

CONSUL MUSEUM INCORPORATED
Oral History Collection – Section 2
Collected by Oral History Researcher Meagan Gough
Shirley Wenaas Interview 2008 March 3

Catalogue No. 2.7

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Conducted on Wenaas Home Site SE15-5-25-W3 Northwest of Robsart, SK

SW =Shirley Wenaas: Interviewee

GW =Gene Wenaas : Interviewee

MG = Meagan Gough: Interviewer

NJT = Nancy-Jean Taylor: Cameraman

3 March 2008

SW: My name is Shirley Mae Clark (maiden name). I was born at a little place called Fife Lake, near Coronach, south of Moose Jaw. I was born at home and was the second of eight children. My sister was just a year and a week older than myself and my brother was a year and a month younger than myself. We actually had a housekeeper, a friend of my father's came, Mrs. Holmbe; we called her Hoky because we could not say Holmbe. We were really blessed because we had our Hoky and also had our grandmother down the road, a quarter of a mile down the road. Whenever anyone got sick, Grandmother always came. We had a really good upbringing.

When the school buses were going to come out, they were closing down the small schools just like they are doing now and he wouldn't have us going to Coronach on a school bus, so he had to sell off and move us to Moose Jaw. Our house was right beside a school; it was a nice house and across the back alley was a skating rink. The only skating we had done was down at the dugout or the pond, the dam, and we had to clear it off. Father got us skates at the second hand store and four of us wanted to skate so we had two pair of skates and lots of times we only put on one, one skate at a time. Everybody wanted to skate. When we got to Moose Jaw we got skates. It was absolutely fabulous. It was great to be able to skate.

My sister was 13 and I was 12 when the twins were born, two little boys.

MG: Identical twins?

SW: No, they weren't. Leonard and Lindsay. We literally brought up those two little babies because the two other boys, David and Jerry, were still quite young, and then the twins. So Donna had Leonard and I had Lindsay. We had to feed them and change them. Our school, we could hear the bell [from home] and run down to the school. We did our chores and then went down to the school.

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MG: Was it a big change not having Grandma?

SW: Grandma followed us to Moose Jaw.

MG: Did she live nearby?

SW: Well, Moose Jaw isn't that big. We lived on the 500 block of Athabasca East and she lived on the 100 block of Athabasca West. It was nice. We never had a TV. Grandma had the TV, so every Sunday we would go to Grandma's place and we always had stew, and sometimes she would make a pie for us. Lots of times we would just take it down on the toboggan and walk down there.

Dad was our critic. He had really bad arthritis. That was another reason why he wanted to move to Moose Jaw in the winter. He got rid of the cattle then and the hogs and just went straight grain farming. It was a big, big change for us children, to get into a big school with all those kids. Another thing, we could pick out our rooms in this big house. At the farm house my sister and I roomed together and Betty, my younger sister and Hoky roomed together. Les always had to room with the hired man, and the little boys were downstairs in cribs. When we got to Moose Jaw there were all those bedrooms, five bedrooms upstairs, so it was really nice. We never had indoor plumbing until we moved to the city. So we all got a good education and were all involved with sports.

My sister and I played hockey, and we were on the Moose Jaw Wildcat Women's Hockey Team and we won the Dominion Championship in 1952. That was quite amazing.

I played basketball and we both played ball. We played Senior A ball in Moose Jaw. We stayed with Grandma in the summertime until the ball season was over because we'd get into playoffs and it was important to be there.

Down on the farm, track and field was a big thing. My dad would always be there for track and field. In those days there were just the wooden rods for high jumping and he was always there because Donna, my sister, was always an excellent high jumper. He always came home with no laces because he would tie up the rods; they always got broken and he would tie them up with his shoe laces. That was before duct tape, and before the fancy rods they have now.

MG: What was your sister's name?

SW: Donna.

MG: What year were you born?

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SW: November 28, 1934.

MG: Did you meet your husband in Moose Jaw?

SW: I actually did. He was a CPR machinist in Calgary and they sent him down to Moose Jaw. My girlfriend kept saying this Gene was so wonderful. He played ball; he played at the six o'clock games and we played at the eight o'clock games. She'd say, "Oh you gotta come and see this guy play ball". When I got home from work, all I wanted to do was have a nap and then go to the ball game. A friend of his who was also on the CPR went to the exhibition so we met there, and we went out a couple of times. I didn't really know; he actually seemed kind of arrogant.

I went to Europe for six months, and my two friends and I stayed in a hostel over there. I was twenty-two. My friend wrote me a letter saying, "Guess what. Gene and whatever her name is, are getting married," and then when I turned the page, "Just kidding."

He had moved back to the farm then, he was going to farm. He had driven somebody up to Regina and stopped in to see me. He phoned me at work and asked me if I wanted to go out that night. I said, "Yeah, I suppose." Another time he asked me to go out and I said, "No, I had to do my hair". So then I never saw him for a while.

We started going out after he'd come back to the farm then. Within a year we had a double wedding; my sister and I got married at the same time in Moose Jaw. This was Betty, my younger sister. We stayed in Moose Jaw that winter. He was a bell hop at the Grand Hall Hotel and I kept my job. He moved down here in April and I came down in May. We moved into the old house and Gene's mother, my mother-in-law, Esther, was a wonderful person; they were living in Robsart and she was running the cafe. All her stuff was still in the house which had green walls. I had a red chesterfield so you know we had to pack up some of this stuff and I thought, oh my goodness...

But anyway, it was great. I moved into a wonderful community. The Wenaas' had been here for quite a while and the family had grown up here. There were three Wenaas families. They had homesteaded here, the three brothers.

MG: What year did you move here?

SW: 1960. Forty-eight years this October.

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MG: Congratulations. What's the key to that, if you don't mind me asking?

SW: When you finally find the right guy! That's the big thing. We both played ball; we both curled. It was just a wonderful community to be in.

MG: So you were happy to move here?

SW: I was fine. I was busy. We did not have any running water. Catherine was born in November of the next year, my first child. 1961. I was scared stiff. When the doctor sent me home with that little baby I thought there was something wrong with him. I had no idea what I was going to do with this little child. She was colicky; she cried forever. Grandma came down; she was a midwife, from Ireland and she was telling me what to do with this little baby. I'd hold her and rock her. I had a real nice little rocking chair without the arms on it so I could sing to her and read to her. When the phone would ring, it was one of those crank phones and it would ring six or eight times before you knew it was your number, and then she would wake up and start crying again. It wasn't just the daytime; it was in the night time, too. But the doctor said it would make her strong and it did; she's a big strong girl.

MG: How many children?

SW: Two. Martin is our son; he lives not too far from here and has the ranch.

MG: So this Grandma is the one you grew up close to. What was her name?

SW: Rebecca Hamilton (her maiden name); she was married three times, to Wright, Corbett and then to Whitelaw. Corbett and my grandmother had a farm right close to us down there.

MG: Nice to have a woman around that was midwife that was close to you.

SW: Well, she said that she brought them into the world and she took them out of the world because she would sit with them, like palliative care is now. You could call my grandma and she would come. She's amazing. Hoky played the piano beautifully. My brother said that she touched every key on the piano. She played for church and Grandma sang. Grandma sang for all the funerals and all the weddings and Hoky played at all these little communities. They would always come up on Thursday because the wedding or funeral was always on the Saturday. They would come up about Thursday and practice the hymns or whatever she was going to sing at the wedding. They would have such a good time. They would laugh about the piano. It does not have Middle C; it does not work, so they would have to work around Middle C.

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MG: So they were quite good friends and companions.

SW: Oh yes.

MG: Same generation?

SW: Hoky was older; she was a wonderful cook. We always had dessert when Hoky was there. Grandma knew nothing when she came from Ireland. She worked as a weaver in Ireland. She came out here to be a farmer's wife, but she became a good cook and a good community worker; she knit and she quilted and she did everything.

MG: Did she play a big role in inspiring you?

SW: Oh certainly. They had what they called a Ladies Aid down there; it was just a group of ladies, not with any church. Just like WI. They would get together, but they always had a quilt going. I can remember when we were just little crawling underneath the quilt; all the kids went.

MG: So they created that because they saw a need...

SW: Just a get-together, so the women could get together once a month. For friendship.

MG: For friendship, camaraderie, sharing stories.

SW: Yes.

MG: Her influence on you must have been huge.

SW: Oh it was, on the whole family. When she spoke, everybody... I remember in Moose Jaw we had cupboards (on the farm we had just a cupboard that stood there). She would come in and say, "Are you not house conscious?" and she would take the cupboard doors and shut them all.

Hoky, as well. She would never tell us to do anything if Mom or Dad were there, but she would take the knife (bang) and take the carrots (bang) and put them there. She didn't say a word, she would just look at us and we knew we should be peeling carrots. Or setting the table...she would get it across to you. She wouldn't have to say anything but we always knew.

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MG: I think this is really neat hearing this because I grew up in my house, too, with my grandmother in the house. There was an aunt, a cousin, my mom, my grandmother, all in the house – five generations of women. Nancy-Jean and I were just talking over at the house, I guess. I brought one of the pictures of my grandma that I had up on the fridge. That influence of having a woman of that generation close by. She must have known so much. How did she become a midwife? She must have been trusted in the community and called upon?

SW: Yes, oh yes. Well, she wasn't afraid; she would tackle anything. She wasn't tall. And, well she was Irish.

MG: So then for yourself, how did you get into WI (Women's Institute)?

SW: When I moved down here, as usual, there were several organizations, and I said I was going to join just one (I should have remembered that.) Our neighbors up here, they are both Women's Institute women, and they lived in the same yard, and they came down and asked me to join and I did. At that time I was just young and all the women were quite a bit older than I was at that time.

MG: You would have been 26?

SW: Yes. They were marvelous, especially Violet Morrison. She is Bert Olmsted's aunt. Just an absolutely marvelous woman. She knew WI backwards and forwards. She was so good. As a convenor, she would do everything so well, especially with the political stuff. Canadian industries and stuff like that. She was just amazing. I'd wonder how she would do it. Where does she get all of this information? Of course, all the women knew how to make pie and cookies and lefsa.

MG: What are these, by the way?

SW: That's lefsa. Lefsa is a Norwegian dish; it is made with potatoes and flour and you roll it out and fry it. You put butter and a little bit of cinnamon and sugar on it and roll it up. I learned all the Norwegian things that you have to learn being in the family. The Wenaas' are Norwegian.

MG: So your family is Irish and English. Your husband is all Norwegian.

SW: All Norwegian. My mother-in-law taught me everything. I was so fortunate because we would get together every Christmas and do the rosettes, and the krumkake, and all the cookies, lefsa and the flat bread. Then Gene's Uncle Harold would come and help us sometimes and, of course, I would never roll the

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flat bread thin enough. You had to keep rolling it until it wouldn't even stay on the paper. It was a good experience.

MG: It sounds like there were a lot of active women in the community at that time. The community seems to be filled with really interesting women.

SW: Yes. I don't know if I have anything to play this thing on (referring to a cassette tape). Two of the Women's Institute women, Randine Anderson and Rae DeCrane. We won a federal competition (FWIC) for this tape. We had sent it in and we won this Carriane Trophy; it is in Robsart Hall right now. They interviewed this Mrs. Humphrey; she was right from England; they ranched up at Pansy's Place, that Marty has now. I actually have all the tapes of institutes in Saskatchewan that competed. There is a wealth of information in there. They interviewed Mrs. Humphrey about when she came to the ranch.

MG: Those are interviews with these ladies?

SW: Yes. I had mentioned this to Sharon Butala. She had been talking about writing a book about pioneer women and so I had told her I have all these tapes. But then she got kind of involved; her husband passed away. I don't know if that will ever come about, but if somebody could do it, it would be just absolutely marvelous.

MG: So the FAW...

SW: FWIC. Federal Women's Institute of Canada (FWIC). Every province, except Ontario which has two representatives, belongs to the FWIC. We are also involved with the Associated Country Women of the World.

MG: So these are similar organizations?

SW: Yes. We all do the same thing. The Associated Country Women of the World, every three years decide to do some project. This project, in 2007, we will donate to the tsunami (in Indonesia). Two nuns who have all these orphan children came to the ACWW Conference in Finland last year and approached the women, and they decided that would be our project.

MG: Every year they have a conference?

SW: Every three years. They had a wonderful presentation apparently. They had an overhead and explained that some of these children come from wealthy families, but everything is gone. Their family is gone (because of the tsunami) so there they are, these little human beings along with everybody else. These two

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nuns have taken them into these orphanages and are doing these wonderful things. So that is our current project with the ACWW.

MG: What are some of the things you do?

SW: We have a pancake supper every March. We care for the Robsart Cemetery. We started that in 1926, planted the trees in 1928 and painted boards. That was before my time. I was there to paint some of the boards as well. And they've done that ever since. We used to go out there with our lawn mowers, then WI purchased our own lawn mowers. Now we have a ride-on lawn mower and hire someone to do the cemetery. Last year we did a big project; several years ago Gene and some of his friends made little metal plaques and they just stuck them in the ground and we painted all of them. Now they are deteriorating, so now we have little cement blocks for all the ones that don't have a regular marker. That was very costly. We have been so fortunate in Robsart that we have never, never had to ask for money. People have always donated money, some with substantial donations. It's just been absolutely marvellous.

MG: What do you attribute that to?

SW: They know somebody is looking after it (the cemetery).

It used to be called the Homemakers and I think it was in 1970 that they changed it to Women's Institute. There was rebellion in Saskatchewan and these women were not going to change, that's all there was to it.

NJT: 1972.

SW: Was it? Anyway they did change it (Saskatchewan was the last to change). Now they are saying that Women's Institute is not a good name. I think it is Ontario that has a Women's Institute in town but also has a *Women's Institution* and they get all mixed up with one getting calls for the other and they want to change the name. I am thinking this is not going to go over.

MG: A lot of tradition in that, local heritage.

SW: Yes. It was one of the things that was brought up when we had our FWIC Conference in Red Deer in 2006. I thought, oh dear, we don't want to be going through this again (change the name), but I doubt if they will. It is something that was just talked about.

MG: So both of these organizations have a fairly large membership in this region?

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SW: We just have the Saskatchewan Women's Institute. One representative from Saskatchewan goes to the federal. All across Canada we have one person that goes to ACWW.

MG: So what's the membership of the women who participate in these two organizations? How would you describe the type of women? What are their backgrounds throughout the province once you get to the national level?

SW: Originally it was all farm women, but now many farm women have moved to town so they don't have a branch in town. They are members-at-large so they still belong to Women's Institute. In Ontario there are so many people they can have very large branches and several branches around. I have always thought it would be nice to have another Women's Institute just for the younger women. They don't have to be with the Robsart Women's Institute, but they could have their own. I think that would work. We are definitely on a different wavelength than the younger girls because they have different interests, which is wonderful, because lots of times Robsart has let some things go by, things that we should be getting involved with but we're just not there anymore. So if we had the younger women into it, I think that would take care of that.

MG: You've had that experience, too, because you were saying you were significantly younger when you moved here. Probably had different experiences and part of a different generation.

SW: Sure.

This is a little bit about Robsart. We also supply the community hall in Robsart with equipment, dishes for the kitchen. We give a high academic standing award to the Consul School every year. Now we are going to give one to Eastend. In 1931 we began sponsoring baby clinics made with our Public Health Nurse and blood clinics. When Catherine was just a baby I could take her into Robsart, and the Public Health Nurse would come once a month into the Hall. She would do all the checkups. The WI sponsored all that.

During the war we supported several projects, sold war stamps, donated to mobile kitchens and to the Red Cross. We built the restroom in Robsart in 1947 and it still stands there. I still go in and clean it once or twice a year.

MG: So the participation of these organizations during the war?

SW: There was lots of participation. They wrote lots of letters.

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MG: Letter writing would have been huge.

SW: Yes. Most families had someone in the war, but there were some who didn't so they wrote letters to these names that they got so they would get a letter from home or someplace.

We also had the travelling library in Robsart. That was where the village office used to be, beside where the post office boxes are, that little white building.

MG: Yes, you've taken me there.

SW: Adelaide Hoodless Museum is in Stony Creek, Ontario. Adelaide Hoodless was the founder of Women's Institutes. (I gave Nancy-Jean this book and I'll also give it to you. Lots of interesting stories in there about Women's Institutes. And I'll give you...)

MG: That's great.

(Bell clangs).

SW: We also support the International Peace Garden. We have a picnic table set up there. The ladies of Manitoba look after it. We donate to it.

MG: It works.

GW: Did you hear it?

MG: Yes, we heard it. That was a good one.

SW: This is a little bit about the Women's Institutes across Canada. This is my old newsletter. I could give you a new one. I am President of the Saskatchewan Women's Institute. What happened was, oh we were set up wonderfully. We had an office in Kirk Hall at the University of Saskatchewan.

MG: Oh, that's where my office is.

SW: Kirk Hall?

MG: Kirk Hall.

SW: Well, we moved out, so we gave you room. That's why.

MG: There you go. I have a little cubicle.

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SW: We shared it. After a while we shared it with someone else. That's where we were, but we had to move out, bag and bandage. We lost our funding several years ago, so we couldn't hire a secretary anymore.

MG: Where did your funding come from? The federal level?

SW: No, Provincial Government. The university was so wonderful because we could use their equipment, their copy machines, their telephones, their stamps. Then enrolments were declining and we were running out of funds so the woman in all her wisdom who was the president at the time said she would take it home and do it. Well, I was vice president at the time and I said no way when I was president that I would do it. It was way too much. I wouldn't even consider it. But guess what, I had to do it. Do the newsletter...and, oh gosh!

GW: Did you try the lefsa?

MG: I did try the lefsa. I love lefsa now. It's my first time having it. My grandma makes it – it's a British thing though. With the extra pie crust, she would make – I forget the name – it was just a special thing that would happen when she made a pie. With cinnamon and brown sugar. Roll it up and bake it.

SW: Through the years we had some very good secretaries, but towards the end they weren't all that good. The office was in quite a mess. But then we got this wonderful married woman from Saskatoon. She was just incredible. She sorted all the stuff in there; she found stuff we didn't even know existed, and then we had to let her go. It was heartbreaking. She was so good.

MG: So when was it you took on the newsletter?

SW: Three years ago. My term is up in June. I had a big long table in the front room with everything on it, and it was driving me crazy, so I went to an estate sale in Maple Creek and got myself a cabinet and painted it all up and put all my stuff in there and in my laundry room. My computer is in there. It works fine.

MG: So you took on many roles then?

SW: Yes. I send out 45 newsletters. I just ran over to Consul this morning and put them in the mail. Our AGM is in North Battleford this June, the first weekend in June (I think it's the 7th, 8th, 9th or the 6th, 7th and 8th?) Friday, Saturday, Sunday in North Battleford. We used to have it in Saskatoon and Regina, but we found it was way too expensive. We used to be able to bunk in the dorms at the U of S and they stopped that. I guess they weren't getting cleaned up or

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something. We had to get hotel rooms then. My daughter wasn't living there at the time. I didn't get to too many of them anyway because it was always on the weekend of track and field, the first weekend in June, and I just could not see myself going to a WI meeting and missing the track and field.

It turned out good. This one in Regina – remember when Jake and Clayton were running up there? It was an ACWW area conference in Regina, and these students from Consul were staying in the same hotel as we were. Clayton was running. They [ACWW] were having a presentation that day (I think it was the RCMP trying to tell us how not to get hooked up in all these scams and stuff like that). So Gene says, "Are you going to come?" He had walked me down to the conference. I said, "No, I can't." He took the stairs and I took the elevator and met him out there and we went. I went to the track and field. I just couldn't miss it. It was great. I snuck back in again [to the conference].

MG: Hard to be in two places at once.

SW: Oh yes. But it was so close. I couldn't not go.

MG: How do you become a member?

SW: Just join. There were very few women around here my age; they all moved to Maple Creek, Medicine Hat, or Eastend. There was just Treva Johnson, Jean Lightfoot and myself, three of us from Robsart. Our other woman just moved to Maple Creek. We do have about six members from Eastend. They joined. We've got some really good members. I shouldn't say this, but it's just amazing. Some of these women can't even make a pie. They don't know how to knit. They don't know how to sew. This is what we've always done. This has been our fundraising. We'd make a quilt and raffle it off.

MG: What do you see in the future for these organizations? What direction would you like to see them go?

SW: We have to bring in the younger generation. The membership is older now, still hanging on, but we have only eight branches now. We've got about 80 members in Saskatchewan. The rest of them are all members-at-large so you can't do anything. You have to have branches to do anything. Just to get your newsletter in the mail every month just doesn't do it.

MG: There's nowhere for people to actually go if they're not (?).

SW: The Western Development Museum... This book was published in 1905, and they republished it. It is a fundraiser; it is all handwritten.

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MG: Nancy-Jean left a copy of that with me yesterday, so I looked through it. I was going to buy a copy. I was going to ask where I could get a copy of it.

SW: Here you go. It's yours.

MG: Oh, thank you!

SW: It turned out well.

MG: That's really kind of you. I just think it's so neat. I was saying to Nancy-Jean, as you mentioned, they're handwritten. You can get a real feel for people.

SW: There's a couple in there. One was the fried chicken one with the mammy. They wanted to change that. We said no, you're not changing anything in that book. If you're going to do it, it's going to be done the way it is. I don't think anyone is going to have a problem with it. I know it probably isn't politically correct, but that's the way it is.

MG: It's historical, over the last one hundred years.

SW: To commemorate that book we went down to Moose Jaw to the Western Development Museum there and sold pie and coffee that day. They had this big hoopla about the anniversary and we sold books. It's fantastic to hear about the people that still have their book, the original book.

MG: I'm really fascinated, actually, just how big a role....their identity, their cultural traditions, what they bring with them, especially when people are immigrating. How important the food is.

SW: (In the background, Gene speaks offside to Nancy-Jean also.) This was a Norwegian community. They all have their ethnic Norwegian dishes in here. Lutefisk is really the big one. We were actually into Maple Creek yesterday to Gene's cousin's place, and we had lutefisk.

MG: So, there's some of your husband's family recipes in here?

SW: No, no, that was published in 1905.

MG: Oh, so I am mistaken. I thought there were additions made to this book. This is a reprint of the original.

SW: The original book, yes. And those drawings, tells you who the artist was.

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MG: Aww, the etchings are beautiful.

SW: Wonderful. Just absolutely wonderful.

MG: They are beautiful. Who did the etchings here? I'll look for it later. That's really neat.

MG: Membership is changing right now in both institutes; is it up or down?

SW: All across Canada it is down, but Saskatchewan is suffering the most.

MG: Why do you think, to what do you attribute that?

SW: To the economy; the women have had to go in to work. We used to have farms; there was a farm here and a farm there. Almost every quarter section had someone living on it. Now there are very, very few people living in the communities.

I'll tell you something about Prince Edward Island, about their funding. They lost their funding, too. But every woman in the P.E.I. Women's Institute documented all their volunteer hours, presented it to the government and the government gave them their funding back.

MG: Wonderful. Just trying to show just how much everyone had done and how important it was. That's how you do it.

SW: Yes, they have a good membership. B.C. is celebrating their hundredth anniversary this year, and Alberta next year. In 2010 we will be (celebrating ours), if we last that long.

MG: What do you think the biggest impact of these organizations for a woman has been? What is the biggest benefit to them for their participation over a hundred years? What has it given them?

SW: I think it is giving them a sense of leadership. You are able to take a secretary's job, a treasurer's job, a president's job, conduct a meeting...how many farm women ever did anything like that? If they went to a meeting, they sat there and listened to the men conduct the meeting. They were able to operate on their own.

MG: Was there ever been any resistance to this?

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SW: No. Gene's always been supportive. I helped him outside all the time and if it was WI (Homemakers) day he would phone up the neighbor, Glenn, and say, "Glenn, can you help me today? Shirley has Homemakers today." I never missed. That was marked on the calendar and I went.

We take turns having the meetings in our homes. Now we have a guest speaker at pretty well every one of our meetings and it has turned out really, really well.

The End