

## A Lifeline on the River

Story and photos by Ina Bruns



"The Little Red River had claimed too many lives," says Gladys Schneider, left, of the Mary Riley Women's Institute in Bowden, Alberta. "We decided to fight it on its own shores."

CANADIAN summers may be brief as a bathing suit that has spent a season out of mothballs, yet despite their brevity, they take an appalling number of drowning victims. Parents whose children swim even in supervised pools or lakes have felt the pangs of anxiety, but in the Bowden, Alberta, district, the swimming season has long been anticipated with something akin to panic. Here youngsters have as a swimming hole the turbulent Little Red . . . tributary of the even more tempestuous Red Deer river.

Members of the Mary Riley Women's Institute, a branch of a world-wide organization of country women, pondered the riddle of the river as they discussed the latest near-tragedy. A local boy lay in the hospital, suffering from pneumonia after swallowing a large amount of water. Not only had the lad come near death from drowning, but he was also recovering from a badly bruised torso after panic-stricken pals had pummelled life back into his body with more strength than knowledge. Since this boy had received "pool" instruction in swimming, it was clearly evident such lessons were not providing swimmers with the resources needed to meet the challenge of the Little Red.

It took a fiery outburst from one of the Women's Institute's enthusiastic members to set up a new program to deal with the problem. Gladys Schneider can be blunt when she is aroused:

"This W.I. was not formed for the purpose of idle talk, tea-drinking and raising funds to buy funeral wreaths!" she declared. "It's past time we face the fact that we live beside a river, and children will swim in that river regardless of how firmly they are warned against its dangers. We've got to train them to swim with local conditions. If we train the whole shebang to swim in the Little Red, they can act as lifeguards for each other."

The 21 members agreed that wholesale instruction might prove the best solution. They had pleaded for years for a lifeguard to be stationed at this popular picnic spot, and when no brawny lad emerged from government offices, the ladies raised funds and trained a local youth to serve in this capacity. However, this had not proven as successful as they had hoped, because the part-time lifeguard couldn't always be at hand when help was needed. Before long his regular work took him to a new area. Although children were warned not to swim without adult guidance, the toll mounted. A youngster played truant from classes and became a victim.

Not long ago, the government decided to turn the picturesque river's bend into a park. Four modern kitchens were built, playground equipment was welcomed, and baseball diamonds graced the 125 acres of river-laced countryside. The government put in a little wading pool that provided safety for tiny tots, but for the droves of people from Calgary and surrounding areas that found a playground at the Little Red, death awaited those who were caught in the cold current of the river under unfavorable circumstances.

Something had to be done and Gladys Schneider's suggestion seemed the only solution left. It was decided

to provide lessons for anyone from six to sixty who was willing to take them for a nominal fee of three dollars for the two week period. It was anticipated that the Mary Riley W.I.'s Learn to Swim Safety Program would include some 60 students. But when classes opened, they were bulging with 180 prospective swimmers from a radius of 25 miles!

Finding an instructor for such an exhausting program might have been difficult, but Mrs. Bud Carbett, one of the members, had an ambitious aunt in Calgary, Mrs. June Powell, who was an instructor at the Young Women's Christian Association. The members offered to pay her a token salary if she would instruct classes at the Red Lodge Park. Mrs. Powell agreed.

### Unbounded Enthusiasm

The Olds Gazette got behind the project with enthusiasm and offered to print entry forms free of charge. Mrs. Leonard Schrader halted duties in the hayfield where she was helping her husband bale hay, to serve as secretary and Johnny-on-the-spot in setting up classes. The W.I. members welcomed Mrs. Powell with sunny skies and full lunch baskets. For the following ten days, chores were done early by eager youngsters so the hours from 9:45 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. could be spent at the river. Proud parents and hopeful members watched from the river's banks as youngsters went from bobbing and breathing, to breast stroke and simple diving.

Mrs. Powell has a natural ability to instill confidence in the most timid. In her quiet instruction of the classes, she was quick to observe those who were fearful, and she encouraged these youngsters to play in a safe area of the river until their fear subsided. At the close of classes, most of the students, including Gladys Schneider and nine other adults, won their badges. These students will, of course, upgrade their skill with future lessons, but a beginning had been made. The threat of the Little Red had been diminished if only because young people learned from an expert that the mark of a swimmer's skill is measured first of all by the precautions he takes. Youngsters were amazed at the respect June Powell had for water safety.

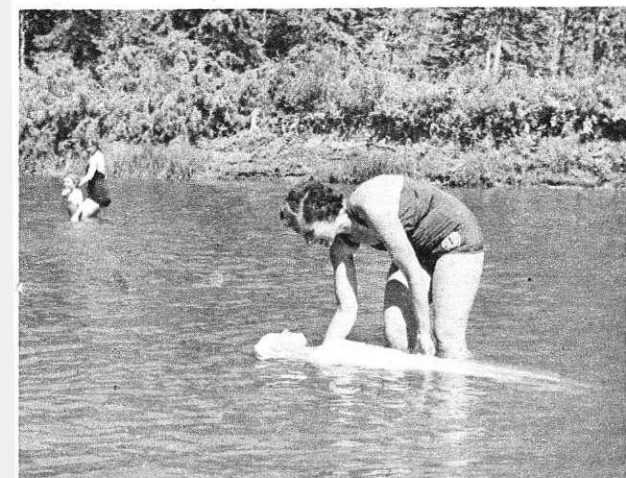
Lessons were constantly braced with lessons of the hazards a swimmer must guard against. Each class ended with some simple demonstration of how to cope with an emergency or how to rescue a swimmer.

"If you can't assist a drowning victim without allowing him to grasp hold of you, whip off your bathing suit and use it as a rope," she advised. "Modesty runs a poor second when it comes to a matter of life and death."

I talked to Mrs. Powell over a cup of hot coffee the W.I. members had provided when classes ended. She admitted she had never before seen a venture in water safety attempted on the scale the Mary Riley W.I. was providing at Red Lodge Park, but she believed there is urgent need of such classes across the country. And she believes that parents can help their children overcome the natural fear of water that prevents some from learning to swim.



The Institute's first step was to plan a two-week water safety program for the community.



Swimming lessons were given in the Little Red River itself by instructress Mrs. June Powell.



Today the river is not the threat it was for 180 pupils who participated in the program.

"From the time of a baby's first bath, care should be taken never to frighten a child of water. Water should not be allowed to pour over the child's face when the hair is washed in a way that causes fear of suffocation. Children should never be forced into the water. All horseplay in water should be avoided lest it discourage the timid from becoming a swimmer. Such undisciplined behavior in water frequently results in drownings."

I took this opportunity to ask why it is that so many "expert" swimmers are listed as casualties each season. June Powell's reply should sound a warning to all amphibians:

"People who may have been expert swimmers last season or even last month are usually far from it at the time of their demise. Swimmers keep forgetting that no exercise will keep them in top condition for the water save that of swimming. Fitness falls off so rapidly, the swimmer can scarcely imagine how quickly exhaustion can overtake one even after a short absence from the water. Over-confidence causes more drownings than anything else."

If the W.I. at Bowden has started something new in water safety classes, it will not be for the first time this branch has gone trail-blazing. Gladys Schneider, whom the members credit with most of the drive for the swimming classes, has been busy for months writing a book of past achievements of this group which started in 1917. Mary Riley, the beloved first president, saw to it that the district had one of the first child clinics in the country.

Sixteen miles from town, the W.I. served a vital need for social outlet in those difficult days. Women eagerly walked ten or even fifteen miles to meetings! Their good works included nursing care in which a district travelling chest was set up for use by anyone in need of it.

### **No Wasted Time**

This active group has carried on an activity once so popular with western rural schools, but long since discontinued even before centralization — the school fair. There are two rural schools still operating in this area.

And somehow they also managed to send books and magazine subscriptions to the children in the Innisfail Hospital, letters and cards to the sick, donations to the Cancer Society, Salvation Army, and the Wood's Home for Children in Calgary, and to an orphanage in Korea.

While much of the urgent need for the local W.I. has vanished, this group still plays an important role in community life. Not long ago, it was decided to send a member to a leadership course in Banff, and it was decided Gladys Schneider was the one to go. Gladys, who got her high school education by correspondence while caring for her invalid mother, was reluctant to go, but the members overcame all obstacles and packed her off to Banff.

Today, if Gladys Schneider sometimes prods the group toward goals like the swimming class, the older members nile and nod knowingly to each other. They accept her youthful enthusiasm with goodwill.

It was co-operation like that given by the Women's Institutes which eventually hung a lifeline across the Little Red. It is to be hoped more such lifelines will be unfurled across the countryside. In water safety there is much work to be done, and few organizations are more able to do it than the Women's Institute.