

## Story: Farmer and grower organisations

Page 5 – Rural women

Two important groups involved with the wellbeing of rural communities are the Country Women's Institute and the Women's Division of Federated Farmers.

### The Women's Institute

The Women's Institute movement began in Canada in 1896, before spreading to England and Scotland. It aimed to bring women together to help each other and share information.

The formation of the New Zealand Country Women's Institute was largely the work of Bessie Spencer, who farmed fruit and honey in Napier. She was introduced to the Women's Institute movement at a handcraft fair in London. She formed the Rissington Women's Institute in 1921. In 1922 a second institute was founded at Norsewood.

Further institutes were established throughout the country, forming provincial federations as their numbers warranted. In 1929 these provincial organisations were regrouped under the New Zealand Consultative Council of Federation Committees, and in 1930 the first dominion conference was held in Wellington.

### Māori women

Māori women formed their own group, the Māori Women's Institute, in 1929. They were associated with the Country Women's Institute and focused on welfare and social concerns. Māori knowledge was disseminated in *Home and Country* magazine, which regularly published articles on traditional arts and crafts, and the medicinal properties of plants. By 1937 there were 40 Māori Women's institutes.

#### Women worse off than cattle

In 1929 Una Macleod, secretary of the Women's Division, caused a stir when she commented: 'If there were legislation passed compelling every farmer to keep his wife as he has to keep his cattle, perhaps the maternal mortality wouldn't be so heavy amongst country women.'

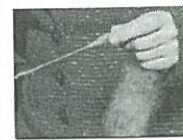
### Women's Division

The Women's Division of the New Zealand Farmers' Union was founded in 1925 by a group of farmers' wives who came with their husbands to the Wellington Farmers' Union conference. In 1946 they became the Women's Division of Federated Farmers, and in 1999 the name was changed to Rural Women. Their early goal was to address issues surrounding the welfare of women and children in rural New Zealand.

### Home help

In 1929 the Women's Division launched the bush nurse and emergency housekeeper scheme, which was funded by a 'community chest'. Its success saw the organisation become a recognised society under the Domestic Service Regulations 1937, and was therefore covered by the Department of Health. With government help, the division was able to focus on supplying accommodation to farming families in need of rest. A number of homes around the country were gifted to the organisation for this purpose. The division also set up training centres for young women.

In 2008 the organisation still had a holiday home at Whangaparāoa, north of Auckland, and ran Honda House, a



Bessie Spencer



Rissington Women's Institute banner (1st of 2)



Women's Division protest

bed and breakfast in Wellington. Many of the health services formerly administered by the division were being supplied by a charitable subsidiary of Rural Women called Access Homehealth, which provided nursing and home care for rural clients.

**Footnotes:**

1. Quoted in Anne Else, ed., *Women together: a history of women's organisations in New Zealand*. Wellington: Historical Branch of Internal Affairs/Daphne Brasell, 1993, p. 393. >

**How to cite this page:**

Willie Smith and Steven Kelly. 'Farmer and grower organisations - Rural women', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 1-Mar-09  
URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/farmer-and-grower-organisations/5>

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