

Rest Rooms Designed by Women

Mother would throw up her hands in the kitchen. "This place must have been designed by a man!", she'd say. Eventually, things changed. Our old farm house got cupboards, of her design!

Not only were kitchens ill-designed for women. Prairie villages were ill-designed for farm women. The plan of one farm every quarter section, was designed to ensure the prairies were covered quickly by farmers. In British Ontario, the source of most early settlers, villages were designed with women and children living closer together. They had easier access to each other.



Melita's Main Street in 1916.

Meet Clarice Hamilton. It's 1904. She's newly married. On a farm. With two small children. Today, she's going to Melita, with her husband Thomas, by horse and wagon. Their weekly Saturday shopping trip. She doesn't have a horse she can harness. And other than picnics and Sunday church, she has little time for visiting. Rural telephones have not yet arrived. She's dependent on Thomas for most everything.

Some women had friends or relatives in town. Many did not. The Hamiltons would park their wagon at the livery stable. Clarice took the children to get groceries. Thomas went to the blacksmith and hardware. On a good day, he'd avoid the saloon. She'd usually be done early, and then wonder how to fill time, where to feed, toilet the children. Where to meet an understanding soul for tea. Of course, the baby would cry. But breastfeeding within sight of a man? Never! Aghh. Clearly designed by men!

The Women's Institute, started in English

A VANTAGE POINTS FLASHBACK

Ontario, set out to improve life for rural women. WI came to Manitoba in 1910. Establishing Rest Rooms for women and children was a high priority. "For family and country", as their mission proclaimed. They partnered with local societies, spreading to Pierson, Boissevain, Deloraine, Waskada, Napinka and Melita. The movement attracted community activists and caregivers – and through fundraising, managed to convince municipal councils and businessmen to contribute for rent, and even purchasing of space.

The rooms were ingeniously furnished with cast-off tables, rockers, sofas. Alberta Palmer of Waskada said they used sugar bags, dyed dark brown, embroidered with yellow flowers to cover chairs. Paid Matrons, like Mrs. Chapin in Deloraine, or Eleanor Coghlan in Boissevain, offered kindness and well supplied change tables, tea and snacks. It became known as "the most humane institution of any village".

Rest Rooms had opposition though. Churches were concerned women would support these "new societies" rather than church budgets. They also questioned Rest Room rules against evangelizing. Women couldn't open back accounts in those days and so were vulnerable, like in Killarney, where a men's organization that held Rest Room funds in trust, broke that trust, scuttling the project.

Rest Rooms fell out of demand once telephones, electrification and cars became the norm. But at least one side-shoot of Rest Rooms continues. Public libraries. The Women's Institute wanted to offer self-improvement reading for Rest Rooms. They partnered with Ag Extension offices to devise book sharing networks, which eventually grew to what we have today. Clearly designed by women!

Designed by Women was adapted from a story by MB Historical Society.

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