

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Organisation

Entry ID: AWE0786

Country Women's Association of New South Wales

(1922 -)

Born 1 January, 1922

Occupation Lobby group

Summary

The Country Women's Association of New South Wales, the first such group in Australia, was founded in 1922 at a Bushwomen's Conference held in conjunction with the Royal Agricultural Show in Sydney. It is a non-sectarian, non-party-political, non-profit lobby group and service association working in the interests of women and children in rural areas. Although ostensibly non-party, in practice the group has tended to bolster conservative politics. Historically, it was, however, also a progressive force in many ways. As early as 1936, for example, the NSW branch passed a resolution in favour of equal pay for women. Although the organisation has in many ways defended traditional gender roles, it has advocated a greater public role for country women. Although its influence has declined, given its large membership and longevity, it was arguably the most influential women's organisation in New South Wales in the twentieth century.

Details

The Country Women's Association of New South Wales, was formed at the Bushwomen's Conference held in conjunction with the Royal Agricultural Show in Sydney in April 1922. This conference was initiated by Dr Richard Arthur, MP for North Sydney, and Miss Florence Gordon, who ran the Home Page of the Stock and Station Journal. Arthur had been urging the need to improve conditions for rural women since 1904. Gordon had had published a plan for a 'Country Women's Union of Help' in 1921 which received a flood of support from her readers. It was inspired partly by the Women's Institutes established of Canada and Britain. An organising committee formed, including Florence Gordon and Mrs Grace Munro, wife of a wealthy landowner in Bingara, who was to become the foundation president.

The Bushwomen's Conference was highly successful and attended by hundreds. Lectures were given on infant care-an important topic for women without the medical facilities or baby health centres enjoyed by city women-and dealing with insects, while Florence Taylor, Sydney's only woman architect, talked about practical rearrangements of the home to increase comfort, such as insect screens. On the second day, the floor was thrown open to general discussion. The women who attended were 'ordinary' rural women, who were in the city for the Show.

The brief of the new Association formed out of the conference was simple: to improve the conditions of women on the land. They adopted the motto 'Honour to God, Loyalty to Throne, Service to the Country, Through Country Women, For Country Women, By Country Women.' Their immediate objectives were to secure reduced train fares to the coast in summer, to get support for a seaside home and have maternity wards in country hospitals. While initially largely ignored, as the association grew it gained considerably lobbying power with politicians.

The Association expanded rapidly. By 1924 there were 120 branches with 4500 members and 21 rest rooms had been financed and fitted out. By 1927 membership had more than doubled and there were 191 branches. By 1928 it was the largest women's organisation in the state and membership continued to grow in the 1930s. By 1937, there were more than 17,000 members, 345 branches and 133 Younger Sets. By 1953 there were 28000 members and 517 branches, 182 rest rooms, 157 baby health centres, holiday homes, rest homes, hospitals, school hostels and playgrounds.

Younger Sets were introduced at the 1927. Their purpose was to 'further the aims of the CWA in general and in particular to use every opportunity of being instructed in First Aid, Home Nursing and Mothercraft'. They were to perform social service and arrange social functions. Girls joined at 18 and often remained until 30.

Although the specific activities of individual branches varied, among other endeavours, they actively supported the Bush Nursing Association, the Far West children's health Scheme, the Bush Book Club, Girl Guides, and Boy Scouts, Travellers Aid and the flying Doctor Service. From the 1930s handicrafts have featured prominently among the associations activities,

and they have also produced numerous cookbooks. Association news was regularly reported in the *Stock and Station Journal* and in 1937 the CWA's own journal was established.

During WWII, most CWA efforts were redirected to supporting the war effort. They entertained and fed men in country training camps, supported the Australian Comforts Fund and knitted garments for soldiers. They particularly took on the task of making camouflage netting for the army from 1942. Over 400 camouflage netting circles were established, producing hundreds of thousands of nets by early 1944. Many members were also left to run the family farm while their husbands were away fighting.

In the postwar years the CWA took an interest in welcoming new migrants – meeting at least two ships a month and providing catering for 1000-2500 migrants a time. They also helped families settle and invited women to branch meetings. Special services were set up for migrant women living in the snowy Mountains. However, like the rest of Australia, the CWA largely ignored the plight of Aboriginal people-although they were more prominent in rural areas-until the late 1950s at least when some branches began to encourage Aboriginal women to join, although prejudice among members persisted.

The CWA was, and continues to be, a generally conservative organisation with an almost exclusively white membership. In the early days at least, many of the most active members were women with money, education and leisure. Historically, it was, however, also a progressive force in many ways. As early as 1936, for example, the NSW branch passed a resolution in favour of equal pay for women. Although the organisation has in many ways defended traditional gender roles, it has advocated a greater public role for country women. It has also been outspoken on environmental issues.

Helen Townsend provides an excellent overview of the diverse nature and activities of the group:

'The Australian countryside has always been seen very much as the province of the Australian male. Folklore and literature concentrate on the tradition of mateship, the struggle of man against nature ... The Country Women's Association has tended to be ridiculed, partly because it is a women's organisation operating in a male domain, and partly because the women who belong to it are such a far cry from the stereotype of the "little woman." The women of the CWA, while believing deeply that their role in the family is vitally important, have been initiators, fighters and lobbyists. They have made localities into communities by providing social activities and educational, recreational and medical facilities ...

She further notes that the group is both practical and idealistic, radical and conservative: 'They are radicals, insisting on better community facilities, yet the conservative guardians of traditional values.' [Serving the Country, p. vii.]

From the late 1960s the numerical strength and influence of the CWA began to decline. It has since revived somewhat.

In 2004 its stated aims were:

- (a) To bring all women and families together and form a network of support.
- (b) To provide a forum for the voice of all women in New South Wales.
- (c) To improve conditions and welfare of all women and families especially in country areas.
- (d) To support schemes which enhance the value of country living, especially health and educational facilities.
- (e) To encourage development in regional areas and to increase the viability of rural communities and the environment.
- (f) To provide a voice to Government at all levels.
- (g) To promote International goodwill friendship understanding and tolerance between all people.

[<http://www.cwaofnsw.org.au>]

In this year the Association had over 13,000 members, belonging to one of 500 local branches.

Published resources

Book

Burthong CWA, forty years 1958-1998., Country Women's Association of New South Wales. Burthong Branch, 1998

Country Women's Association, N.S.W., Canberra Branch, 50th Anniversary, 1946-1996, 1996

The Many Hats of Country Women: The Jubilee History of the Country Women's Association of Australia, Stevens-Chambers, Brenda, 1997

Getting things done : the Country Women's Association of Australia, Country Women's Association of Australia, 1986

Serving the country : the history of the Country Women's Association of New South Wales, Townsend, Helen, 1988

The Golden Years: The story of the Country Women's Association of New South Wales, 1922-1972, 1972

Gateway to service : Country Women's Association, N.S.W., Nowra Branch, 1924-1984, 1984

The diamond years / Country Women's Association N.S.W., 1997

The history of the Lockhart Branch of the Country Women's Association as from 19th July, 1924 to 19th July, 1945, 1945

Pre-maternity and post-natal first aid : an outline of the preparations to be made for a confinement pending the arrival of doctor and nurse, Norrie, Harold, 1923

Progress : official record of the Country Women's Association of New South Wales, 1922-1938, 1938

Riverina Group 1927-1997, 1997

Rowena remembered : a history of the C.W.A. and district, 1994

The silver years : the story of the Country Women's Association of New South Wales, 1922-1947 Publisher: Sydney : [1947] Printer: (Sydney : Estate of Harry G. Nall) Description: 66 p. : ill., ports ; 27 cm., 1947

Journal Article

Remote Rural Women's Ideologies, Spaces and Networks: Country Women's Association of New South Wales, 1922-1992, Teather, Elizabeth K, 1992

The double bind: being female and being rural: a comparative study of Australia, New Zealand and Canada. [Edited version of a public lecture presented at Lock Haven University, Pennsylvania, April 1998], Teather, Elizabeth Kenworthy, 1998

Tailoring rural women in Australia, Canada and New Zealand: the Touch of Silk [Paper first presented at the International Conference of Historical Geographers (9th: 1995: Perth, WA).], Teather, Elizabeth Kenworthy, 1997

Gwen Green (nee Lowenthal) 1900-1988 confronting the Great Depression head-on [A pioneer Jewish woman.], Rosenberg, Louise, 2000

Mandate of the Country Women's Association of New South Wales. [Earlier version of this paper presented at the conference 'Interest Groups and Political Lobbying' (1994: University of New England)], Teather, Elizabeth Kenworthy, 1996

The Country Women's Association of New South Wales in the 1920s and 1930s as a counter revolutionary organisation, Teather, Elizabeth Kenworthy, 1994

The first rural women's network in New South Wales: seventy years of the Country Women's Association, Teather, Elizabeth Kenworthy, 1992

Newsletter

Newsletter / Country Women's Association of New South Wales Canberra Branch, 1987-

The Country Woman: The official organ of the Countrywomen's Association of New South Wales, 1937-

Report

The Official annual of Country Women's Association of New South Wales: annual report and balance sheet to be presented at the annual general conference, 1927-

Conference Proceedings

Programme/Agenda ... of annual meeting and general conference of the Country Women's Association of N.S.W., 1922-

Pamphlet

Wyong CWA golden jubilee, 1932-1982, 1982

Resource

Archival resources

Australian Historic Records Register

[Country Women's Association, Candelo Kameruka Branch](#)

[Country Women's Association, Cartwright's Hill Branch](#)

[Country Women's Association, Henty Evening Branch](#)

[Country Women's Association of Australia, Yanco Branch](#)

[Country Women's Association, Yanco Branch](#)

State Library of New South Wales

[Clara M. Stevenson correspondence, 1916-1964](#)

Mitchell and Dixson Libraries Manuscripts Collection

[Clara M. Stevenson correspondence, 1916-1964](#)

[Rose family papers, 1749-1974 \[Henrietta Eliza Bertha Rose\]](#)

Newcastle Region Library

[Records of the Country Women's Association of New South Wales, Hunter River Group. \[manuscript\]](#)

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Thelma Bate interviewed by Hazel de Berg in the Hazel de Berg collection \[sound recording\]](#)

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection

[History 1959 \[manuscript\]](#)

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