always remember that we are partners in this home-firm while allocating our money to the different branches of the work, and each carried out throughout the year that each may be in intelligent touch with the affairs of the other, as any business partners would be. Some think that this kind of business relationship between husband and wife would interfere with the domestic happiness and raise a barrier. No such thing—it breaks down barriers, promotes good fellowship, and inspires mutual confidence. Its success, however, depends on first our ability to convert and convince our husbands as to what constitutes true home partnership.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

<sup>36</sup> *Legacy*, 4.

<sup>37</sup> *Legacy*, 3-4.

Motherwell, clearly aware of the battle for equality not only on the political front but also on the home front as well, saw partnership as the logical path toward the common goal of a successful and viable farming enterprise. As well, like her counterparts at the convention, she maintained that, though men and women were partners in the farming venture, they also had "different branches of work" and, like any business partner, it was important that the "affairs" of each sex be closely monitored.

The perspectives presented by the conference speakers certainly stemmed from their urban, middle-class, and English-speaking backgrounds. Motherwell, for example, while emphasising the existence of a farming partnership, did not refer to farm wives' roles in the garden, in the yard, or in the field, nor did she point to the responsibilities of dairying or poultry-raising—a perspective that is not surprising, given her marriage to Saskatchewan's minister of agriculture, a successful and educated farmer from Ontario.<sup>38</sup> (Presumably, Mr. Motherwell employed hired hands for many of the functions that wives performed on less established farms.) However, despite the urban background of the speakers, the emphasis which the speakers placed on partnership, specialisation, and the professionalisation of homemaking clearly resonated with not only their audience but also with the many rural women who joined the organisation. The rate by which the Homemakers' Clubs grew, for example, suggests that the ideology of the organisation found favour with many rural women. Moreover, that rural women identified with the philosophy of the Homemakers' Clubs illustrates not only how intrinsically rooted Victorian ideology was in all levels of society but also that many rural women, like their urban counterparts, sought to define themselves by traditional notions of womanhood. To that end, the Homemakers' Clubs provided the education necessary to "inspire them with the dignity and significance of their profession"<sup>39</sup> and, as Dolores Hayden articulates, "provided control

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<sup>38</sup> Catherine married Motherwell in 1908. It was his second marriage, having lost his first wife in 1905. For a brief overview of his accomplishments in education, farming, and politics, see Gerald Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 315-16.

<sup>39</sup> Linda Rasmussen, et al, *A Harvest Yet To Reap* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1976), 122.

over all aspects of domestic life."<sup>40</sup> Thus, the organisation provided a space where farm women's work was recognised and validated; moreover, Homemakers gained power through this organisation and, consequently, were able to embrace their identity as farm wives through the professionalisation of their farming responsibilities.

The legitimisation of homemaking also allowed Homemakers' Clubs to redefine the concept of home by expanding its walls in order to create a distinct prairie definition of rural womanhood. This reconceptualisation did not confine women to domesticity but rather allowed them to embrace it and, as such, create a legitimate work place for farm women. That is, Homemakers' Clubs re-invented domesticity by incorporating yard and field work into its definition, which served to legitimise farm women's responsibilities within the developing prairie society. Certainly, this legitimacy was attained because their roles remained defined with the (expanded) household where there was virtually no challenge to society's status quo; they still conformed to the Victorian principle of a gendered separateness even if the reality of farm life did not fit so easily into such a paradigm. Homemakers, however, accepted the dominant ideology of the separateness of men and women and adhered to the discourse of true womanhood, which preached that women had a "duty" to remain "sustainers of the home,"<sup>41</sup> to create a better community, and to improve the nation through the teaching and moulding of children. In reality, of course, farm women were not restricted specifically to the household; as such, Homemakers redefined the household to include the garden, the yard, the barn, and, very often, the field itself, which resulted in farm women's dual workload. Thus, since this dual workload did not reflect the existing Victorian definition of womanhood, Homemakers' Clubs redefined the ideology to suit the prairie experience, which included their farming responsibilities, and created for themselves a legitimate role in western Canadian society.

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<sup>40</sup> Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 55.

<sup>41</sup> *Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan, 1911-1961* (Saskatoon: c.1961), 17.

The ability for Homemakers' Clubs to demand recognition for their work can also be connected to the growing politicisation of women through the suffrage movement, which coincided with the establishment of the organisation; both movements demanded recognition for women and both sought to improve society through the contributions of women. Esther Thompson, assistant to the Director of Women's Work with the University of Saskatchewan, articulated the Homemakers' philosophy in 1920, which also reflects the position of the suffrage movement and speaks to the maternal feminist nature of both organisations: "the Mother molds [*sic*] the character of our men and women, who tomorrow, will in turn, mold our national ideals and policies."<sup>42</sup> This prevailing ideology of the early twentieth century, which believed in women's inherent moral superiority over men, clearly found favour in both the Homemakers' Clubs and the suffrage movement.

Despite similar ideologies, however, suffrage groups and the Homemakers' Clubs differed fundamentally in how they applied those perspectives to everyday life. While both groups aimed to improve their communities and society at large, as well as sought to elevate the status of women, the suffrage campaign demanded the recognition of women through the vote; conversely, Homemakers' Clubs remained focused on the centrality of home life. Esther Thompson, again in 1920, maintained that, while she did not disagree with the suffrage movement, "education must precede legislation if permanent reforms are to be effected."<sup>43</sup> She further suggested that "women may, through the intelligent exercise of the vote, promote progress, yet the home is a greater avenue through which to better mankind and the world."<sup>44</sup> For Thompson, then, it appears that quality home life overrode the political nature of the suffrage movement and, while certainly women's suffrage was important, she felt that the home – and thus the homemaker – was the foundation to a better society.

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<sup>42</sup> *Homemakers' Clubs, 1910-1920*, 10.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

Not all women, however, were convinced of the effectiveness of an organisation based on homemaking and motherhood. In 1915, a woman wrote to the *Grain Growers' Guide* with the following perspective:

What do you think about this (Women's Institute) program? Is it not merely a program for very young school girls? Does this program speak to your heart and intellect? Does this program give us a larger field than the usual "women's yard"? Always suggestions about housework, knitting, and the main woman's destination: "preparing of dainty side-dishes and salads." Kitchen, kitchen and again kitchen!<sup>45</sup>

Francis Beynon, sister of Homemakers' organiser Lillian Beynon and active suffragist responded:

All great changes require much time and instead of being peeved about the domestic character of the program...I think you might find cause for thanksgiving in the fact that in the very first year of their existence they are studying parliamentary procedure, the history of their great women, and social settlement work in great cities. Be patient with these women's clubs, my friend, and you will see them grow into something better than either you or I could foretell.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, while both movements emphasised the fundamental role of women in society, the means by which they attained their goals differed. For the members of the Homemakers' Clubs, family, home life, and community service were the vehicles to an improved society and they took no official stand on the suffrage issue.

Despite the official non-committal stand on the suffrage issues, however, Homemakers discussed and debated the subject to the point that the Bradwell Club even stated in 1912 that they established their club for the purposes of "Home Management, education, libraries, public health and votes for women."<sup>47</sup> Moreover, given the similar ideologies of the Homemakers and the suffrage organisations, it is not surprising that a number of women were members of both groups. Local discussions and support for the campaign aside, however, the clubs did not publicly support the issue, as illustrated by the 1912 convention when a local club presented a resolution to support the suffrage cause. Lillian Beynon quickly vetoed the resolution (despite

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<sup>45</sup> Mary Nicolaeff, *Grain Growers' Guide, 1915* in *Saskatchewan Rural Women's Project: A Report* (n.p., 1985), 16.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* Francis Beynon, *Grain Growers' Guide, 1915*.

holding the position of president of the Winnipeg Political Equality League), due in part to the clubs' relationship to extension and the university, which were at arm's length from the provincial government. Her position, however, also related to the clubs' mandate to remain non-partisan. In his recollections of the formation of the Homemakers' Clubs, President Murray stated his concerns:

Well I do remember the Dean's anxiety lest the University become involved in party politics. There was no question that party politics had been the greatest curse of State Universities on this continent. Both political parties in Saskatchewan had publicly declared that there should be no political partisanship in the University, and the University authorities were equally anxious to avoid every appearance of the evil. This decision was responsible for the name, the motto, as well as the objectives of the Homemakers' Clubs.<sup>48</sup>

Murray's comment, however, is interesting when examined next to the fact that the main speakers at the Homemakers' Clubs organisational convention were all intimately involved in the suffrage movement. In fact, in Murray's 1939 recollections of the first convention, he stated that the driving force behind the organisation of the clubs was Lillian Beynon, Cora Hind, and Mary Mantle.<sup>49</sup> Certainly, Nellie McClung and Catherine Motherwell were also well-known political activists whose presence at the first convention illustrates that Homemakers' Clubs and the suffrage cause had similar ideologies, albeit with different approaches for the end goal. That is, for suffragists and Homemakers alike, a better society required that the home – and therefore women – serve as its foundation, as Mary Mantle told prospective Homemakers in the summer of 1911:

[I]f, as is commonly said, the home is the sunniest side of every great people; if it is there that character is shaped for life; if the home determines the state, then the homemaker is the pivot on which everything turns, and by its importance the work of the homemaker is dignified.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Legacy*, 8.

<sup>48</sup> *Retrospect and Prospect*, 10.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* For biographies of these women, see Rasmussen et al, 225. Beynon, for example, was intimately involved in Manitoba suffrage movement and helped found Manitoba Political Equality League in 1912. Similarly, Cora Hind was a member of the Manitoba Franchise Club and, like Beynon, active in the Manitoba Political Equality League.

<sup>50</sup> *Legacy*, 4.



Mantle effectively emphasised the centrality of home life and its intrinsic relationship to the nation; moreover, she illustrated that women not only played a crucial role in the creation of a moral society, but they also received legitimacy for doing so.

Despite the claim of non-partisanship, however, it appears that the developing political and early feminist ideologies were firmly entrenched in society and did not go unnoticed by Homemakers. The fact that some Homemakers sought to take a stand on suffrage issues illustrates that the organisation did not exist in a vacuum and that the members were not one-dimensional; rather, members were involved in other organisations aside from the Homemakers' Clubs. Moreover, despite the claim to remain non-sectarian, it appears that some local clubs worked closely with church organisations. Upon the organisation of the Kelso Homemakers' Club, for example, "their first work was to buy an organ for the use of the school and community."<sup>51</sup> Even more connected to the church was the Springside Homemakers' Club, whose "chief aim [after the war] has been to assist our church, which urgently needed help. We have now paid off the debt on it, which was of many years' standing, have paid insurance on it for the next three years, pay for its caretaking, and assist in any way necessary."<sup>52</sup> Undoubtedly, the role of the church was so innate in turn-of-the-century Canada that it was virtually impossible that it remain a separate entity from any aspect of the dominant society. For Homemakers' Clubs, this innateness meant that most local clubs operated, almost unwittingly, within an Anglo-Protestant discourse. That is, singing the national anthem, reciting the Lord's Prayer, or quoting scripture appears normative and an accepted element of the local club meetings. Non-sectarianism, it seems, was defined within Christianity since it appears that no Jewish women, as one example, were members of the organisation.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Homemakers' Clubs, 1910-1920*, 24.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>53</sup> Anna Feldman argues that, like most women on the prairies, Jewish-Saskatchewan women suffered the isolation and loneliness of farm life. As a result, they turned inwardly to their community in order to cope. See "'A Woman of Valour Who Can Find?': Jewish-Saskatchewan Women in Two Rural Settings, 1882-1939," in *"Other" Voices: Historical Essays on Saskatchewan Women*. David De Brou and Aileen Moffat,

The Anglo-Protestant nature of the clubs is also evident in the Homemakers' Clubs adoption of the motto of the Ontario Women's Institutes: "For Home and Country." Imbued with British imperialist language, this motto became the foundation upon which the organisation operated, intrinsically linking notions of womanhood with the moral fabric of society. That is, given that the dominant ideology dictated that home was the domain of women, by extension, then, women were responsible for creating a moral and ethical citizenship. Linda Rasmussen illustrates, for example, that "responsible motherhood was a theme common to the rural women's movement. In 'conservative' circles, the home was recognized as a component of the State; hence, homemakers were seen as nation-builders, with all the responsibility that entailed."<sup>54</sup> President Murray reinforced this ideology in 1920 when he stated that Homemakers' Clubs "represent the growing sentiment that women have a place and a duty to perform for the good of the community as well as the home."<sup>55</sup> The Homemakers organisation carried this motto with them throughout the decades, continuing to emphasise their fundamental responsibility to home life, to the community, and to the nation. Their role as Homemakers was to create a solid home life, and by extension, as Esther Thompson emphasised, mould "the character of our men and women, who tomorrow, will mold our national ideals and policies."<sup>56</sup>

Historian Georgina Taylor argues that "the Homemakers accepted a narrowly defined role for women."<sup>57</sup> Yet, this perspective does not tell the full story nor does it paint an accurate

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eds. (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1995): 60-75. Similarly, Mathilde Jutras illustrates that French-speaking women were isolated by their language, culture, and religion. See "La Grande Nostalgie": French-Speaking Women and Homesickness in Early Twentieth-Century Saskatchewan," in *"Other" Voices: Historical Essays on Saskatchewan Women*. David De Brou and Aileen Moffat, eds. (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1995): 41-59. By deduction, then, since the authors maintain that ethnic women turned inwardly in their struggles in western Canada, one can conclude that they did not join the Homemakers' Clubs.

<sup>54</sup> Rasmussen, 122.

<sup>55</sup> *Homemakers' Clubs, 1910-1920*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> *1910-1920*, 10.

<sup>57</sup> Georgina Taylor, "Should I Drown Myself Now or Later?' The Isolation of Rural Women in Saskatchewan and Their Participation in the Homemakers' Clubs, the Farm Movement and the Co-

picture of the organisation; in fact, it was specifically this "narrowly defined role" that enabled farm women to demand recognition for their work. As this chapter has illustrated, by identifying with and embracing the public discourse of the separate roles of men and women, Homemakers' Clubs celebrated women's traditional roles because they served to legitimate and professionalise rural women's work as equal importance to men's work. Similarly, an organisation devoted specifically to the needs of rural women also allowed them to incorporate their farming responsibilities into their definition of homemaking. More importantly, perhaps, while club women initially joined the organisation for social contact and to exchange homemaking advice related to cooking, baking, child-rearing, and the operation of a farming household, it did not take long for Homemakers to expand their mandate beyond its rural homemaking education. Rather, with assistance from the university, Homemakers' Clubs provided rural women with an education beyond the farmgate and gave them the opportunity to develop their own personal abilities through community service activities. And as the years progressed, the intrinsic relationship between the organisation and the university deepened and further institutionalised the notion that rural women's primary commitment was to home and country. Ironically, however, while the university sought to educate rural women in their responsibilities as Homemakers, wives, and good citizens, the value that the university placed on education and the importance of knowledge also led Homemakers to explore, discuss, and debate less traditional topics, as well as to challenge common perceptions of women; and in that sense, Homemakers' Clubs came to embrace a more political nature for which they have not been duly credited.

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operative Commonwealth Federation, 1910-1967" in *Women: Isolation and Bonding: The Ecology of Gender*, Kathleen Storrie, ed. (Toronto: Methuen, 1987), 90.

## CHAPTER THREE:

### The Foundation

*We want you to feel that the University of Saskatchewan is yours—that the teaching programme and the research work carried on there is helping Saskatchewan Agriculture and making it possible for your farm homes and your farming practices to improve.<sup>1</sup>*

*Margaret Pattillo, Director  
Department of Women's Work*

Imbued with the dominant ideology that a woman's realm rested within the home, Homemakers' Clubs began their formative years by offering companionship and basic adult education to rural women, the majority of whom had little contact with the world outside their homesteads and who, very often, desperately wanted assistance in their everyday household tasks and in their responsibilities to the farming outfit. And while homemaking was certainly well within a woman's traditional realm of responsibility, many women had also inherited new responsibilities related to farm living of which many had no previous knowledge or experience; the Homemakers' organisation provided them with that knowledge and information. And as club membership grew, so did the educational content at local meetings expand beyond household- and farm-related tasks to include current social, economic, and legal issues, providing members with information and education that was not always readily available to women in rural Saskatchewan. What is more, and despite the organisation's official non-

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<sup>1</sup> SAB, Nancy Adams Papers, "Aims and Philosophies of Women's Extension." Speech by Margaret Pattillo to visitors at annual Farm Week. August, 1949.

political and non-partisan stance, Homemakers' Clubs began to explore political topics, including birth control, dower laws, state medicine, and the lack of legal protection women faced. This chapter, then, examines not only the relationship between the Homemakers' Clubs and the University of Saskatchewan, and thus traces the evolving nature of the educational topics and community service projects, but it also argues that Homemakers' Clubs became a space in which its members could explore, discuss, and debate their status as farm wives in rural Saskatchewan. In fact, the organisation, by embracing traditional roles of women and promoting its educational mandate, inadvertently encouraged its members to explore topics of a more political nature in the goal to have their status as farm women recognised. Similarly, this chapter illustrates that although discussion topics and the educational aspect of the organisation expanded beyond the household and farm life, Homemakers never strayed from their commitment to "home and country", for it was precisely because of this commitment that the scope of the organisation did not rest solely on homemaking advice but challenged its members to explore and challenge their place in home life and in their communities.

The intrinsic relationship between the University of Saskatchewan and the Homemakers' Clubs was fundamental to the growth and success of the clubs in that the primary responsibility of Extension was to "take the university to the country"<sup>2</sup>; in essence, Homemakers' Clubs became the vehicle by which the university could fulfil the mandate of the Extension Department—to disseminate information to rural Saskatchewan in order to improve and develop both individuals and communities. This mandate of self- and community development defined the direction of the Homemakers' Clubs at the local, district, and provincial levels and created an intimate relationship between the organisation and the university from the moment that Director of Extension Hedley Auld initiated the organisation. Many rural women's groups had been

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

operating prior to the development of the clubs but when presented with the opportunity to become a formal club under the direction of the university, they eagerly joined the organisation, partly because they became part of a larger organisation but mainly because, given the limited opportunities for rural women to further their education, they welcomed the educational opportunities that would be available under the direction of the university. In the Conquest district, for example, the women's section of the United Grain Growers (UGG) had existed for a number of years but its membership required marriage to a UGG member; since Homemakers meetings "were educational, the groups felt that all women of the community should have the benefit of the meetings."<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the women re-organised under the Homemakers' Clubs and registered with the university in 1928, with the conviction that all women from the community deserved the benefit of education through the club organisation. Undoubtedly, given the club mandate of non-partisanship and non-sectarianism, the women who had been working within the UGG for better grain prices and improved marketing practices had to put aside their political activities – at least during official club activities – and operate within the boundaries of the Homemakers' Clubs mandate. This is not to say that discussions during the social hour did not include UGG-related topics or other potentially political issues related to market agriculture but within the official structure of club meetings, these topics did not surface, nor were they permitted.

The educational component of the Homemakers' Clubs was of fundamental importance to the administration of the university and, especially in the early years, Homemakers readily absorbed the university-distributed information and relied upon the university for direction. It has been argued, in fact, that the "administrative and educational support provided by the University was crucial" to the development of the Homemakers' Clubs.<sup>4</sup> Most importantly, perhaps, was Hedley Auld's careful supervision of the organisation, who kept in close contact

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<sup>3</sup> SAB, Conquest District Homemakers' Clubs, *History of the Conquest District*, [n.p.].

with the clubs by receiving local club minutes and providing educational information through bulletins and pamphlets.<sup>5</sup> This intimate relationship between Homemakers' Clubs and the university was also solidified by the fact that the Director of Agricultural Extension acted as the ex-officio secretary and managing director of the clubs<sup>6</sup>—presumably in order to assist with club development and offer encouragement as they established themselves. Undoubtedly, however, Auld also wanted control over the clubs in order to ensure adherence to the organisation's traditional mandate.

In the early years, farm women who had been suffering from the isolation and drudgery of farm work – often with little or no knowledge of the operation of a farming household – and looking mainly for companionship and advice on homemaking, flocked to the flourishing organisation. As a result, club membership grew rapidly. By 1914, only three years after the inaugural convention, the organisation boasted 140 local clubs with a membership of 6,000<sup>7</sup> and in order to better administer the rapidly flourishing organisation, the university created the Department of Women's Work in 1913, which became the administrative body for the Homemakers' Clubs. Thanks in part to the Dominion-Provincial Agricultural Instruction Grant, which granted the university \$80, 000 per year until 1924,<sup>8</sup> the Department of Women's Work thrived. In the 1915-16 fiscal year, the department received a total of 4,500 dollars of the agricultural grant, which represented 16 percent of the funds.<sup>9</sup> But as club membership and activity grew, so did the percentage of which Women's services received from the grant. By 1924, the Department had secured nearly \$16,000, which represented 57 percent of the

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<sup>4</sup> *Saskatchewan Rural Women's Project: A Report* ([n.p.], 1985), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Kerrie Strathy, *Saskatchewan Women's Institutes: The Rural Women's University, 1911-1986*. (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, unpublished MA thesis, 1987), 25.

<sup>6</sup> Lorne Paul, *Extension At the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, 1910-1970: A History* (Saskatoon: Extension Division, University of Saskatchewan, 1979), 80.

<sup>7</sup> *Retrospect and Prospect: The Silver Cord and the Golden Chain*. (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, Extension Division, 1936), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Strathy, 60.

<sup>9</sup> Strathy, 56.

agricultural grant given to the university and a 46 percent increase over the first year.<sup>10</sup> The exponential increase in funding over the course of eight years is a testament, perhaps, to the value placed on the Homemakers' Clubs and women's work in general for, clearly, the work of rural women – and thus their education – was invaluable to the university administration. Not only did the financial assistance provide for administrative costs, but it also allowed the department to cover the salary and travel expenses of its director, plus one other lecturer. By 1919, the department had been able to secure three more full-time lecturers.<sup>11</sup> At the end of the 1924 fiscal year, however, the department lost its funding when the granting program was terminated, resulting in lay-offs and a reduction in short courses and demonstrations for the clubs. Fortunately for the Homemakers, university president Walter Murray continued to fund the organisation from university reserves<sup>12</sup>—an indication that he and the university administration valued the Department of Women's Work, its goals, and the role of the Homemakers' Clubs in rural Saskatchewan.

With the creation of the Department of Women's Work, the university hired Abigail DeLury as the first director of the new department, who reported directly to the university president<sup>13</sup>—an indication not only of the organisation's importance to the university president, but also of the authority he held over both the new department and the Homemakers' Clubs, for she was an important link between the affiliated organisations. In the first year of the clubs' existence, for example, Lillian Beynon, who had been pivotal in the establishment of the clubs, was concerned that rural women, despite their thirst for rural homemaking information, would find access to educational literature from the university difficult to acquire. In the summer of 1911, just a few months after the founding convention, she reported:

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<sup>10</sup> Strathy, 56.

<sup>11</sup> Strathy, 56.

<sup>12</sup> Strathy, 56.

<sup>13</sup> *Legacy: A History of Saskatchewan Homemakers' Clubs and Women's Institutes, 1911-1988*, (Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Women's Institute, 1988), 6.



It was with many feelings of doubt in regard to the success of the work in the Homemakers Clubs, that I this summer started out to visit those organized last fall. My doubt was based on the fact that not one of the women in the clubs I had organized was familiar with the work they were attempting, and also because I had not been able to give them any literature...They were directed to write directly to the University for any information they wished, but as there was no one there whom they knew, or who was familiar with their particular needs, I did not expect that many would avail themselves of that help.<sup>14</sup>

The arrival of a strong and competent director, however, provided local clubs with the connection to university information and education that they coveted. Employed with the Home Economics Department of the Moose Jaw School Board when she accepted the position with Extension, DeLury was an "energetic and determined" woman, widely read, and "intimately involved in the direction and control of club affairs" and often lodged at the homes of club members.<sup>15</sup> Aside from her roles as facilitator of extension literature and administrator of the Homemakers' Clubs, that she often stayed overnight at the home of a club member also helped to solidify the relationship between local clubs and the university. Certainly, overnight lodging at a Homemaker's residence was a result of simple logistics, given the difficulty of travel at that time; however, it also gave DeLury the opportunity to better identify with the concerns and needs of rural women and to reinforce her commitment, as well as the university's, to the organisation's members. Moreover, as the relationship between club members and herself strengthened, DeLury was better able to reinforce the university's direction over club affairs.

Under DeLury, the organisation became well-known for its promotion of "good homemaking, neighbourly living, good citizenship and interest in all phases of adult education."<sup>16</sup> In 1920, amidst celebrations of the organisation's tenth anniversary, DeLury stated that the clubs were "to aim at more community effort; a greater emphasis on the cultural side of life; and education in citizenship; and simpler living," and to "preserve traditions of the home,

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<sup>14</sup> *Legacy*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Strathy, 61; *Legacy*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Strathy, 43.

integrity, tolerance, kindness and hospitality, and all other qualities of neighborliness."<sup>17</sup> Speaking in a language not unlike the guest speakers at the 1911 convention, DeLury connected the importance of a quality home life with its relationship to national development, thus institutionalising Anglo-Canadian values which easily filtered down to the local level.

In order to assist rural women as they established local clubs, DeLury composed a *Homemakers' Handbook*, in which she established standardised structure and specific guidelines for local club meetings and was available to any club. The result of DeLury's standardised structure meant that all clubs across the province followed a virtually identical format, which began with a welcome from the local club president, followed by the singing of the Club Ode and the secretary reading the minutes from the previous meeting. Subsequent to that, business arising from the previous minutes were presented, followed by any current business at hand, which usually involved fundraising activities, the treasurer's report, the reading of correspondence, and any other discussions that involved their current activities. Towards the end of the meeting, they passed a collection and ended with God Save the King or the national anthem. Once the meeting was closed, a social time began, which usually involved a light lunch with tea and coffee. Virtually no club differed in format, though at a number of meetings in the Woodlawn district, the Woodlawn Homemakers' Club recited the Lord's Prayer following the Club Ode<sup>18</sup> and a number of club minutes indicate that the meeting "opened with a hymn."<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, though the university – and thus the local clubs – remained adamantly opposed to anything political or partisan, it clearly promoted Anglo-Canadian values by singing hymns, God Save the King, and reciting the Lord's Prayer.

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<sup>17</sup> Paul, 80.

<sup>18</sup> Woodlawn Homemakers' Minutes, Meetings from October to December 1937; January 1938. Papers in possession of the author.

<sup>19</sup> See for example, SAB, Hawarden District, *History of the Hawarden District Homemakers*, 47; Plato Homemakers' Club, Minute book, January 14, 1917.

The incorporation of a structured format undoubtedly stemmed from the idea that the standardisation of club minutes ensured that clubs did not deviate from the pre-determined format. The authors of *Legacy* indicate that DeLury had the "ability to translate the formal rules of order for conducting a meeting in a relaxed and familiar style without losing for a moment her grip on the sense of order which legitimated [sic] the proceedings."<sup>20</sup> Certainly, the university's role in structuring the format of local meetings appears authoritative and dictatorial and organised within an Anglicised perspective. Yet, it is important to note that, especially in the formative years, rural women looked to the university for direction as they organised and established their local clubs, since many rural women had neither the knowledge nor the resources needed in order to structure meetings or organise a club. The standards and guidelines devised by the Director enabled inexperienced Homemakers to operate and thrive within their clubs while allowing rural women to feel a sense of connection to a province-wide movement.

The structured nature of the organisation's local meetings also complemented the educational component of club meetings which, in the early years, tended towards traditional homemaking topics often suggested by DeLury's *Homemakers' Handbook*. Her handbook, which contained a "comprehensive list of 'program topics,'"<sup>21</sup> assisted the early clubs in establishing some of their discussions, which, in the early years, given the emphasis that women's extension placed on the domestic role of women, centred around the traditional responsibilities of farm wives. In 1911-12, for example, the Bladworth homemakers discussed topics such as "how to store vegetables and preparing for winter," "how to make hens lay in winter," "deserts [sic]," and "cooking for thrashers or any large gathering."<sup>22</sup> Once a local club was well-established, it often set out its own discussion topics for the entire year, as the Bladworth Homemakers did in February, 1912, when they decided upon topics such as food

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<sup>20</sup> *Legacy*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Legacy*, 17.

values, paper bag cooking, salads, and canning and pickling.<sup>23</sup> DeLury's handbook also assisted Homemakers as they determined their annual agendas, which included the "endless and inescapable chores" related to the "growing, preservation, cooking and serving of food...as well as eggs, butter, milk, fruit and vegetables, preserved meats."<sup>24</sup> And while a number of these topics certainly would have found resonance with urban women, many other topics would not have applied to city homes for Homemakers' Clubs also provided information beyond the kitchen and assisted rural women with their farming responsibilities. Indeed, for women who had little experience cooking for large threshing crews, for example, the organisation provided the avenue by which they could learn how to fulfill their responsibilities at harvest time.

One of the unique ways in which information was propagated within the Homemakers organisation was through the forum of the roll call, in which members made a brief presentation at the local meeting, either on a topic of their choice or on one that had been determined in the previous meeting. In general, roll call topics involved information that could be easily researched or was familiar to the member who was presenting it.<sup>25</sup> In the early years, the most common topics related to traditional homemaking such as a favourite recipe or a household tip, but they could also include a literary quotation or information on a current issue.<sup>26</sup> These traditional homemaking topics remained an important element of Homemakers' Clubs, even as they entered the much later decades of the 1960s and 1970s, but never did the women limit themselves to such topics. Given the university's mandate of adult education, DeLury and her colleagues ensured that Homemakers looked beyond the farmgate to inform themselves of relevant issues and events, all of which related to self-improvement, better quality home life,

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<sup>22</sup> SAB, Bladworth Homemakers' Club minutes, August 10, 1911; September 14, 1911; December 14, 1911.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* February 8, 1912.

<sup>24</sup> *Legacy*, 17.

<sup>25</sup> *Legacy*, 17.

and the betterment of communities. DeLury, for example, suggested that local clubs examine issues related to primary education, medical services, citizenship, legislation, and the law, "especially law relating to women and children."<sup>27</sup> While certainly these issues went above and beyond helpful homemaking advice, they were nonetheless intrinsically connected to the overall mandate of "home and country." Moreover, these "comprehensive directions" were deemed "appropriate topics of discussion"<sup>28</sup> by DeLury and her colleagues. As the years progressed, however, Homemakers' Clubs expanded topics of education and by the 1930s, they were examining subjects such as cancer, traffic laws, state hospitals, tuberculosis, and dower laws.<sup>29</sup> By the 1950s, roll call had expanded to include topics such as "what our club has done to promote better citizenship among Young Canadians and new Canadians"<sup>30</sup> and giving a presentation on another country,<sup>31</sup> as well as members' favourite radio programs.<sup>32</sup> Roll call, then, included a wide slate of topics and was an avenue by which Homemakers presented information through which other members gained knowledge.

In 1919, Women's Institutes across Canada went national and, with that, local Homemakers' Clubs adopted another forum by which information and education were distributed. The Federated Women's Institutes of Canada (FWIC) enabled the rural women who were members of Homemakers' Clubs and Women's Institutes (WI) across the country to unify under one umbrella. Understandably, in order for a national organisation to function, a level of uniformity is required; thus, the FWIC established a form of standing committees, known as convenorships, to provide direction for local club activities and, undoubtedly, to provide a level of collectivity among the nation's many Homemakers' Clubs and WIs. The convenorships

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<sup>26</sup> See for example, SAB, Robin Hood Homemakers, Branch Report for District Convention, 1958; Blackey Homemakers' Club Minutes, April 13, 1950; McMillan Homemakers' Clubs Minutes, March 18, 1953.

<sup>27</sup> *Legacy*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> *Legacy*, 17.

<sup>29</sup> USA, RG 11s.4. Box 3, A, 2, a, June 15, 1931.

<sup>30</sup> SAB, Bladworth Homemakers' Club minutes, April 13, 1950.

represented Arts and Crafts (later Home Industries), Public Health and Child Welfare (later separated into two separate convenorships), Agriculture, Legislation, and Immigration. For reasons unknown, the Saskatchewan Homemakers did not incorporate this formula until 1924; however, once the provincial organisation introduced convenorships, local clubs incorporated the format, which streamlined discussions and provided a standard format for the educational mandate of women's extension. More importantly, however, pre-determined categories now set the agenda for local club discussions and, while limited to the seven standing committees, local clubs determined the specific topics for discussion. As a result, given the broad nature of the standing committees, local Homemakers could incorporate virtually any topic into their discussions. Over the years, for example, in the Hawarden district, the Agriculture convenor covered topics related to market agriculture as well as gardening, horticulture, changes in agricultural practices, tree planting, soil conservation, and flower arranging.<sup>33</sup> Like the standard format of monthly meetings, convenorships provided rural homemakers with a sense of interconnectedness, as well as the reassurance that all clubs remained committed to "the promotion of the interests of the home and community."<sup>34</sup>

The incorporation of convenorships into the club structure also provided a forum that enabled clubs to expand and diversify their discussions and, ironically, this new structure inadvertently introduced the self-described non-political Homemakers' Clubs to more political and potentially controversial topics that included parliamentary procedure, wills and estates, international relations, race relations, voting procedures, the larger role of women in politics, women in the economy, and the general status of women. And since the introduction of convenorships came at a time when many clubs had been firmly established for over ten years and, having already acquired substantial homemaking education from their club meetings,

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<sup>31</sup> SAB, Hawarden Homemakers' Club, *History of Hawarden District Homemakers*, 70.

<sup>32</sup> SAB, McMillan Homemakers' Club minutes, July 17, 1956.

<sup>33</sup> SAB, Hawarden District Homemakers' Clubs, *A History of the Hawarden District Homemakers*, 84.

Homemakers embraced the new forum of discussion which allowed them to diversify their topics and explore subjects that moved them beyond the traditional discussions of the household and farm. This is not to say, however, that these topics did not have a direct link to their roles as farm wives and rural homemakers; rather discussions of a more political nature had a direct impact on their status as farm wives. Thus, what may appear as a basic extension of discussion topics in the name of the Homemakers' educational mandate actually became the avenue by which its members could debate, in Veronica Strong-Boag's words, the "politics of everyday life."<sup>35</sup>

An example of the more political nature of the Homemakers' Clubs, and undoubtedly one of the more controversial topics, came in 1937 at the provincial convention when the Dinsmore Homemakers put forth a resolution calling for better information and access to birth control:

Whereas good authorities claim that at the present time so many are using unsafe and unsanitary methods of birth control, thereby causing unnecessary suffering and loss of life; and whereas statistics show many families are too large to be properly sustained: Therefore be it resolved that we urge the speedy removal of all barriers due to legal restrictions or other causes, which now prevent parents, who desire, access to such scientific knowledge on birth control as is possessed by the medical profession.<sup>36</sup>

Discussion of the resolution, however, was denied; the Advisory Board, established in 1931 to advise the Director on matters related to Homemakers' Clubs and to review convention resolutions, noted in their minutes two days prior to the convention:

That in view of the fact, that many members of our organization are opposed to the principles of birth control and have written objecting to the discussions of the resolution regarding it, we ask the Dinsmore Club, to with draw [*sic*] their resolution for this year.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Retrospect and Prospect*, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Veronica Strong-Boag, "Pulling in Double Harness of Hauling a Double Load: Women, Work and Feminism on the Canadian Prairie" *Journal of Canadian Studies* Vol. 21, No. 3 (Fall 1986), 32.

<sup>36</sup> USA, RG 11 s.4. Box 3, A, 3, a, Folder 3, June 9, 1937.

<sup>37</sup> USA, RG 11 s.4. Box 3, A, 2, a, Folder 1, June 7, 1939.

The Dinsmore club withdrew their resolution without incident.<sup>38</sup> However, the Advisory Board's comment indicates that the resolution had caused some commotion among club members, some of whom had obviously written in objection to the resolution. Moreover, the decision to deny debate over the resolution indicates that Women's extension had final say in topics of discussion and it certainly appears that the Homemakers' Clubs' relationship to the university did not always benefit local clubs and stifled a potentially important issue for some of the members. Undoubtedly, Dinsmore's resolution stemmed partly from the economic conditions of the 1930s and its impact on large families, but it also illustrates that the local club viewed the topic as important enough to forward to and discuss at the provincial convention. Interestingly, the language of the resolution also suggests that birth control was not the only issue; the reference to "unsafe and unsanitary methods of birth control" which "caus[ed] unnecessary suffering and loss of life" suggests that perhaps the resolution goes much deeper than the topic of birth control to include the termination of pregnancy. Perhaps most importantly, however, despite its withdrawal at the convention, the Dinsmore resolution indicates that this topic was, in fact, being discussed and debated at the club level; moreover, it illustrates that even within the organisation's traditional mandate and under a sort of cloak of respectability, Homemakers' Clubs demanded autonomy over women's bodies and challenged the authority that pre-determined their choices.

Similarly, the women of the Homemakers' Clubs demanded legal recognition for their unpaid work on the family farm and challenged the fact that they had little legal standing when it came to the ownership of the farming enterprise. As such, the political nature of the organisation is clearly illustrated through the Legislation convenorship, under which Homemakers advocated for changes in legislation that would better reflect their contributions to the family farm and would provide them with the legal recognition of which they were so

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*



deserving. As early as 1930, for example, the Mantario Homemakers "discussed and debated at length the 'Statutory Property Rights of Married Women' in Saskatchewan."<sup>39</sup> Though the minutes do not record the discussion, the topic itself suggests that Homemakers endeavoured to learn as much as possible about their legal standing within the farming enterprise since the regulations of the state obviously affected their everyday lives. What is more, this fundamental issue was clearly an on-going one because twenty years later, Homemakers continued to not only educate themselves on this topic but also pushed for legal changes (that had obviously not yet been made) that would provide them with protection over their livelihoods. In the Blackley district, for example, the minutes indicate that in November 1955, the Legislation convenor "gave a very interesting paper on Women's rights and settling of estates."<sup>40</sup> Again, though there is no record of the exact discussion that took place, one can speculate that the convenor's paper engaged the group in an exchange of ideas relating to women's property rights, the impact of a spouse's death on their everyday lives, and, undoubtedly, their lack of legal protection in this regard.

The importance that the Homemakers placed on this issue is also illustrated by the fact that, in that same year, a number of clubs took their local discussions of property rights to the provincial level by forwarding a number of resolutions to the provincial convention for further debate. And the fact that a number of local clubs brought forward similar resolutions suggests that many of the local organisations had been engaged with this issue throughout the year. The Simpson Homemakers' Club is representative of those that were brought forward:

Whereas under present federal law, when a married man dies leaving a taxable estate, the entire estate is taxed and, whereas most married women in Saskatchewan work as hard as do their husbands to help build up an estate; therefore, be it resolved that we, the members of the Saskatchewan Homemakers' Clubs, respectfully request the Federal Government to consider wives as marriage partners with their husbands and to change the law so only one half of an estate is taxable after the death of a husband.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Mantario Homemakers' Clubs, *History of the Mantario District Homemakers*.

<sup>40</sup> Blackley District Homemakers' Clubs, Club minutes, November, 1955.

<sup>41</sup> USA, RG 11s.4. Box 3, A, 2, a, Folder 4.

Like the partnership that Mrs. Motherwell had spoken to over forty years earlier, these women continued to demand recognition as partners under the law since their work contributed to "building up an estate" as much as their husbands' work did.

Not only was their partnership on the family farm not legally recognised but neither were their farming responsibilities and contributions, which were provided to the farming enterprise in the form of unpaid work. As such, just as they had discussed and debated, and subsequently appealed for, property rights, as early as 1937, club members had also demanded that housework be recognised as an occupation under the law. At the provincial convention that year, a resolution was carried that spoke to that demand:

Whereas, as housework by the wife in the census, is classified as 'not a gainful occupation', and whereas most wives in the home do the work of a seamstress, cook, nurse, gardner [*sic*], etc. etc. etc. any of which is classified as 'a gainful occupation': Be it resolved that we protest against the same to the statistical Dept. at Ottawa so that the change may be made before another census is taken.<sup>42</sup>

Certainly, passing resolutions did not necessarily mean that a law was changed or an issue was resolved; however, like the birth control issue, these legal debates and resolutions illustrate the political undertones of the organisation and indicate that the Homemakers' Clubs went beyond the exchange of recipes and household advice. Moreover, these discussions and debates illustrate that for Homemakers, who did not, for example, campaign for the vote or take an official stand on other potentially controversial issues of the day, their workplace existed within the home and on the farm and, thus, the personal was political. As such, Homemakers' Clubs demanded public and legal recognition for fulfilling their responsibilities in their workplace.

The organisation also engaged its members in other relevant topics of the day with the idea that, empowered with knowledge, Homemakers' Clubs could work for the improvement and betterment of others in society. In that respect, by the early 1950s, many local clubs began to

explore the realities of life for First Nations people and sought not only to learn more about their way of life but they also attempted to assist Indian people in their contemporary struggles. While most clubs appear to have had a certain respect for traditional First Nations way of life as well as a sense of regret for Indian people and the loss of a way of life, their Anglo-Canadian perspectives tended to prevail over that sense of despondency. For the most part, their firm commitment to personal improvement and community service contributed to their belief that integration into mainstream society would benefit Indian people and ultimately lead them out of a life of poverty. Concern grew, for example, when, in 1965 at the Blackley District convention, Homemakers heard William Bellegarde, chief of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians, speak to the fact that out of 121 reserves in the province, only three had electricity and ninety percent lived on welfare.<sup>43</sup> He also informed them of the proposed construction of an Indian Conference and Training Centre. The Blackley District clubs pledged to furnish one room,<sup>44</sup> which certainly suggests that clubs were prepared to assist Indian people in order that they improve their quality of life. When Blackley District member Mrs. Ulrich guest spoke at the Robin Hood local meeting a few weeks later, she repeated Chief Bellegarde's information, concluding her address by stating that "we with our good ways of life should share with the less fortunate."<sup>45</sup>

In the North Battleford area, the McMillan Homemakers also studied First Nations people. In 1953, Mrs. Shepherd "read an article on a woman chief of an Indian tribe" and in July of the same year, Mrs. Arsenault "gave an article on the Church, a mother to the Indians."<sup>46</sup> In November 1955, the "Legislation report noted improvement in Indian standards of living, education and farming methods."<sup>47</sup> By the early 1960s, however, Homemakers' Clubs took a somewhat more active approach in their concern for Indian people in Canada, more than likely a

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<sup>42</sup> USA, RG 11s.4. Box 3, A, 3, a, Folder 3.

<sup>43</sup> SAB, Blackley District Homemakers' Club, District convention, 1965.

<sup>44</sup> SAB, Blackley District Homemakers' Club,

<sup>45</sup> SAB, Robin Hood Women's Institute minutes, 1965.

<sup>46</sup> SAB, McMillan Homemakers' Club minutes, May 20, 1953; July 15, 1953.

result of the growing politicisation of First Nations people at the time. At the 1968 provincial convention, a resolution called for better integration of "Indians into mainstream society through education and the eradication of racism."<sup>48</sup> The resolution read:

Whereas the Indian People of Canada have forwarded a list of resolutions to the Government of Canada from the National Conference of Indian and Northern Education aimed toward overcoming inadequate education BE IT RESOLVED that the Association of Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan endorse these requests.<sup>49</sup>

One of the requests put forth by the National Conference of Indian and Northern Education – and therefore supported by Homemakers – called for the "deletion from all textbooks and media or references against Indians and inclusion of full credit for their contributions to the history of Canada, as well as elimination of all references to Indians as savages."<sup>50</sup>

Perhaps the most intriguing way in which Homemakers' Clubs learned about the role of First Nations people in Canada was through their club histories. In 1951, Lady Tweedsmuir – wife of Canada's Governor General and very active in the Women's Institutes in England and Canada – donated three Silver Cups to the FWIC to be awarded biennially to winning clubs in approved competitions. One of these competitions, the "Tweedsmuir History", encouraged Homemakers' Clubs to research, interview, discover, and write about their community's history.<sup>51</sup> For many, their community history began with First Nations culture and way of life prior to European settlement and in most cases, club histories respected and honoured their predecessors' culture. The Ethelton club, for example, referred to Indian people as the "original owners and inhabitants" of the land, who had been "pushed aside for homesteaders."<sup>52</sup> In fact, the Ethelton Village History painstakingly traced the experience of First Nations people of the area from pre-contact to the present day, and painted a dismal picture of poverty, rejection by

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, November 16, 1955.

<sup>48</sup> USA, RG 11s.4. Box 4, A, 3, a, Folder 8.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> In 1951, the Pense Homemakers' Club won third place in the national standings for their local history and in 1953, took home first place.

mainstream society, illness, destitution, and lack of education.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the women who researched the community history appear to lament the loss of the traditional Indian way of life.

We pause to wonder. Is this magnificent race which roamed the plains long years before the white man? Are these the braves who rode beside the ponderous buffalo and killed him with the slender arrows? Are these the maidens comely and gay who sat beside clear springs and trailed ebon[y] tresses of hair on their limpid surfaces? Is this the race that wore so proudly its buckskins, beads, bear claws, war paint and feathers? That they should come to this within this century of their dispossession!<sup>54</sup>

Certainly, it is clear that their historical understanding of the pre-contact period was based on the romanticised images of the noble warrior and the maiden woman but it also reveals the fact that mainstream society could easily – and guiltlessly – discuss pre-contact First Nations because that context did not address the problems facing Indian people in contemporary society, nor did it confront the issues relating to the relationship between the two peoples. Nonetheless, it points to a sensitivity that, arguably, was not a common perspective in the immediate post-war setting in Canada. In fact, included in the village history was Homemaker Caroline Busby's four-stanza poem entitled "Red Man's Land" in which she "hails the land of the Red Man" for its grain, timber, river, and forests and, introspectively, notes that Europeans took all the best from the Indian people – freedom, food, clothing, shelter, shuffled them to a "tight little area" and treated them like "pariahs."<sup>55</sup> Her solution does, however, speak to the perspective of mid-century, Anglo-Canadians; that is to give them "education, citizenship, power [and] to raise him to where we all stand"<sup>56</sup>—a language representative of the mainstream, eurocentric ideology of the time that called for the integration of Indian people into Canadian society.

Like the Ethelton club, the Pense Homemakers included a brief discussion of First Nations people, which mentioned treaties and the fact that they had been corralled onto reserves where they "learned to eat the white man's food, wear his clothes, copy many of his bad habits

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<sup>52</sup> SAB, Ethelton Homemakers' Club, Tweedsmuir Village History.

<sup>53</sup> In the Ethelton area, the local Indian band lived on the nearby Fort á la Corne Indian Reserve.

<sup>54</sup> SAB, Ethelton Homemakers' Club, Tweedsmuir Village History.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

and suffer many of his diseases."<sup>57</sup> For the Hawarden District Homemakers, the answer to the "Indian question" was summarised, much like Caroline Busby's solution, in a slide shown at their district convention when it was suggested that the best approach was "training the natives to help themselves."<sup>58</sup>

While certainly the distinctive eurocentric perspective of the post-war setting is clearly reflected in the club minutes, histories, and conventions, it is not to say that Homemakers looked negatively upon First Nations people. Rather, their resolutions and calls for integration into Canadian society reflect their mandate of self- and community improvement. They believed fundamentally that integration would improve the fate of Indian people; and the fact that they called for the eradication of unacceptable racist terms – and racism itself – implies that Homemakers felt a genuine sense of compassion for the plight of Indian people. Thus, in order to improve their circumstances, integration into mainstream society was the best answer the Homemakers could comprehend.<sup>59</sup>

These less traditional topics, however, did not lessen the value that Homemakers' placed on their homes and communities; rather, they actually reinforced the notion that education contributed directly to the home and the community. The firm conviction that personal improvement through education led to improvements in both the home and the community was the foundation upon which Homemakers legitimised their new areas of discussion. Most importantly, better education gave the organisation a mandate to work within communities in their goal to improve the regions in which they lived.

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<sup>57</sup> SAB, Pense Homemakers' Club, *History of Pense*, page 29.

<sup>58</sup> SAB, Hawarden District Homemakers' Clubs, *History of Hawarden District Homemakers*.

<sup>59</sup> Indian Homemakers' Clubs did exist in the province but operated separately from the main rural organisation. Initiated by the Extension department in 1937, the first Indian Homemakers' Club was organised on the Red Pheasant Reserve, with courses including gardening, food preservation, child care, and sewing. Within three years, approximately fourteen clubs existed on reserves and by 1954, twenty-five Homemakers' Clubs existed on Saskatchewan reserves. However, the rural clubs did not integrate with those on reserves. That the main organisation proclaimed themselves unhampered by race or creed suggests that the proclamation only related to mainstream society. See "The Indian Homemakers," *Western Producer*, August 26, 1954, page 10.

Homemakers' Clubs' activities in their local communities were intrinsically linked to the educational mandate of the organisation—essentially, community service was the evidence of the clubs' commitment to the betterment of individuals and rural neighbourhoods. And while local clubs had originally organised mainly for the purposes of companionship and homemaking education, they quickly evolved into efforts in community service. Local clubs did not focus inward but became actively involved in bettering the community by organising a variety of different events – some educational, some leisurely, but all meant to improve the livelihoods of their friends and neighbours, as well as improving the physical surroundings. The Hawarden district's community history speaks to the role of Homemakers in the community at the same time as it commemorates their past Homemakers' dedication:

We have always had a suspicion that many women value their work too lightly. The members felt, perhaps, that their work was not spectacular, but that small, steady flame of love, courage and fidelity with which they dedicated themselves to their homemaking and Homemaker's [sic] Club work, provided the spiritual strength so much needed by their families and communities.<sup>60</sup>

At stake, they believed, was the mental, physical, and social well-being of their communities.

Almost immediately after the provincial organisation came into being in 1911, Homemakers' Clubs looked for ways to improve their local communities. Baby and child care clinics, where a local doctor conducted physical examinations on children, as well as travelling libraries, public rest rooms, donating pianos to schools, the care and beautification of cemeteries, and co-ordinating the construction of community halls were contributions to the communities in which Homemakers lived.<sup>61</sup> In the late 1920s, the Pelly Homemakers, aware of the lack of medical assistance in rural areas, put together a first aid kit for expectant mothers, which included drugs, soap, baby clothes, linens, to name a few, and was ready for the mid-wife when "maternity called."<sup>62</sup> The mid-wife left the kit with the family and Homemakers replaced

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<sup>60</sup> SAB, Hawarden District Homemakers' Clubs, *History of the Hawarden District Homemakers*, page 1.

<sup>61</sup> See Paul, page 85.

<sup>62</sup> SAB, Pelly Homemakers' Club, *History of the Pelly Homemakers' Club*, 6.

the supplies. Similarly, another club raised funds to pay for the church janitor<sup>63</sup> and in 1931, the Conquest Homemakers' Club organised fundraisers to sponsor a new health centre for the community, their "chief activity" during the Depression being local relief work.<sup>64</sup> In the southern portion of the province, the All Saints Church presented the Pense Homemakers with an old one-room Anglican church to be used as a club room.<sup>65</sup> The club room, however, was not restricted to club meetings and activities, but "was to be used for community purposes"<sup>66</sup> and by 1912, the Homemakers operated a library out of the building, at the disposal of anyone in the community. The club recalled that "during the first year the clubroom was used as a reading room and was open Monday and Wednesday for men with an attendant, and on Saturday evenings for both men and women."<sup>67</sup>

Community service was also very often affected by the events of the day. During the First World War, for example, Homemakers' Clubs' added patriotic work to their other commitments, knitting garments, sewing shirts and pyjamas, preparing quilts, and sending parcels of food to the men overseas. The 1918 Director's Report, for example, indicates that \$36,955 was raised by the Homemakers' Clubs for the Red Cross, in addition to the 18,400 quilts, socks, mitts, and bandages.<sup>68</sup> On a local note, the Grenfell Homemakers' Club's commitment to the war effort is illustrated in the 140 Christmas boxes sent to Canadian troops in 1917. Included in the box were butter, sardines, gum, nut bars, peanuts, boot laces, handkerchiefs, tooth paste, shaving cream, and a two-pound, home-made fruit cake, to name a few.<sup>69</sup> And while certainly their efforts were directly related to their commitment to their local communities, it is also important to note that patriotic work also fit well within their motto of

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<sup>63</sup> Paul, 85.

<sup>64</sup> SAB, Conquest Homemakers, Club History Book, [n.p.].

<sup>65</sup> SAB, Pense Homemakers' Club, *History of Pense*, 5.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>68</sup> *Legacy*, 11.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*



"For Home and Country" and served to reinforce the connection between their roles as mothers and the future of the nation.

Homemakers' commitment to their communities also included the social agenda and many local clubs organised or sponsored many social events. Fowl suppers, dances, Rally Days, summer picnics, and card tournaments were common activities that Homemakers put on. For the most part, money from fundraisers did not go into a club's account but was put towards charity, sponsoring a community event, maintaining a public rest room, or bringing in speakers for the many clinics they organised. Most importantly, Clubs did not organise community events simply for their own benefit, but believed fundamentally that social and educational events would benefit entire communities. Like their motto indicated, home and country was the root of their organisation and they took their responsibilities seriously. Homemakers' Clubs' motivations ran much deeper than simply assisting in the development of their local communities. Rather, their commitment to their core values of home and country and to the improvement of self, family, and community, lay at the core of their motivation.

In 1976, provincial club president from 1948-1951 Nancy Adams spoke to a group of women on the early years of the Homemakers' Clubs, stating that, like farmers, "women were forming clubs too, for community projects and for a little fun. They worked for schools for their families, churches for their souls and cemeteries for their dead. They quilted and sewed to keep warm and exchanged recipes and ideas."<sup>70</sup> This chapter has illustrated, however, that Homemakers' Clubs provided women with much more than just "community projects and a little fun." Certainly the organisation enabled women to improve their rural homemaking skills but it also provided them with a forum to discuss a wealth of topics, ranging from the traditional gardening and poultry-raising to the more political issues that affected their personal lives, such

as legal rights, the status of women, and birth control. In fact, despite the outward appearance of a traditional women's organisation, the Homemakers' Clubs provided rural women with a space to address the political issues of everyday life. However, these issues did not exist in isolation from each other; rather, the combination of companionship, education, and community service was the avenue to self-improvement which, in turn, enabled them to become better mothers, wives, and citizens in order to attain the objectives of improving home and country. Moreover, the organisation allowed them challenge common perceptions of women and demand recognition for their work and contributions to rural life. In doing so, Homemakers looked to the university for direction and the intimate relationship between the two organisations allowed the clubs to thrive. From the early years of basic homemaking advice and companionship, to the incorporation of educational convenorships and the community workshops and events, Homemakers' Clubs contributed vastly to the development of their rural communities. With the foundations firmly established, Homemakers were able to tackle the large issues that faced them as they entered the post-war years. Changes in agriculture and rural life, as well as the changing perspectives of women and their proper roles, were new issues that Homemakers faced. Homemakers' Clubs remained committed to "Home and Country" and continued to espouse a language of domesticity and true womanhood that they had embraced in the earlier years. This ideology continued into the post-war period, when the Homemakers' Clubs were forced to address, above all things, the rapid changes in agriculture and its effects on rural life.

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<sup>70</sup> SAB, Nancy Adams Papers, A591, E.46, "For Home and Country," Speech to the Saskatoon Public Library, December 5, 1976.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### Challenges

*"The years have brought many changes to our province  
and as Homemakers we should be concerned first  
with those changes that affect our homes and communities."<sup>1</sup>*

*Mrs. W.A. Thomson  
Provincial Club President, 1952-1955*

The post-war period ushered in sweeping changes that fundamentally affected rural life and compelled Homemakers' Clubs to evaluate their role in and contributions to rural life. The economic boom that followed the Second World War was partially responsible for the change in rural Saskatchewan because it provided the country with an overall sense of security and the luxury of a spending power not seen since the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> For rural residents, however, consumer confidence alone does not sufficiently explain the change in rural life; rather, farm and town families were also adapting to a general transformation of rural life that began almost immediately at the end of the war. Adaptation to rapid agricultural change, in the form of mechanisation, intensification, and increased production, combined with the arrival of electricity, running water, improved roads and automobiles, and better telecommunications became a way of life for the family farm by the early 1950s. Moreover, ruralites readily embraced the arrival of new farming implements and modern amenities as symbols of

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<sup>1</sup> USA, RG 11s.4, 23. Address to provincial convention by Mrs. W.A. Thomson, June, 1955.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Peter S. Li, *Making of Post-war Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996); Robert Bothwell, Ian Drummond, and John English, *Canada Since 1945: Power, Politics and Provincialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

modernisation, unconcerned about – if not unaware of – the significant social change that would accompany them. Rural modernisation also reflected a closer integration of rural and urban standards, both ideologically and in basic standards of living. For most rural dwellers, the urbanisation of farm living became a welcome sign of progress and modernity in rural life. However, it also resulted in a tension between the old and the new, between progress and the status quo. Thus, an interesting conflict of ideas occurred as rural Saskatchewan became more ideologically and materially like their urban counterparts, a development which conflicted with deeply-rooted, fundamental beliefs in the superiority of rural life. This conflict is evident in Homemakers' Clubs; this chapter examines that conflict and assesses how the impact of rapid agricultural change and the arrival of modern amenities fundamentally altered rural life and argues that these outside forces compelled Homemakers' Clubs to address these issues that fundamentally affected their roles as homemakers, mothers, and farm wives. In the process of confronting this change, clubs embraced those elements of modernity that they deemed beneficial, such as electricity, plumbing, and agricultural technology, and eschewed those that threatened traditional family, social, and community values. Thus, this chapter examines the Homemakers' Clubs in the context of a growing modernity and illustrates that, in the face of change, the organisation continued to emphasise the fundamental importance of homemaking and its contribution to homes and rural communities. That is, the prevailing ideology of true womanhood remained the foundation of the organisation.

High grain prices, good crop yields, acreage expansion, and, perhaps most importantly, world demand, marked the post-World War II agricultural setting in Saskatchewan. After fifteen years of instability, rural Saskatchewan readily embraced this agricultural boom. Moreover, the booming world market forced an immediate response by western Canadian farmers to meet demand, which led directly to the rapid expansion of agriculture. Thus, the combination of a booming post-war economy, world demand for grain, and a sense of

impatience to move forward after fifteen difficult years was the combination that led to a fundamental transformation of rural life.

The intensification of Saskatchewan's agricultural sector began with rapid mechanisation almost immediately at war's end. Without economic depression or war hindering their purchasing power, farmers responded quickly to world demand by investing heavily in machinery. Between 1926 and 1951, for example, the number of tractors on Saskatchewan farms grew from 26, 700 to 106, 700—an increase of 400 percent.<sup>3</sup> What is more, half of this increase occurred in just five years, between 1946 and 1951.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the number of binders – harvesting machines at one time viewed as the latest and most productive innovation in prairie farming – dropped by 170 percent.<sup>5</sup> In 1964, civil servant John Dawson described the post-war setting as "being in the throes of a technological revolution" and that the "pace of technological change was particularly rapid during the first post-war decade."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the rapidity with which farmers mechanised led to fundamental changes in the process of farming itself and had a profound effect on rural life.

With the investment in new machinery, farmers were confident that the debt required to purchase new implements would pay off when farmers would not only produce more grain, but they would produce it more quickly and efficiently than they had in the past. It quickly became clear, however, that the new efficiency in grain production led to other types of agricultural change. Though efficient grain production and world demand provided farmers with more capital and allowed farmers to expand their land holdings, it also meant that the average farm size began to increase. In 1911, for example, the average size of a farm was 296 acres; in 1951,

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<sup>3</sup> USA, RG 11s.1, I, H, 3, c, Address delivered by W.M. Harding, Secretary, Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life, to the Elbow Agricultural Society Rally, held at Loreburn, April 9, 1954.

<sup>4</sup> Saskatchewan. *Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life: Mechanization and Farm Costs*. (Regina: Queen's Printer, 1955), 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> SAB, Nancy Adams Papers, Pamphlet entitled "Changes in Agriculture to 1970" by John Dawson, Staff Study No. 11, prepared for the Economic Council of Canada, December 1964. Page 1.

the average size had grown to 551 acres and this number continued to grow.<sup>7</sup> By 1961, the number of farms had decreased, but averaged 686 acres in size.<sup>8</sup> Obviously, since the amount of land available to Saskatchewan farmers did not generally change, when farm sizes increased, the number of farms decreased. In addition, larger land holdings ultimately required the individual farmer to update his machinery in order to farm the increased acreage. Alternatively, faster machinery meant that a farmer could also work land more quickly. Essentially, better agricultural technology ensured that farmers entered a vicious circle—more land eventually led to the need for better and faster machinery, while faster machinery meant that a farmer could farm more land. In any case, not only did the process lead to an increased debt load, but, for every farmer who increased his land holdings, another farmer left his land and moved either to a nearby town or to the city. Thus, in the name of agricultural progress, efficiency and expansion had a price; it changed the face of rural communities and their social structures that had existed for decades.

This growing change in rural communities was reported by Ernie Pascoe, editorial writer for the *Regina Leader-Post*. He wrote in 1952 of a Regina-area farmer who worked two sections of land and had written to the university, requesting plans for a drawbar hook-up that would allow him to pull five eight-foot, one-way seeders behind one tractor. The farmer's hired men had "abandoned him" the previous year, leaving him with four tractors and four one-way seeders and only himself to work the land.<sup>9</sup> The farmer's request led to the development of a hitch that made it possible to pull five eight-foot seeders behind one tractor, which allowed one operator to cultivate and seed at least sixty acres per day and "considerably more by working at

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<sup>7</sup> USA, RG 11s.4, Box 4, A, 3, c, "Changing Rural Saskatchewan," Address by College of Agriculture Professor H. Van Vliet to Saskatchewan Homemakers' Convention, June 11, 1965.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Ernie Pascoe, "Rural life commission finds many changes: Today's self-contained farmer," *The Leader-Post*, Editorial, 8 June 1953, 13. The article did not indicate why the hired men abandoned him.

night with headlights."<sup>10</sup> Pascoe was concerned, however, that the impact of agricultural modernisation on rural life would override the benefits of technology.

One particular two-section farm that can be taken as an example formerly was worked by five six-horse outfits, with an average of five hired men all spring and summer for grain-growing and livestock operations. Gradually it has become consolidated into a straight-grain farm operated by the farmer himself, with the help of an extra man and a nephew to truck the grain in the fall.<sup>11</sup>

He concluded that "there are now 112, 000 farms in Saskatchewan, which is a drop of nearly 20 per cent in 10 years. In other words, nearly one farmer in five has moved off the land and the other four have taken over his farm to make larger holdings."<sup>12</sup>

What is omitted from Pascoe's perspective of mechanisation, however, is the role that farm women played in his scenario of "five hired men all spring and summer." What had been the demanding job of feeding and housing hired men disappeared because of new agricultural technology and this change in home life became the topic for many discussions by Homemakers' Clubs as they too began to adapt to the changing rural scene. The virtual elimination of threshing crews and hired help meant changes to the standard farming household—they no longer had to provide room and board or cook for a threshing crew of twenty during harvest, certainly a physically demanding and laborious job that was added to their other responsibilities on the farm. Homemakers' Clubs discussed these changes at meetings, as well as in their community histories, with a sense of relief. The Ethelton Homemakers compared the busy harvest season of the 1930s to the contemporary setting.

Harvest was a busy time for the housewife then, with crews of hungry men to feed and keep even through long spells of wet weather. Of course, previous to the threshing there were the stokers and binder operations to feed.

Now, in 1948, the picture is changed. In one operation a combine operated by one or two men does the harvest work in one operation.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> SAB, Ethelton Homemakers' Club, *Tweedsmuir Village Histories*, 130.

Though not specifically stated, but certainly implied, the impact of mechanisation reduced the workload of the farm wife. A typical threshing crew often consisted of at least four men with teams to haul the grain, two spike pitchers, four field pitchers, ten men with teams to haul sheaves, two men to haul water, an engineer, a separator, and a fireman.<sup>14</sup> In order to accommodate these many hungry men, the Pense Homemakers' community history indicates that the farm wife's job began at 4:30 when she served breakfast, followed by the clean-up work at 5:15, dinner at 11:30, lunch at 4:30, and the "whistle blew anytime after 9:30, depending on how bright the moon was shining."<sup>15</sup> And these responsibilities were required in addition to the farm wife's regular duties.

These changes, however, were greeted by the Homemakers' Clubs with a twinge of nostalgia. For example, the Mantario Homemakers' Club commented on the arrival of better farming technology:

With the passing of the horse and the substitution of the combine a great burden of labor was lifted from the shoulders of the Home-maker, the farm wife, who had no longer the stooking help and the threshing crews to cook for... But there also passed an era when harvest was a kind of neighbourly reunion.<sup>16</sup>

The authors, however, were quick to qualify the sense of regret:

It is a certainty, however, that you could not find a woman in Golden Valley or Sunshine Valley, who had ever cooked for threshers – or even for the teamsters when a cook car was carried, who would want to see the days of the "Good Old Threshing Gang" again.<sup>17</sup>

Similar recollections in the mid-1970s also illustrate how the changes in agriculture affected farm women. Myrna Luther of Aylesbury recalled that:

the threshing outfit my dad always hired had a bunk car for the men to sleep in but no cook car so it was up to my mother to cook for the men, often twelve or fifteen. I really don't know how she ever did it. It meant long hours of hard work...Later, we got our own smaller separator and engine. This really helped lessen my mother's work.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> SAB, Pense Homemakers' Club, *A History of Pense*, 19.

<sup>16</sup> SAB, Mantario Homemakers' Club, *A History of the Mantario District*, [no page].

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> USA, RG 11s. 4, B, 18, "Prairie Sunset" by Myrna Luther, Aylesbury, Saskatchewan. Mrs. Luther did not win an award or receive Honourable Mention for her submission.



Though new technologies in agriculture certainly gave the appearance that women's farm work was lessened, in reality, their contributions to the enterprise shifted. Settlement-era farm women, for example, tended to perform the more traditional roles of cooking, cleaning, laundering, child-rearing, gardening, poultry-raising, and dairying and while these responsibilities did not disappear in the post-war setting, they were certainly less labour-intensive once electricity and modern appliances were introduced to the farm home. While modern-day amenities relieved much of the drudgery and labour of housework, they also contributed to a more fragmented nature of work; that is, while physical labour decreased, farm women's daily tasks began to shift to include bookkeeping, running general farm errands, and going to town for machinery parts.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, they also assisted in some physically demanding labour such as baling hay and building or repairing fences and, during harvest, they often ran combines, drove grain trucks, and operated tractors. Thus, while farm women's work did not necessarily become more laborious, it certainly became more varied. A washing machine, for example, performed the physical labour for women which, theoretically, freed women's time for more leisurely activities; however, while valuable because it removed the physically onerous job of laundry, it also helped create new responsibilities, since women often filled that "free time" with other tasks.

When president of the Federated Women's Institute of Canada Mrs. Rand addressed the Homemakers' Clubs in 1959, she connected the increased workload to the changing agricultural setting.

The picture of agriculture today is so complex that our responsibility as farm wives increases hourly. No more do we just plant the garden and feed the chickens—we must be bookkeepers and students of economics.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bennett and Kohl, *Of Time and Enterprise: North American Family Farm Management in a Context of Resource Marginality*. In association with Seena B. Kohl and Geraldine Binion. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 167.

<sup>20</sup> USA, RG 11s.4. Box 4, A, 3, c, Address to 49<sup>th</sup> Annual Provincial Convention by Mrs. Rand, President, Federated Women's Institutes of Canada, May 28, 1959.

Mrs. Rand succinctly highlighted a host of issues in her statement, ranging from agricultural change to the changing role of farm women. Clearly, her reference to the responsibility of farm wives denotes the fact that Homemakers believed fundamentally in the "partner" status on the farm. And as farming changed, so too did their responsibilities shift in order to operate a successful enterprise.<sup>21</sup> It is also clear that their increased responsibilities were in addition to, and did not replace, their existing responsibilities in the home, the garden, and yard. She did not, however, speak to the fact that farm women's work had become more varied and, perhaps, found it difficult to balance the increasingly segmented responsibilities of farm living. Similarly, the College of Home Economics' Brief to the Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life illustrated the dual workload of farm women and hints at the expanding definitions of women's work on farms:

In many rural families the housewife may choose how much time she will give to gardening, poultry keeping and dairy work. However, in the busy seasons of seeding and harvesting it is almost certain that she will have to give some of her time to outside work on the farm and it may be that she will have to take her turn at driving a tractor or truck.<sup>22</sup>

Again, the fragmented nature of farm women's work is not explicitly mentioned by the Royal Commission.

Amidst the rapidly changing setting in the home and in rural life, Homemakers' Clubs ensured that the primary role of farm wives did not lose its fundamental importance and continued to emphasise the core values of tradition and family and to focus on their primary roles as mothers, farm wives, and partners in the enterprise. And while the clubs readily welcomed rural modernisation as a sign of progress and, perhaps more importantly, the end to much of the physical labour that farm wives had endured, they nonetheless cautioned their members that, amidst the changing structures of the family farm, their central role was first and

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<sup>21</sup> Whether or not their partnership was noticed by their husbands, by society, or by the law is another question.

foremost as farm wife and mother. Mrs. Euphie (W.A.) Thomson, provincial president from 1953 to 1955, for example, spoke to the clubs in 1955, stating that the "years have brought many changes to our province and as Homemakers we should be concerned first with those changes that affect our homes and communities."<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Mrs. Mary Hull spoke at a district convention in 1963 with a cautionary tone with respect to the impact of technological changes. She stated that "some people are of a frame of mind that they accept almost every change whether it be scientific, technical, social, as good. They run forward to meet the future."<sup>24</sup> She continued with a note of warning, suggesting that the tangible advantages to change, such as all-weather roads, better cars, and better communications, may have a negative impact on rural communities:

It may be a year or two before we realize we seldom see our friends and neighbours anymore. That the district has lost a degree of friendliness and comradeship it once had. These intangibles must be considered too when we are affected by change...It becomes increasingly important to guard against abandoning those values often of intangibles that we cannot afford to lose.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps, however, it was too late to reverse the changes – at least, in the minds of some Homemakers who recorded their concerns in their community histories in 1951. The Pense Homemakers' Club raised concerns much like Mrs. Hull's.

The coming of the motor car, far from increasing sociability[,] diminishes it. People were no longer dependent on their neighbors for recreation, they could go farther afield and did so. Shows and ready-made entertainment took the place of the more homely fun... The old days held much drudgery, much discomfort and suffering, but they were not all bad; the kindness, courtesy and contentment of our old timers are a living proof of that.

Certainly, the Pense Homemakers recollected the past nostalgically; nonetheless, their perspective speaks to the fact that times had, in fact, changed. The prosperity of the post-war era brought not only economic advantages but also new forms of entertainment, the ability to travel

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<sup>22</sup> USA, RG 2001.3 B-176, Brief submitted to the Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life by the faculty of the College of Home Economics, University of Saskatchewan.

<sup>23</sup> USA, RG 11s.4, Box 22, B, 23, Address to Provincial Convention, June, 1955.

<sup>24</sup> USA, RG 11s.4, Box 22, B, 21, "Changes In Rural Life Affect People." Address by Mrs. Mary Hull to District Convention, 1963.

farther distances more quickly, and improved telecommunications, causing what one College of Agriculture professor called "the breakdown of former small and closely-knit rural communities and a less clear identification with a specific community."<sup>26</sup> Thus, Homemakers' Clubs had to address those changes and, while many recalled the past with a sense of nostalgia, that sentiment does not negate that sense of loss.

Changes in agriculture also often required farm wives to enter the work force, partly to help defray the increasing costs of mechanisation and partly to help finance the purchase of new amenities in the farm home. Homemakers felt an element of concern about their participation in the paid labour force. At the Hawarden district convention in 1957, Director of Women's Work Margaret Pattillo spoke to the topic. Her speech, entitled "New Dimensions in Homemaking," suggests that women working off the farm was becoming a necessary part of farm living and she made suggestions on how farm women should adapt to meet their increasing demands.

Mothers today have a more important role as an individual now. There are more working mothers today. All this means better management. They must know how to budget their time and their money. Homemakers should make use of the community's resources, libraries, Women's Extension Services, and church, they must adjust to a changing world.<sup>27</sup>

While Pattillo emphasised a proper balance between motherhood and paid work outside the home, and appears to have accepted the changing situation, Edith Rowles, Head of the Home Economics Department, who often spoke to the Homemakers' Clubs, stressed the importance of a mother's role at home. In a lengthy address to the 1957 provincial convention, she spoke of "Women In A Changing World," stating that "home life in Saskatchewan is changing, especially home life on the farm."<sup>28</sup> More importantly, perhaps, she emphasised her concern over women working outside the home.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> USA, RG 11, Box 4, A, 3, c. "Changing Rural Saskatchewan," Address by College of Agriculture Professor H. Van Vliet to Saskatchewan Homemakers' Convention, June 11, 1965.

<sup>27</sup> SAB, Hawarden District Homemakers' Clubs, *A History of the Hawarden District Homemakers*, 68.

<sup>28</sup> USA, RG 11s.4, Box 4, A, 3, c, "Women In A Changing World." Dr. Edith Rowles to Homemakers' Convention, Saskatoon, June 4, 1957.

As money becomes more and more important for our medium of exchange what happens to Mother's contribution to the home? You'll say that the value of the homemaker's contribution cannot be measured in dollars and cents. We measure it in contentment, in happiness! That's not an easy measurement to make and if contentment is in part made up of having a new car, an automatic washer, or a gas stove. What then? Perhaps the homemaker decides she can help her family best by taking a job outside the home—working for a salary instead of for love.<sup>29</sup>

Certainly, Rowles played on any potential guilt that Homemakers may have felt about entering the paid workforce; however, it is also clear that for Rowles, as for Homemakers, home was the foundation of the community, social life, and the nation. And undoubtedly, a number of Homemakers felt much the same way. At the Hawarden District Convention in 1953, the question was posed: "Can a woman be a successful homemaker and have a career at the same time?"<sup>30</sup> After much discussion, the "majority thought not but individual cases and circumstances had to be considered."<sup>31</sup> Though the discussion itself is not recorded in the minutes, presumably the members held to their long-standing belief that home life and all of its responsibilities were the priority and all other factors remained secondary.

The Homemakers were not alone in their concerns about the rapidly changing rural setting and in 1952, the provincial government established a Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life, which addressed the concerns of both the government and rural residents, and provided analyses, conclusions, and recommendations for the future of agriculture in the province and in which the Homemakers organisation became involved. In commissioning this study, the government hoped to better understand and deal with rural change. Political scientist David Smith maintains that the Royal Commission

provides one of the most cogent analyses to be found in a public document of the factors that have moulded Saskatchewan. It accomplishes this by describing three types of change: in agriculture, in population[,] and in rural institutions. The result is an invaluable depiction of the province fifty years after its founding and at the moment

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> SAB, Hawarden District Homemakers' Clubs, *A History of the Hawarden District*, 54.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

when the full effect of long-term demographic and technological change had become evident.<sup>32</sup>

It is important to note that the Royal Commission did not focus solely on the economic and technological elements of agriculture but rather the commissioners understood that *rural life* was inextricably tied to agriculture. Dr. Smith, for example, argues that the "striking feature" of the commission is its "concern to maintain the fabric of rural life, an anxiety governments of all political complexions have continued to manifest since 1905"<sup>33</sup>

From the outset, Homemakers' Clubs became actively involved in the commission's work by submitting briefs to the study through the Extension department. As a result, many Homemakers incorporated the commission into their monthly club meetings and discussed its findings as they became available, which speaks partly to the clubs' relationship with the university and partly to the fact that the organisation was a well-known and well-respected association within the commission process. It appears that in the early stages of the study, the commissioners had hoped to rely upon general briefs from various organisations for some of the information that would be included in the study. A 1953 letter, however, indicates that "the Commission has found that they have to have much more specific material on the various problems. With this in mind, they have devised a new problem listing sheet on which various clubs or individuals may pose the more specific aspects of the problems."<sup>34</sup> As a result, they established a formal process by which study guides were made available to the Homemakers through Director of Women's Work Margaret Pattillo. Club members discussed the issues that their local communities faced and summarised them in the forms provided to them by the Royal Commission. For the most part, Homemakers followed the format laid out by the commissioners. The commissioners asked the Homemakers' Clubs to list issues arising from

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<sup>32</sup> David E. Smith, ed. *Building a Province: A History of Saskatchewan in Documents* (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1992), 29.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 29. Emphasis added.

<sup>34</sup> SAB, R 236, SHC, Letter to Mrs. W.L. Cruikshank, Bratton Homemakers' Club, February 2, 1953.

grain marketing, obtaining better farming and homemaking advice, rural roads, electrification, farm credit, recreation, home, and social life, medical and dental services, local services such as banks, stores, implement agencies, repairs and servicing, education, the trend to larger farms, and the form concluded with an "other" category.<sup>35</sup> Once the clubs had identified the problems on the forms, they were returned to the Saskatoon office, summarised, and returned to the clubs for proposed solutions. The final step sent the forms to Director Pattillo and were then submitted to the Royal Commission for analysis.

Clubs responded enthusiastically to their involvement in the commission process, undoubtedly an indication of their concern for the rapid changes in rural life. In response to the pre-determined categories, clubs listed a variety of concerns, ranging from the need for qualified teachers, lack of conveniences in the home, lack of domestic and farm help, improved health and dental clinics, rural electrification, and plumbing, to the need for standardised time zones, daylight saving time, the need for standardised children's clothing, the lack of good reading material for children, the price of meat in butcher shops, and coloured "margerine."<sup>36</sup>

It appears, however, that not all clubs received the formal study guide. A number of clubs indicated that they "were very anxious to be involved in the process"<sup>37</sup> and wrote to the commission requesting information. On behalf of the Moose Plains Homemakers' Club near Nipawin, club secretary Mrs. C. F. Vanstone asked for "the brief on the Royal Commission on Agriculture. I plan to hold a forum on agricultural problems in this area."<sup>38</sup> The commission was clearly an important component of the Moose Plains club because a month following her first letter, the club secretary informed the commission that:

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, "Problem Listing Sheet."

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> SAB, R 236, Community Forums and Hearing, Public Relations and Information, Saskatchewan Homemakers' Clubs, Letter from the Golden Sheaf Homemakers' Club; Letter from Mazonod Homemakers' Club.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter from Mrs. C.F. Vanstone to William M. Harding, Secretary, Royal Commission, November 25, 1952.

We did hold a discussion at the Moose Plains Homemaker's meeting December 4<sup>th</sup>. The members entered the discussion with so much enthusiasm that we decided to set aside a period for further talks at each monthly meeting and send in a brief every two months.<sup>39</sup>

Other Homemakers' Clubs that did not receive the formal paperwork and, rather than remain uninvolved in the process, submitted their own letters or briefs to the Royal Commission. Those letters provide more insight into and explanation of the Homemakers' concerns than do the formal worksheets. Many, for example, take on a frustrated tone that does not appear in the formal process, which required organisations simply to list their concerns. Similarly, the letters also tend to focus specifically on the main concerns, rather than having been required to identify all concerns related to the pre-determined categories.

One specific concern belonged to Mrs. Charles Dickson from the Nipawin area, who brought to the attention of the commissioners the Outlook Dam Project, which had recently been abandoned by the provincial government because of its cost. It does not appear that she wrote on behalf of her club; however, her letter to the commission was written on formal Homemakers' Clubs stationery. Her letter is one of frustration and is worth quoting at length.

Tonight we hear that the Royal Commission's findings on the Outlook dam project has been given. "The Outlook dam is too costly," so the "Curry" report tells us. We have every reason to be ashamed to think a remark like that has been passed by a supposedly intelligent (?) [*sic*] body today. Our fore-fathers had more foresight when the railways were laid across the vast prairies and the rockies.

Our rural life now is practically damned as it is. We have school units which makes it necessary to move the mother and children to town to get the children near the bus. If we wish modern amenities a farmer almost has to do that.

Who can afford to build on the farm, wire for electricity, buy a few appliances like, say, washer – range and fridge and then pay the high cost of hook-up? We can't pay for luxuries like that with egg-money, can we!

Am I barking up the wrong tree? This commission seems to be the first opportunity given to women to speak up and hope to be heard, and I am one of those women who has had to give up rural-living but would gladly go back if we could see a future in it.<sup>40</sup>

Mrs. Dickson's frustrated tone indicates her many concerns and, undoubtedly, this frustration would not have been apparent in the formal process established by the Royal Commission.

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, December 8, 1952.



Clearly, problems in rural life had affected her personally, given that her family had to move off the farm in order to afford basic living expenses.

Like Mrs. Dickson's concerns, the Bratton Homemakers' Club also raised concerns over the impact of mechanisation in their region and submitted a letter to the Royal Commission that dealt specifically with that issue. Their main concern was the deterioration of community life as a result of larger farming enterprises. As a result of the 1930s, the area surrounding the town of Bratton had lost a number of farmers who could not survive the difficulties of the Depression; consequently, the land was purchased by "large farmers from a distance who find it easy to move their larger, newer equipment. Consequently, we have a sparse, widely separated community, schools are closed and many moved away."<sup>41</sup> The club went on to state that their main concern was the "important changes in the methods of farming [which] we think is the use of larger machinery – which makes for larger farms, longer hours during the season and much less population."<sup>42</sup>

These issues that Homemakers' Clubs raised to the Royal Commission almost invariably received a formal response from Public Relations and Information Commissioner Bill Hamilton, who always thanked the club for its contribution and then requested that the club use the format specified by the Royal Commission. His general response asked the clubs to obtain the official problem sheet and re-submit the information, which indicates that a fairly structured process determined the findings of the Royal Commission. Nonetheless, Hamilton always indicated that the commission would retain a copy of the received letter, as well as forward a copy to Margaret Pattillo. Many of the Homemakers' concerns, as well as potential solutions, were included in the Royal Commission's final report and, while typically found only in one section out of the fourteen that were published, nonetheless indicates that their voices were heard.

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<sup>40</sup> SAB, R 236, SHC, Letter from Mrs. Chas. Dickson, January 19, 1953.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter from the Bratton Homemakers, January 24, 1953.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

Perhaps the most direct effect of rural modernisation on the farm home and family was the arrival of electricity and plumbing. Symbols of progress, these elements of rural modernisation freed farm wives from the previous, more labour-intensive duties by allowing new labour-saving devices and modern household technology in the home. Refrigerators, freezers, washers and dryers, and electric stoves were a godsend to farm women who were previously tied to labour-intensive duties. The Royal Commission noted the benefits that household modernisation brought to the farm home:

The great bulk of the power consumed on the farm is consumed in the farm home. Lighting, washing, ironing, and refrigeration are the most common uses. Outside the home, such uses as lighting, block heating, and power for small shop tools are the most common uses. Because of this concentration on home uses, the main impact of rural electrification has been on the social side. It relieves the drudgery of housework on the farm.<sup>43</sup>

However, while modern home implements did relieve the drudgery of housework, they did not necessarily decrease farm women's workloads. The assumption that household technology lessened farm wives' responsibilities and increased leisure time was commonplace and, perhaps more importantly, somewhat deceiving. Electricity meant that the washing and ironing could be done longer into the evening and a washing machine, while relieving women from labour-intensive laundry days, also meant that putting a load of laundry into the machine freed up time for other duties, such as running to town for parts or repairing the fence in the corral. Certainly, the value of labour-saving devices rested on the fact that the drudgery of the work was removed and I do not mean to suggest that rural life would have benefited by remaining non-electrified. It is important to remember, however, that rural electrification and the arrival of new household technologies did not necessarily reward farm wives with increased leisure time, but rather

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<sup>43</sup> Saskatchewan, *Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life: Farm Electrification* (Regina: Queen's Printer, 1957), 11.

caused a shift in their contributions and responsibilities within the enterprise.<sup>44</sup> American rural sociologist Virginia Fink has studied the impact of technology on farm women in the American mid-west and has concluded that increased household technology has contributed to the expansion of women's roles on farms. She argues that:

The incorporation of electricity and mechanical aids in the home and farm, the commercialization of bread, canned and frozen fruits and vegetables, and butter and eggs, generally smaller families and fewer live-in hired farm hands decreased the total time and energy needed to produce, preserve, and prepare food. Yet these developments seemed to "free" these women for more work in the *male sphere*.<sup>45</sup>

After years of physically demanding labour, however, Homemakers' Clubs embraced the arrival of electricity and household technology as saviours. Myrna Luther's story indicates how life got easier for her mother after the arrival of household technologies; she also states, however, that these technologies did not diminish her commitment to her family.

My mother continues to live with her two sons [on the farm], preparing their meals and doing the housework. Gone are the days of bread baking and feeding large threshing crews. The combine now replaces the threshing machine so there isn't the work involved in preparing large meals. Electricity in the form of the washing machine, drier and iron has lightened her labours. Her role down through the years has been the making of a home. From meagre beginnings, she has been able to enjoy a very rewarding life.<sup>46</sup>

While Homemakers' Clubs welcomed new household amenities and agricultural modernisation as symbols of progress, they were also aware of the potential problems that came with mechanisation and therefore discussed agricultural change in a context of how to properly incorporate those changes into home life. And while there is often not an understanding of the relationship between agricultural change and its effects on farm women, both Homemakers'

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<sup>44</sup> For further discussion on technology and housework, see Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work For Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, Inc, 1983).

<sup>45</sup> Virginia S. Fink, "The Impact of Changing Technologies on the Roles of Farm and Ranch Wives in Southeastern Ohio," in Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles, eds. *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures* (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1988), 229-30. Emphasis in original.

<sup>46</sup> USA, RG 11s.4, B, b. "Prairie Sunset." Submission to creation writing competition by Mrs. Myrna Luther, Aylesbury, Saskatchewan.

Clubs and the Royal Commission made explicit connections to the implications of agricultural change on farm women. In 1954, Mrs. Thomson spoke to this relationship:

Agricultural Advancement and changes in the methods of farming have changed the pattern of family and community life. These changes came about slowly and in many instances we did not realize that things were different until they had been repeated many times and problems had been created. ... Rural problems are a challenge to Sask. Homemakers. We must get down to earth, deal with and work out our problems in a forthright manner.<sup>47</sup>

While the women welcomed the progress of agriculture, they nonetheless tried to ensure that its effects on the family and the community were minimal.

Aside from confronting issues related to agriculture and rural life, Homemakers were forced to address a new problem that they had not had to tackle before: a declining membership. If the early years of the Homemakers' Clubs are represented by their exponential growth, then the post-war setting is characterised by a slow rate of decline in club membership—a result of the changing rural scene as well as changing perceptions of the roles of women. In 1914, for example, the Homemakers' Clubs boasted a provincial membership of 6,000 women involved in 140 clubs and by 1940, membership had reached 8,625.<sup>48</sup> By 1956, however, the number of clubs had dropped to 325, with a membership of just over 5,300, and these numbers declined steadily throughout the 1950s and 1960s. By 1960, there were only 296 clubs with a membership of 4800—representing a drop of forty-four percent in twenty years.<sup>49</sup> Club members immediately sought to remedy the problem by, first, identifying the causes of the decline and, second, by determining a solution.

As early as 1951, Homemakers addressed the issue of their declining membership. Under the banner of "Where Do We Go From Here?", discussion groups at the annual

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<sup>47</sup> USA, RG 11s.4, Box 22, B, 23.

<sup>48</sup> *Retrospect and Prospect: The Silver Cord and the Golden Chain*. (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, Extension Division, 1936), 10; Georgina Taylor, "'Should I Drown Myself Now or Later?' The Isolation of Rural Women in Saskatchewan and Their Participation in the Homemakers' Clubs, the Farm Movement and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, 1910-1967" in *Women: Isolation and Bonding: The Ecology of Gender*, Kathleen Storrie, ed. (Toronto: Methuen, 1987), 83.

convention examined questions such as: what can we do to interest younger women? What can clubs do to increase membership? Can you explain why so many clubs disbanded? How can this be prevented? Over 100 clubs are not represented at convention. What can be done about this?<sup>50</sup> Clearly, the issue weighed heavily on the minds of the organisers since it was slated as a topic on the agenda of the convention. Unfortunately, there is no record of the dialogue within the discussion groups so conclusions must be drawn from examining the discourse of the club leadership over the course of a number of years. And since club membership declined every year following the end of the war, the issue topped the agenda at most annual conventions of the 1950s.

Provincial presidents of the 1950s generally addressed the problem of declining membership in their opening remarks to club delegates who attended the annual conventions. In 1954, Mrs. Thomson raised the concern to the members. She asked: "What of the future? That is up to you. When we celebrate our centennial [golden jubilee] as a province will Homemakers' Clubs still be a vital force?"<sup>51</sup> The note of concern is evident in her words and her solution to the problem is interesting. First, she indicated that the future of the clubs depended on the grassroots membership and their contributions to the organisation, but she also echoed the maternal feminist ideology of the early years of the clubs when she continued in her address: "Let us strive to meet the demands of a busy life, preserving all that is good and noble from the past. Let us strive to grow with the years and ever keep before us our motto 'For Home and Country'."<sup>52</sup> Mrs. Thomson does not intimate any tangible action to remedy the problem but rather emphasises that if Homemakers adhered to the core values of the clubs, then potentially, the problem would solve itself. Her words also reveal a sense of nostalgia, which appears to be a recurring theme in Homemakers' Clubs' discussions in the post-war setting.

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<sup>49</sup> USA, RG 11s. 4, Box 4, A, 2, a, Folder 4. See also A, 3, a, Folder 6.

<sup>50</sup> USA, RG 11s. 4, Box 4, A, 3, a, Folder 6.

<sup>51</sup> USA, RG 11s.4, Box 22, B, 23.

At the same convention, shortly after Mrs. Thomson spoke on the issue, members speculated on the reasons for declining membership and disbanding clubs. The secretary recorded that "the reasons for the number of disbanding clubs were too few members, rural members moving to town, older members preferring afternoon meetings while younger member [*sic*] like evening meetings, older members prefer to give donations while younger women like to raise the money."<sup>53</sup> Suggested solutions to the problem ranged from inviting "women or groups of women" to Homemakers' meetings to "providing the clubs with more publicity."<sup>54</sup> Another member suggested that "a good idea might be for [Director of Women's Work] Miss Pattillo or another speaker to give a pep talk to a club considering disbanding, or one losing interest" and Mrs. Thomson suggested that "Ag. Reps might report districts where new clubs could be organized."<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the Advisory Board encouraged the clubs to become "more public and [to] show more enthusiasm if we want new clubs to organise."<sup>56</sup> Though commendable that club members identified the problem as a serious one, their solutions were nonetheless rather cursory remedies to a potentially volatile issue. The suggestions were not a tangible response. In the clubs' defence, however, one could speculate that had the clubs even taken real action to address the issue of declining membership, it would not have done them any good; there were too many issues at play in rural Saskatchewan at the time. Mary Hull, during her 1963 speech on the changes in rural life, had the luxury of ten years of hindsight, as well as the findings of the Royal Commission when she speculated that declining membership was related to the changing rural setting: "In 1956 the Royal Commission on Agriculture and Rural Life stated: 'Daughters do not feel a necessary part of farm organisations and do not take pride in the farm home or in farming as a way of life.' Could the absence of one of the daughters'

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> USA, RG 11s.4, Box 3, A, 2, a, Folder 4.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

traditional occupations be partly responsible for this? Along with of course, many more opportunities for her in urban life."<sup>57</sup>

Historian Georgina Taylor suggests that the decline in club membership began simply with rural depopulation and with more families moving to rural towns and cities – with inherently more people and better entertainment – women's involvement in organisations in general suffered. Taylor also maintains that fewer feelings of isolation and the increased participation of married women in labour force – which meant less time for club activities – led to a decline in membership.<sup>58</sup> More significantly, perhaps, the nascent changing attitudes about the roles of women took a toll on club membership and by mid-century, "women's clubs which promoted traditional roles appealed less to young women than they had done earlier in the period."<sup>59</sup> Kerrie Strathy suggests that, because of the close relationship between the Homemakers and the university, and its continued commitment to non-partisan activities, many women left the organisation in order to be more politically active in the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation.<sup>60</sup> She further argues that this "exodus of progressive and visionary women was a tragic loss the [Homemakers' Clubs] and set the stage for its further decline."<sup>61</sup> The observations of Homemaker Ethel Chapman suggest that perhaps Strathy is correct: "there are more influences attracting women away from the home than are attracting her to it."<sup>62</sup>

What has not been suggested by these scholars, however, is that perhaps the organisation's loss of membership can be attributed to the fact that women's politicisation as farm wives, which they found in the Homemakers' Clubs, was no longer sufficient. Moreover, given the exodus of members to the more political Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, one

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<sup>57</sup> USA, RG 11s.4, B, 21. "Changes in Rural Life Affect People." Speech by Mary Hull at Provincial Convention, 1963.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor, 83.

<sup>59</sup> Taylor, 83.

<sup>60</sup> Kerrie A. Strathy, *Saskatchewan Women's Institutes: The Rural Women's University, 1911-1986* (M.Ed. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, 1987), 91.

<sup>61</sup> Strathy, 91.

could also speculate that many women no longer found the Homemakers' Clubs a sufficiently political organisation. Thus, as times changed, and the Homemakers' refused to move beyond their motto of "For Home and Country", what was once quietly political had become more about re-trenching the traditional view of women than expanding the domestic sphere into the public and demanding recognition for their domestic and farm work.

It is difficult to speculate, however, whether clubs would have suffered had they developed a more broadly defined role for women. In all likelihood, the rapid and immediate changes in rural Saskatchewan, combined with a growing urban outlook, meant that younger women's interests rested in other areas—a perspective suggested by the Ethelton Homemakers. In their club history, they indicate that within their community, there were seventy-six homes with housewives but only fifteen percent belonged to the Homemakers' Club, which "sounds very feeble."<sup>63</sup> They further suggested that "some women, active a few years ago, now find that a family of school children and pre-school children keeps them at home. But what of the others? Surely our program is entertaining and instructive for all these, and our bond of fellowship elastic enough, if we could but draw these women into our circle at regular meetings. This is our challenge."<sup>64</sup>

Unfortunately, these sentiments did little to remedy the problem of declining membership and since the underlying reason for the problem was the rapidly changing rural setting, what action might have been taken would have more than likely been futile. A brief comparison of the Saskatchewan Co-operative Women's Guild, which disbanded in 1975 as a result of a declining membership that had begun in the early 1960s,<sup>65</sup> suggests that Homemakers' Clubs were not alone in the members' exodus and that external – and inevitable factors –

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<sup>62</sup> SAB, Nancy Adams Papers, "Start Where You Are With What You Have." Address by Ethel Chapman to the Women's Institutes Officers' Conference, 1954.

<sup>63</sup> SAB, Ethelton Homemakers' Club, *Tweedsmuir Village Histories*, page iv.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*



resulted in a serious decline in women's organisations. The official reason given for dissolving the Women's Guild was that it had "outlived its usefulness" and had achieved the "basic objective of getting women directly involved in co-operatives."<sup>66</sup> In reality, however, the Guild was no longer necessary for women to meet their social needs.<sup>67</sup> A history of the organisation suggests that working women "were not attracted to the Guild, or for that matter, to any other women's groups. Their social needs were met in other ways."<sup>68</sup> It goes on to say that the "only women' groups which are experiencing any growth in membership are those offering programs for recreational needs."<sup>69</sup> Perhaps, then, Homemakers' Clubs did not sufficiently address – or accept – the fact that at the heart of the matter was a changing rural setting.

Thus, aside from the few suggestions indicated above, the clubs did not take categorical action to fix the problem. Rather, like Mrs. Thomson's address in 1954, convention organisers of the 1950s drew on the messages of family, community, and nationhood when planning the annual meetings. Not unlike their turn-of-the-century counterparts, they continued to emphasise the relationship between home and country, regarding the inherent morality of women as the road to a noble citizenship. Convention themes, for example, included *Home: The Foundation of Citizenship*; *Citizenship Begins at Home*; and *Home—the Backbone of a Nation*.<sup>70</sup> Rather than accept the changing rural scene and its impact on the organisation at face value, however, Homemakers chose to reiterate their traditional ideology. Just as they had done in the past, Homemakers' Clubs approached the issues of the 1950s with faith in their club motto – "For Home and Country."

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<sup>65</sup> Louise Simbandumwe, "Saskatchewan Co-operative Women's Guild" (University of Saskatchewan, unpublished paper, September, 1990), 27.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> USA, RG 11s.4, Box 3, A, 2, a, Folder 3.

The changes in rural Saskatchewan had a significant impact on Homemakers' Clubs and in the attempt to maintain and attract new members, the clubs chose to re-trench the original goals of education, homemaking, and community service. And although one of the original purposes of the clubs – to provide a social outlet for isolated rural women – had disappeared, Homemakers' Clubs continued to emphasise the importance of fellowship and social contact within the context of the larger issues of the day. This chapter has illustrated that the early foundations upon which the Homemakers' Clubs were established continued into the 1950s as the inextricably linked values of family, virtue, community, and nationhood provided the basis for addressing the rapid agricultural and social change in post-war rural Saskatchewan. And in the midst of a changing rural life and a declining membership, when Homemakers' Clubs had the opportunity to explore the changing ideas of the roles of women, the post-war Homemakers' Clubs chose to sustain the early twentieth-century doctrine of their earlier members and remained committed to their roles as farm wives, mothers, and community agents.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### Contextualising the Homemakers' Clubs

When Lillian Beynon conducted her follow-up tour of rural Saskatchewan six months after the inaugural Homemakers' convention in 1911, she reported that she had "many feelings of doubt in regard to the success of the work in the Homemakers' Clubs" because "not one of the women in the clubs [she] had organized was familiar with the [club] work they were attempting."<sup>1</sup> She need not have worried; the organisation flourished and reached thousands of rural women, becoming one of the most well-respected women's organisations in the province. Its popularity rested partly on the fact that it provided a space where rural women could embrace their womanhood and simply exist as women. But more than that, the organisation allowed also rural women to find recognition in their household and farming responsibilities through the creation of a legitimate and professional space for farm women. While they did not campaign for suffrage or actively work towards better grain handling and marketing procedures, nor did they become involved in political organisations, they did, in fact, expand the domestic sphere into the public realm. By focusing on the everyday aspects of farm living – their households, their farm yards, their families, and their communities, Homemakers' Clubs became the space in which rural women demanded recognition for their contributions to agriculture. Thus, to study the Homemakers' Clubs is to better understand the organisation and its members—their

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<sup>1</sup> *Legacy: A History of Saskatchewan Homemakers' Clubs and Women's Institutes, 1911-1988* (Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Women's Institute, 1988), 7.

motivations, their sense of their world, and their perspectives of rural living—and contributes to the larger scholarship of the province's rural women. Moreover, though the foundation of the organisation lay in its traditional roots, and certainly that was part of its attraction, that perspective does not tell the entire story. As a result, this examination exposes the intricacies of the organisation and certain themes emerge.

First, Homemakers' Clubs must be examined in a context that both acknowledges and accepts their traditional mandate because it is this ideology from which all other aspects of the organisation stem. While some have been critical of organisations that embraced traditional roles of women and promoted separate spheres, it is important to note that, as Wendy Mitchinson maintains, "few Canadian women in the nineteenth century perceived this [ideology] as a limitation."<sup>2</sup> The organisation, however, served as more than just a place where women exchanged recipes and sewing tips. Rather, Homemakers' Clubs, by embracing a domestic ideology, actually allowed its members to push the domestic sphere into the public realm and demand recognition for their work, providing both public and private validation that women's work on the family farm was legitimate and fundamental to the success of western Canadian agriculture. Moreover, Homemakers' Clubs also provided its members with dignity in domestic work through which they gained power in the domestic sphere.

What is more, however, is that the domestic ideology under which the Homemakers' Clubs operated not only allowed its members to find recognition and validation in their work, but, in their goals to elevate home life, to legitimise their work, and to adjust domestic ideology to include their farming responsibilities, the organisation became a space in which its members discussed, debated, explored, and, in some cases, challenged common perceptions of women. If one follows the argument of Veronica Strong-Boag, who maintains that "we reexamine our

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<sup>2</sup> Wendy Mitchinson, "The WCTU: 'For God, Home and Native Land': A Study in Nineteenth-Century Feminism," in *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s*, Linda Kealey, ed. (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979), 167.

understanding of what is political, where it occurs and who is involved,"<sup>3</sup> then it is clear that the women of the Homemakers' Clubs must be viewed as political. Women's politicisation is about more than the demand for suffrage, for example; it can also involve, according to Strong-Boag, "important struggles over power and authority."<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, Homemakers' Clubs demanded equality under the law, legal recognition of their unpaid work, formal recognition of their contributions to agriculture, as well as the even more controversial debate of autonomy over one's body. As such, an organisation that may outwardly appear to be a traditional women's organisation devoted strictly to the exchange of recipes and household advice, was, in actuality, quietly political.

Second, Homemakers' Clubs enabled its members to construct a rural identity that provided them with a level of femininity and respectability in their farming responsibilities. For a farm wife amidst the daily drudgery of house and farm work, joining the local Homemakers' Club meant that not only could she gather with a group of women who shared her experiences, but, by improving her domestic responsibilities, she could also find a sense of femininity in a setting where that was often difficult to attain. Myrna Luther, for example, spoke to her farm mother's responsibilities when she wrote:

House-keeping was no bed of roses, for there was always water to be fetched from a slough for dish-washing and laundering. Then, too, there was churning to do, for we always kept at least one milk cow. One winter my mother churned and printed over six hundred pounds of butter which she sold to a local merchant.<sup>5</sup>

Amidst all other responsibilities, which included yard work, animal husbandry, and field labour, only their domestic responsibilities defined them as women. As a result, joining the Homemakers' Clubs meant that farm wives could gain that sense of femininity that was often lost in the farming venture. Undoubtedly, urban, middle-class women would not have had the same experience in their homemaking responsibilities as Mrs. Luther's mother and other farm

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

wives and, thus, the urban Homemaker's femininity was not threatened by the responsibilities of farm living. But by joining the local Homemakers' Club, which emphasised the art of homemaking and included in its definition their farm work, rural women could maintain their femininity in a not-so-feminine environment.

Third, in a rural setting that was rarely, if ever, defined by womanly characteristics, success as a homemaker provided farm women with a respectable profession and the University of Saskatchewan, as the overarching authority of the organisation, provided that professionalisation. Through the Homemakers' Clubs, no longer were farm women's responsibilities just a set of tasks that were required to operate a farmstead; instead, their work became a legitimate profession, supported by university lecturers, educational pamphlets, and a Director of Women's Work to guide them. This close relationship between the university and the Homemakers' Clubs meant that these women were no longer just farmers' wives but they had a legitimate role to fulfil on the family farm, which the university reinforced as a professional occupation. Essentially, the university maintained that without women, farming would fail. And to ensure that they were successful in their life's calling, the university, through its intrinsic relationship with Homemakers' Clubs, professionalised the responsibilities of farm women and enabled them to attain a legitimacy on their farms and in their communities. If farmers had to "study how to feed the stock"<sup>6</sup> with university support, then certainly their wives deserved the same, since their work on the farm was indeed an occupation that warranted education and university support

The university's involvement in and authority over the Homemakers' Clubs also served to reinforce a domestic ideology and institutionalise the dominant Victorian ideology in a rural setting. With public figures, guest lecturers, and department heads who emphasised the separation of men's and women's work, the university certainly upheld its mandate to "take the

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<sup>5</sup> USA, RG 11s.4, Box 22, B, 18, a. "Prairie Sunset." Submission by Myrna Luther.

university to the country"<sup>7</sup> by reinforcing the dominant perspectives of the day. Similarly, the creation of a Department of Women's Work attests to the fact that the university reinforced gendered notions of work. What is more, that ideology did not disappear as the Homemakers' Clubs entered new decades but continued into the post-war setting. In 1960, for example, Home Economics department head Dr. Edith Rowles stated to the Homemakers' provincial convention that "the woman's role is that of homemaker; the man's role in our society is still that of breadwinner even though women are rapidly taking on the job of sharing this responsibility [with paid employment]."<sup>8</sup> Though certainly this perspective contributed to the clubs' decline in the post-war years, for those who remained in the organisation, they continued to embrace their roles as homemakers and emphasise their traditional responsibilities as university administration continued to reinforce that ideology.

Finally, the Homemakers' Clubs served as a vehicle by which the university could, by extending agricultural information to rural areas, ensure that the province's burgeoning rural areas developed in accordance with mainstream Anglo-Canadian ideology. The fact that the university administration took the initiative in organising the Homemakers' Clubs is evidence of the fact that the institution had a certain objective in the development of the province. These officials did not leave anything to chance and, as a result, sought out farm women as one group who would serve to promote their interests in rural Saskatchewan. By improving the art of homemaking, which created better homes, families, and citizens, and by their community service, the University of Saskatchewan, through the Homemakers' Clubs, was able to institutionalise an Anglo-Canadian ideology in rural areas.

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<sup>6</sup> *Homemakers' Clubs, 1910-1920* (Saskatoon: c.1920), "Women's Clubs: Their Nature and Purpose," 25.

<sup>7</sup> SAB, Nancy Adams Papers, "Aims and Philosophies of Women's Extension." Speech by Margaret Pattillo to visitors at annual Farm Week. August, 1949.

<sup>8</sup> USA, RG 11s.4. Box 4, A, 3, c, "Women in a Changing World," Dr. Edith Rowles to Saskatchewan Homemakers' 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention, June 1, 1961.

Ultimately, this Anglo-Canadian bias is evident at the club level. Despite the claim to remain non-partisan and non-sectarian, Homemakers' Clubs exemplified this perspective by the use of patriotic songs such as "God Save the King" and "The Maple Leaf Forever." Likewise, that many local clubs reported the use of traditional church hymns and the Lord's Prayer certainly contributed an Anglo-Protestant flavour to the organisation. And if the discussion at one of the Conquest Homemakers' meetings is any indication of the innate bias in the organisation, then the hegemony of Protestantism is evident. When the local club studied China, for example, during one of its discussions under the International convenorship, the women were surprised to find that "Confucius, although he has been thought to be a founder of religion, never in his writings even mentioned 'God.'"<sup>9</sup> For this local club, then, religion was specifically limited to a western ideology based on Christian doctrine.

Combined with these Anglo-Protestant values, the club motto itself reinforced the Anglo-Canadian bias of the organisation by integrating nationalism with gender. "For Home and Country," a distinctly British term, intricately linked motherhood with patriotism; to that end, since "home" was already determined to be a distinctly feminine space then, by extension, women served the nation by creating a home that was based on her innate qualities of womanhood. Thus, the Anglo-Protestant flavour that permeated the Homemakers' Clubs suggests that the organisation was not unlike other traditional women's organisations in early twentieth-century western Canada. The difference, however, is that the Anglo-Protestant leanings of the Homemakers' Clubs were not as overtly displayed as was the mandate, for example, of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which explicitly connected its religious doctrine with the political campaign for temperance. For Homemakers' Clubs, however, the Anglo-Protestant ideology that was part of the organisation was somewhat more subtle than its political counterparts. That Homemakers operated their clubs within this context was

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<sup>9</sup> SAB, Hawarden District Homemakers' Clubs, *History of Hawarden District Homemakers*, 88.



undoubtedly a natural extension of their religious beliefs and, as a result, the non-sectarianism under which they claimed to operate was never perceived to be violated.

Georgina Taylor's argument that "Homemakers accepted a narrowly defined role"<sup>10</sup> is to suggest that rural women had no power in their choice to join the organisation. In fact, the rural women who did join the Homemakers' Clubs did so specifically because of the opportunities they provided. Not only did the organisation provide access to education and the opportunity to perform community service, but amidst the drudgery of life and work on a farm, membership in the Homemakers' Clubs afforded rural women with respectability in their local communities and it reclaimed a sense of femininity that was lost to the farming venture. As well, a close relationship with an institution like the University of Saskatchewan served to sanction their role on the family farm as a valid, professional occupation. They were not just wives of farmers anymore; they were women who held a legitimate place on their farms in and their communities and who had professional responsibilities to uphold. Furthermore, in an agricultural setting where class was often difficult to define, Homemakers' Clubs, by nature of their traditional ideology and commitment to community service, served as an expression of middle-class values in a rural environment. Finally, that the Homemakers operated within an Anglo-Protestant and distinctly patriotic ideology indicates that the organisation also sought to institutionalise these values in the province's rural communities.

To study the Association of the Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan is to illustrate that these rural women did not exist in a cultural vacuum in which society's dominant ideologies did not influence them. Rather, it exposes the intricacies of an organisation that sought to live up to the expectations of the society around them and, at the same time, remain rural by nature. And

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<sup>10</sup> Georgina Taylor, "'Should I Drown Myself Now or Later?' The Isolation of Rural Women in Saskatchewan and Their Participation in the Homemakers' Clubs, the Farm Movement and the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, 1910-1967" in *Women: Isolation and Bonding: The Ecology of Gender*, Kathleen Storrie, ed. (Toronto: Methuen, 1987), 90.

while many historians have examined farm women in the context of their work, their invisibility, and the undervaluation of their roles on Saskatchewan farms, the study of Homemakers' Clubs provides a glimpse into life beyond the farmstead and illustrates that these women did exist outside of their responsibilities of farm life. In their objective to improve rural homemaking and to better the homes and the communities in which they lived, Homemakers were devoutly committed to providing a better standard of living for all involved.

Admittedly, a study such as this one also creates a skewed picture. Since the Homemakers' Clubs operated under an ideology that embraced an Anglo-Protestant perspective and reinforced a gendered notion of work, they certainly did not appeal to all rural women. Though the organisation proclaimed to function without any concern for race or creed, most of the women involved in the clubs were white and Anglo-Saxon. What is more, that the public record tends to reflect the literate and active groups within a certain era, means that certainly this study is biased in favour of that public record. As a result, this study is not a comprehensive analysis of Saskatchewan farm women and does not speak to the experiences of non-Homemakers. Neither, however, does it claim to. Rather, this study provides a window into a well-established and well-respected rural women's organisation that has been central to the lives of thousands of rural women, their families, and their communities for over ninety years. Likewise, it contributes to the greater scholarship of rural women in Saskatchewan and provides an analysis of an effective rural organisation that came to be well-respected by local communities for their commitment to the improvement of rural life. Moreover, it exposes the intricacies of an organisation that allowed rural women to maintain their femininity in a less-than-feminine environment. To that end, Homemakers' Clubs provided its members with a space that allowed them to cultivate a domesticity that served to improve their homes, their communities, and their rural way of life.

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