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Lone Rangers:
Women on New Zealand County Councils

A thesis
presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Introduction

Soon after being elected as a Matamata county councillor early in the 1980s, I visited my parents. My father, who had immigrated from England as a 20 year old but still retained some of the British class-consciousness from which he had sought to escape, was quite pleased to have a member of the family in a role that he saw as 'aristocracy'. On this occasion, Brian Talboys, a friend of my father's and at that time Deputy Prime Minister, was also visiting and Dad took the opportunity to proudly announce that his daughter had joined the political elite, being the first and only woman elected to this council. Mr Talboys pondered for a minute and said "Goodness! Did you have a shortage of pain in your life? The Matamata County Council must be the last bastion of male chauvinism." This was definitely not the reaction Dad had expected, but those words – and the grin with which they were delivered - stayed with me through many a long and difficult council meeting. It certainly impressed me that an experienced politician, and particularly a male one, should make that comment. In light of my subsequent experience, and my knowledge of the experiences of other women councillors I knew at the time, I wonder if county councils were indeed the 'last bastion of male chauvinism', or simply a reflection of their times. And if they were not typical of the times, what made them different and how was that difference manifest?

This study seeks to place the experience of women on county councils in the context of the times. Was their treatment different from that experienced by rural women in general and by women on urban councils? What effect did they have? Did they make any difference in the council chamber, or to council decisions? Did they see a need for change, and have any success in achieving it? And of course along with all these questions goes the 'if so, how?', and 'if not, why not?'

An additional aim of this study is to record the stories of these women, and establish them as part of our history. Studies of local government in New Zealand typically have a greater – if not exclusive – focus on urban authorities. This is not surprising as throughout the period under study around 80 percent of the population resided in locations administered by city or borough councils and only 20 percent or less in

county areas.¹ Even where attention is given to rural authorities, acknowledgement of the presence (or lack) of women councillors, and any contribution made by those who were there, is almost universally absent. But present they were, albeit as a small minority within an already small minority.

It seems a shame that as individuals and as a group female county councillors were, and remain, largely invisible. County councillors of all shapes and sizes ceased to exist as a result of the major reorganisation of local government in 1989. Thus ex-county councillors constitute another of New Zealand's endangered species, and if their stories are not recorded soon they will be lost forever. This of course begs the question as to whether these stories warrant preservation, and to what extent my view of this is shared by other women ex-councillors. The overwhelming response from the women who responded with information for this project was one of great enthusiasm and support, and many commented on their disappointment at the lack of any existing record, let alone recognition, of their work and experiences.

The end point for this study is 1989, when local government reorganisation abolished all counties and replaced them with district councils, changing the nature of both the electorate and the council. The objective of district councils was to reflect 'areas of interest'; the rationale being that rural areas did not operate in isolation but in commercial and cultural association with adjacent urban centres. Thus district councils combined counties and boroughs (and sometimes cities), with political representation allocated in proportion to the populations. So while rural areas retained, at least for a time, their own representatives, rural councillors were in almost all cases considerably outnumbered by their urban colleagues. The nature of the district council meetings, debates and processes followed more closely the conventions of the predecessor borough (or city) council than those of the county or counties they replaced.²

The start point should be the date on which the first woman was elected to a county council. This is not easy to ascertain, but is probably about 1950 when Dorothy Davies was elected to the Makara County Council.³ A very few women followed

¹ *New Zealand Official Yearbook*, 1997, p 110.

² Comments from reporters and many of the women who continued as councillors (on district councils) after 1989. Also Julie Hallam, interview, 21 February 2004.

³ *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz> Dorothy Davies, 8 April 2003.

Dorothy over the ensuing 20 years and by the late 1970s about a dozen women had held seats in various county council chambers. The 1980s saw a marked increase in female participation with possibly 75 women currently serving as county councillors by the time counties were abolished.⁴ This suggests a total of 90 to 100 women who have served as councillors on New Zealand county councils. I contacted all the current District Councils asking them for information on women elected to the counties which were amalgamated into their area. Most district councils responded, although several were prepared to provide this information only if I paid for the staff time required to find it. I also gained assistance from Archives New Zealand and Local Government New Zealand, and in all was able to obtain the names of 76 women, of whom at least six are no longer living.

As many of these women as possible were traced, using information from District Councils, electoral rolls, telephone directories, newspaper reports and 'snowballing' techniques – asking contacted women if they knew where other, more elusive, women were now living. Some women were known to have moved away from the area in which they were elected to a location not known, and some had remarried. Of these elusive women only three were traceable. I included only those councils which had at least one woman councillor, and which were truly rural councils. Some, such as Stewart Island and Waiheke counties, were called counties but had more in common with District Councils in that they included associated urban centres and did not have the wholly rural character of counties. This also applies to counties which had been rural long ago but by 1960 were so closely associated with large centres of population that they had more in common with urban authorities than they did with rural ones. Several counties were in reality part of Christchurch; notably Papanui and Heathcote, and the women who were elected to these councils were city residents, representing city areas. Seeking to preserve this study as that of rural women in rural local government I have excluded material relating to either councils or women who do not fit those criteria. Consequently, I was able to send out 39 questionnaires of which one was returned with a note asking to be omitted and 36 were filled in and returned.⁵ Three of those were not included because they came from women who had

⁴ This figure is not verifiable. The analysis of local government election statistics for the last election prior to the abolition of counties (the 1986 election) was not published. In 1983 72 women were elected to county councils. My investigations show 16 women were first elected to counties in 1986, and 15 sitting women were not re-elected at that election. These numbers are neither complete nor verifiable, but it has not been possible to obtain accurate figures.

⁵ A copy of the questionnaire form is included as Appendix 1.

been elected to urban ridings of the Paparua County Council. As 33 is approaching half of the possible total, and there is a good geographical spread across New Zealand, I believe a representative sample has been achieved. The sample of women is fairly evenly divided between North and South Islands, (18/14) and in all includes 27 counties. Of those 27, all but four had just one woman included in this sample, with the remainder having two (Matamata, Patea, Golden Bay, and Waimea). Of the 33 women, 23 were, for at least one three year term of their period on council, the only female councillor. Thus while the sample is smaller than originally hoped, I believe it is of sufficient size and structure to provide a valid basis for analysis.

My initial intentions for research were more broadly based than has proved feasible. Minutes of county meetings are not as readily available as I had expected. When counties were amalgamated into district councils in 1989, most of the minutes were transferred to the district council offices, and much of this material has since been destroyed. Very few were lodged with National Archives either then or later. Even those I was able to access proved less fruitful than I had hoped as they contain little background to the resolutions, thus giving no indication of the debate preceding the vote, and no hint of council dynamics. Occasionally 'votes against' were recorded, but huge quantities of minutes could be perused without obtaining any useful material. Newspaper reports proved to be similarly difficult. Because counties operated in the rural regions, few were reported in the major papers, and then only spasmodically when an issue of major interest was being debated. Prior to elections the small local papers regularly printed items on any up-coming contests, but were less predictable in respect of reporting meetings. I searched months of issues of three of the small Waikato papers but found very few mentions of county meetings. Those that did appear provided little of relevance to this study. Items tended to report the issue and the decision with little indication of the nature of the discussion and gave infrequent reference to those who took part in the debate.

Thus for this study, the information provided directly by ex-county councillors is fundamental, and constitutes the majority of the research material. Also recorded are interviews with some reporters who attended council meetings and wrote reports for local and national newspapers. Their comments have provided a more external view of the meetings, and can be used to compare impressions of urban councils in the cases where the same reporter attended meetings of county and borough councils.

Similarly, comment was sought from male councillors, so that the view of the council male majority is recognised in this study alongside that of the (often) lone female.

The limits on the scope of this study have necessitated some approximations and compromises in comparisons of data. Because the total number of women on county councils is small it has been necessary to aggregate the group across the period of study. This means that the statistics developed must be treated with some caution in that they are not derived from a truly homogeneous group in terms of time. In order to be able to obtain appropriate contextual material, I have accessed other studies, particularly those undertaken in or related to New Zealand. Generally, these have the advantage of numbers sufficiently large to enable restriction of timespan, and the definition of subsets relating to discrete times or elections. Thus some comparisons must be taken with caution, and I have emphasised these differences where they arise. While it is acknowledged this is less than ideal, some comparisons can validly and usefully be made.

There can be no doubt that this study is gender-related. It is also very much associated with women in politics, and particularly focuses on the small number of women involved in rural local government. But it is by no means intended as a study of “women-as-political-failures” as discussed by Marilyn Lake.⁶ In this work Lake evaluates the theory which had wide acceptance in the 1970s and which describes the small numbers of women in recognised political positions as ‘a failure’ in terms of women failing to gain – or even seek – election to political office. She challenges this argument by highlighting the ways in which women ‘do politics’ other than by being present in council chambers and parliaments. My study does not have the intention of furthering the former opinion, but its scope precludes an examination of ways in which rural women have taken an active part in local affairs without being elected to the local council. Neither does my study focus on the failure to gain greater female representation on councils nor the gap between the numbers in rural government compared to urban or central government. It is an indisputable fact that there were notably fewer women on county councils than in other areas of local government, and this has relevance to any study of rural governance. But beyond examining the numbers and statistical imbalances, I seek further to find why the experience of being that small minority was so surprising for most of these women,

⁶ Marilyn Lake, “Feminist History as National History”, *Historical Studies*, 106, April 1996, pp 158-61.

and the time on council so fraught with difficulty. Certainly the small number of women – and the widespread experience of being the only female - has a bearing on this, but it is seen as contributing to the answer rather than forming part of the question.

Joan Scott argues that for the purposes of historical analysis, gender is defined by the interrelationship between two propositions; first that gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and second that gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.⁷ Scott's approach describes the duality of gender which seems appropriate to this study. The two propositions can clearly be seen in action, both inside the county council chamber and outside of it. In their everyday life the women included in this study lived and worked within social relationships influenced by gender – none mentioned in any negative way their acceptance that they were 'the wife' (and not 'the farmer') and had limited involvement in management and financial decisions related to the farm even though many of them spent a great deal of time working as part of the farming operation. By contrast, most of them are very clear about their dissatisfaction at their apparent lack of involvement in council decisions, or even being seen as a 'real councillor'. What this study tries to clarify is to what extent, if at all, the social system inside the council chamber differed from that outside.

Power relationships were important in county government, as they are in all levels of politics, both formal and informal. The absence of party structures in rural elections left something of a vacuum in terms of recognised power hierarchies, but this by no means precluded significant exercise of power. Traditionally, the county chairman (elected by the council, not the electors as was the case with mayoralities) held a great deal of political power, both visible and invisible. However, in most councils, both the county engineer and the county clerk also exerted a significant degree of power, or believed they should.⁸ It was not uncommon for the balance of power between these two, and between either or both of them and the chairman, to be a source of ongoing struggle, albeit conducted in a most civilised manner and as invisibly as

⁷ Joan Scott, "Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis", *American Historical Review*, Dec 1986, Vol. 91, p 1067.

⁸ Many of the questionnaires note this in various forms and contexts, and refer to the effect of the common 'power struggle' that went on between the holders of the two most senior staff positions. See also Jenny Simpson quoted in Jenny Rankine, "Shaking Up Local Bodies", *Broadsheet*, November 1986, p 27.

possible. Thus there was a somewhat ephemeral and mobile power structure which exerted a varying influence as alliances formed and reformed depending on topics debated and the rise and fall of various 'personalities' on the council. This had implications for the women on council in terms of whether they were able to become part of this power relationship, or chose – or were forced – to operate outside it.

It must be emphasised that not all the women surveyed expressed the belief that gender discrimination played any part in their council. A minority stated that being female was no disadvantage, and at times had some advantage.

Gender analysis such as attempted in this study must also be sensitive to considerations of class and race.⁹ Every endeavour is made to bear this in mind, but in the study of this female minority it is fair to claim little effect from race or class. All the women contacted are of uniform race, and I found the names of only three potential contributors who were Maori. Of these, one died some years ago and I have been unable to trace the other two. It has also proved impossible to gather reliable statistics in regard to the racial composition of county councils, but I am confident that the vast majority of male councillors were, like the women in the study, European New Zealanders (Pakeha).¹⁰ It is very possible that Maori councillors, both male and female, could constitute another important minority with its own unique experience of involvement on county councils. This is, of course, outside the scope of my study, but it needs to be emphasised that this is an absence which I would prefer to have been able to at least recognise and quantify. Despite considerable effort, I have been unable to obtain any relevant and authoritative material that enables me to comment upon the effect of race alongside that of gender. The invisibility of race other than Pakeha is, of course, a statement in itself. One of the women who participated in this study commented on the presence of a Maori man on her council, and his uncharacteristic quietness during meetings.¹¹ He expressed to her a feeling of being an outsider in an uncomfortable environment and, while relaxed and forthcoming with other councillors on informal occasions, found the situation of

⁹ Scott, p 1054-5.

¹⁰ My own recollection of County Conferences, like those of other female county councillors I asked, is that of a very few Maori men. Some could not recall any, but were not sufficiently confident of their memories to state there were none present. This perception is supported by an examination of county council photographs (not a comprehensive study of all county councils by any means) in which very few show non-Pakeha appearance. It is recognised that this constitutes a highly subjective and scientifically unreliable source, but the best I could obtain.

¹¹ Noeleen Buckland, questionnaire.

a structured council meeting very foreign and intimidating. I could find no evidence of any other ethnicities being represented on county councils, but given that my source of information came from only a sample of women councillors, with the added restriction that I have made contact only with those councils who ever had at least one woman councillor (probably around two thirds of all counties), it is not possible to make a confident claim in this regard. None of the women I spoke to could recall knowing of any county councillors (male or female) other than Maori or Pakeha.

Rural New Zealand is not a classless society, but in general terms a county council could be considered close to single class. Rural society is most clearly defined in class terms by the division between 'owners' and 'workers', and as far as I have been able to ascertain, it was almost solely farm owners who were present at the council table, albeit the female councillors in the form of spouse of the 'real' owner. This is, however, an oversimplification, and will be touched on further later in this thesis. It seems possible that class boundaries could effectively be raised on an ad hoc basis, at the whim of the majority. Such considerations as how long an individual – or their family – had resided in the district held 'class' significance, and the difference between being born in the area and arriving later could be used as a definer of credibility or class.¹² Several questionnaires included comments on occasions when male councillors discounted female opinions on the basis that they were 'too new to the district to understand', and conversely some women attributed their acceptance on council to their 'status' in local farming terms. They also remarked on the impression that male councillors believed that there was some degree of mana attached to being on council, or possibly being in a position which enabled them to be able to take days off for council meetings. This meant, in most rural areas, that they had to be farm owners, and probably older owners who had achieved the financial position of being able to run the farm with staff rather than being involved on a day-to-day basis. Class differentiation, while less clear and apparent than may apply in urban situations, certainly existed. Literature on class structure in New Zealand has difficulty with classification in the rural sector. In their table of occupational groupings, Jones and Davis place farmers as a separate section within their fourth group from the 'top' along with small proprietors but below lower level professionals

¹² Jocelyn Fish, Katrina Gardiner, Robyn Grigg, Heather Little, Jenny Wilson, Sue Lane, questionnaires. Commonly the histories of counties and rural areas describe councillors as 'respected farming leaders' and comment on the size and nature of their land holdings. Non-landowners and 'workers', or even sharemilkers, are conspicuous by their absence.

and 'routine non-manual clerical and sales people'. Agricultural workers make up the lowest group, below 'skilled manual workers'.¹³ This is in conflict with analyses based on capitalism and asset ownership, which places farm owners high on the list, on the basis that they have ownership of land which is a means of production. Farm workers remain low, but intermediate positions such as sharemilkers are ignored.¹⁴ The class structure in the rural sector is not well defined by studies of class in New Zealand,¹⁵ and is complicated by the structured mobility, especially in dairying areas. In the period of this study, approximately 1975-1990, progression in dairying areas from worker to sharemilker to owner was universally recognised, and thus in dairying districts a farm worker was commonly perceived as much as a potential owner as he was a current 'worker'. This established a different model to the urban worker/employer/owner strata, and different again to that of non-dairy farming, which varied between districts and farming regions. The fluid and often unspoken nature of 'class' *within* rural society makes it more difficult to pin down as a category of analysis.

My own involvement as both researcher and participant must be acknowledged and clarified. As already stated, part of my motivation for choosing this topic arose from my own experience as a county councillor. This creates problems for me as researcher, and I have tried to limit my inclusion of 'self' to the same level as that of the women who have contributed material. In order to include myself in comparisons and statistics, I filled in a questionnaire as did all my respondents. Thus I have used my 'responses' where it has been appropriate to combine information from all or several respondents. I am mindful that I have knowledge of the full nine years of my experience on council, which is far greater than the amount of information any of the other women have been able to contribute. I am also keenly aware of my attitude and reaction to my own experiences, and have consciously endeavoured to both set these aside and to welcome the challenge to these that other women's comments have

¹³ F L Jones and Peter Davis, *Models of Society: Class Stratification and Gender in Australia and New Zealand*, Sydney: Croom Helm Ltd., 1986, p 18.

¹⁴ David Bedggood, *Rich and Poor in New Zealand A Critique of Class, Politics and Ideology*, Auckland: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1980, refer discussion in Chapter 5 "Contemporary Class Structure".

¹⁵ Many studies either ignore rural categories or isolate them in comparison to urban ones. This gives no indication of 'class' relative to the broad heading of 'farming'. Refer David Pitt, *Social Class in New Zealand*, Auckland: Longman Paul Ltd., 1977. Farming is not mentioned other than prior to 1900, except in the chapter "Occupational Choice and Social Class in New Zealand" where it is isolated – the three broad categories are manual, non-manual and farm, p 81.

presented. This has created a difficulty that I had not expected. In the course of my research I found that my experience was more extreme than I had realised at the time. What I had put up with (or tried to) during my term of office because it was 'just the way things were', I now find was not the way things were for many other county councillors. Some perceived no discrimination at all, most others experienced a measure of discrimination that seems to be less than I did. This raised an unexpected level of retrospective pain, which I certainly had not anticipated, and created some problems for me in terms of what Liz Stanley refers to as "real meaning, with hindsight".¹⁶ The process of accepting other women's experience as different to mine has included a degree of personal battle, not only to remain objective, but to exclude the 'what about poor me?' reaction. Had my experience been more typical I could more readily have ignored it. Objectivity and subjectivity themselves are both highly subjective, and vastly more complex than expected when related to painful personal experience. It has been possible to avoid "tampering with my past" as outlined by Stanley¹⁷ but I have struggled with the temptation to enter into dialogue with it. Had I realised the negativity of the personal memories thrown up by this research, and the effect they would have on me, I might have chosen a different topic. At this stage I can only state that I am aware of the potential difficulties associated with my dual role, which I recognise and have tried to prevent unduly influencing my work.

As already noted, literature and previous research directly related to this topic is very limited. There exists, however, a significant body of work associated with local government, women's involvement in politics both national and local, and social studies of various aspects of rural life in New Zealand. I intend my work to go some way toward filling the gap that exists in the record of rural women in rural local government. Only a small proportion of overseas studies are applicable to this area of research. Many other social structures are too different from the New Zealand rural context to be comparable, such as in strongly ethnically and/or tribally influenced African countries¹⁸ and those in markedly different cultures to Western

¹⁶ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I: the Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992, p 21.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p 54.

¹⁸ Refer several discussions in MacLean, Quadir and Shaw (eds.) *Crises of Governance in Asia and Africa*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001, especially Sandra J. MacLean, "Ethnicity and Race in the Changing Political Economies of South Africa and Zimbabwe", and Abillah H. Omari, "Ethnicity, Power, Governance and Conflict in the Great Lakes Region".

democracies, such as Japan.¹⁹ Many countries have carried out re-organisations similar to that of 1989 in New Zealand, and abolished bodies comparable to counties too early for use in valid comparisons within my timeframe.²⁰ Many of the European countries have systems strongly influenced by local culture which makes comparisons with the 'British' form of local government hazardous.²¹ Even the British system itself, upon which the New Zealand structure was originally based, was changed significantly by restructuring in 1973, at which time 'counties' formed a tier more comparable to our regional councils, with districts and parish councils on a lower level within the county.²² Some systems of overseas local governance are so different to ours that comparisons are, at best, difficult and possibly dangerously misleading, as in the United States where most of the positions equating to senior staff in New Zealand are held by elected incumbents.²³ Far more detailed and comprehensive studies than this thesis have either avoided comparisons or made ones which are very difficult to understand.²⁴ Given these problems, I have avoided becoming enmeshed in hazardous and potentially confusing comparisons with overseas local government structures. In fact New Zealand local government has some unique features, notable among them being the absence of overt party affiliations in county politics, which make direct comparisons irrelevant. Nevertheless, note has been taken of work originating from overseas studies, and comparable findings are given consideration where appropriate. Because existing work is broad and varied in relation to my topic I have devoted a full chapter to its analysis. This enables me to use the work of others to fully explore the environment within which my work is located.

¹⁹ Margaret Bowman, *Local Democracies a Study in Comparative Local Government*, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire Pty Ltd, 1983, p 18.

²⁰ Japanese counties were abolished in 1921 and replaced by bodies more comparable to our District Councils, see Council of Local Authorities for International Relations, *Comparative Study on Local Government Reform in Japan, Australia and New Zealand*, Sydney: Japan Local Government Centre, 2000, p 9.

²¹ See descriptions and discussions in Alan Norton, *International Handbook of Local and Regional Government*, Birmingham: Edward Elgar Ltd, 1994, and Henry Teune (ed.) *Local Governance Around the World*, Pennsylvania: The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1995.

²² Bowman, pp 26-27.

²³ Refer work by Flammang and Hallowell, discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1.

²⁴ Norton, p 34. A table comparing Classes and Numbers of Sub-National Authorities excludes New Zealand completely, but another table comparing Intermediate Authorities, which includes English, Irish, Welsh and US counties shows New Zealand as having 14. This number doesn't equate to the number of any local authorities as defined by Anderson and Norgrove, (in *Comparative Study on Local Government Reform in Japan Australia and New Zealand*, Chapter 3 "Local Government Reform in New Zealand 1987-1996) but is closest to that for Regional Councils, which are a different tier of government, and not comparable in function or structure to counties in NZ or overseas.

The structure of this thesis is intended to provide sections each of which deal with a discrete topic, but which taken together provide a coherent account of the involvement and experience of women in New Zealand rural local government.

Chapter one researches the work already carried out that raises issues and provides context to my topic. This includes both New Zealand and overseas studies, and while little of it relates directly to women on county councils, an examination of social and political issues for women is necessary to clarify the context for the subsequent observations and conclusions of this thesis. As already noted, the context for this study is not that of the council chamber and the council electorate in isolation. The experiences of the women on New Zealand county councils must be placed in the setting of local government, the rural social structure, and the changing mores of the time. Thus I have devoted a full chapter to the review of literature and research in order to clarify the theories relating to both women's political involvement and the effects of social environment on the quantum and nature of that involvement. As already noted, most of the women participating in my study held office in the period from the late 1970s to 1989. This period closely follows a very turbulent time in the establishment of women's place in all parts of society, and has significance in terms of reaction to this turbulence, which includes both progress and backlash in gender relations.

The second chapter traces the development of the county system. It is important to have a clear picture of county government within the overall scheme of local government in New Zealand, and of how differences between governance in town and country have arisen. It would be good to be able to establish to a greater extent *why* the differences arose and were sustained, but that has proved too difficult to ascertain within the scope of this work. Suffice to say that at least some of the differences are substantial, and have relevance to the experiences of the women involved in this study.

The next four chapters examine the experiences of the women who contributed their memories to this research. Chapter three compares and contrasts the county women with their urban counterparts. It seeks to find to what extent, if any, the county women were different from their urban colleagues and, similarly, to identify any

differences between society and governance in the two areas that might have affected women councillors on rural and urban councils.

Nomination, election campaigns and experiences prior to election are explored in chapter four. The most obvious point of difference between rural and urban election processes is the lack of any party or 'ticket' involvement in the county electorates. While this had a major effect on how the elections were experienced by both candidates and voters, other less obvious influences also characterise rural elections. Most of these have been established over many years and are integrated into the social structure of rural areas, for example the influence and involvement of Federated Farmers, which was, during the period of study, largely closed to women. There were no equivalent organisations in urban centres which had the active support of such a large majority of the male voting public.

It must be noted that all the women included in this study did at some stage succeed at election and become a member of a county council. I have been able to find only a few isolated references to female candidates who stood but were never successful.²⁵ It is therefore not possible to surmise how information from that source might have influenced this study, but as the numbers of women who did achieve election are small, and those I could trace even smaller, it is fair to speculate that any input that might have been obtained from never-successful candidates would be a very tiny sample. Given that belief, and the difficulty of endeavouring to trace them, I have not spent time in this pursuit.

Chapter five examines the experience of taking one's place at the council table and becoming part of county governance. While some of these experiences bore out the rather dire warning delivered by Brian Talboys, by no means all of them did. This chapter examines not only what the women themselves have related, but also considers other perspectives. I wanted to include some input from male councillors in an endeavour to give a more balanced perception. The scope of this work allowed only a small sample of male councillors to be accessed, but those contacted displayed a marked lack of enthusiasm. I did not feel it was appropriate to seek input from

²⁵ Diane Grant *Here I Stand The Experiences of Women Candidates in the 1980 Local Body Elections*, Martinborough: Affirmative Action, 1983. At least two unsuccessful candidates for county elections in 1980 are quoted (pp 42-43), but as none of the contributors to this publication are identified they cannot be traced.

councillors with whom I shared the council chamber as this could be embarrassing for them, and might well provide information that was influenced by politeness or a reluctance to be completely candid. Other male councillors were, however, curiously unwilling to participate. Of the eight contacted only one agreed to talk to me.²⁶ This places me at risk of doubly compromising this aspect. First, I am including views from only one male councillor alongside those from 33 females, and second, it leaves me with the dilemma of choosing between using a single sample or nothing. Therefore I have been very judicious in the use of the male perspective. I have tried to overcome this to some extent by use of another male perspective, that from a member of the New Zealand Dairy Board in the 1980s. The Dairy Board at that time was the most comparable farmer-dominated governing body outside of local government. Dairy Board members (apart from two government appointees) were farmers directly elected by farmers,²⁷ and who had dealings with county councils both as ratepayers on their own farms, and as a body needing to have dealings with counties.²⁸ Interviews with male councillors would have been more directly applicable but, being unable to obtain those, this was be the only way I could achieve a degree of male perspective via a comparison of the county council culture with that of another similarly rurally-driven governing body.

At most county meetings one or more reporters, from the small local papers or 'stringers' for the bigger dailies, sat through the day in the hope of obtaining useful copy. Many of these were the newest, youngest reporters who had to go through this process as part of the rite of passage to better things, and certainly a lot of them moved on as quickly as they could to more interesting material. But I have been able to trace some who not only remember their days as 'county reporter' but also have scrapbooks of stories and columns they wrote at that time. This has provided a view of county meetings that is largely external, and again this perspective has been used to balance the view of the women from whom the majority of the input was obtained, and to test their perspectives against those that have no political or personal affiliations. It must be stated however, that all the reporters who agreed to being

²⁶ I have chosen to keep the identity of the sole male councillor confidential, although he did not request this. Many of his views contrast with those of the women interviewed, and I felt that juxtaposing his statements with those of the sole female on his council adds useful perspective to this study, but in that context could be personally embarrassing for him.

²⁷ The Meat and Wool Boards at that time were elected via an electoral college system, not direct voting by constituents.

²⁸ Typically dairy processing plants are located in rural areas, and construction or renovation required planning permission from the local authority.

interviewed for this project are female; whether this made any difference to their views is impossible to ascertain. I believe that they all acted as professional reporters, and they told it as they saw it, but they did see it from a female perspective.

Chapter six relates some of the more personal stories that came as part of my information gathering, and while these are very individual and anecdotal I have included them without, I hope, compromising academic integrity. When I first made contact with the councillors I was able to trace, I emphasised that my study was in social history, not politics. Many of the women needed clarification as to what this difference means, and I explained that social history is about 'what it was like for people' rather than a record of political manoeuvres and the rationale and repercussions of decisions. Such a large proportion of them responded to my explanation with comments such as "Oh! you want to hear about my toilet debate" or "I must show you my cufflinks!" that I started a file of 'Funny Stories'. As this grew I could not bear to let them languish unseen, and have devoted this chapter to the sort of experiences that made us seek each other out at precious moments when those of us who were sole female councillors had the chance to meet with our colleagues. This happened rarely, at national County Conferences or more often at gatherings of women in local government, and we always leapt at the chance to be able to share dire tales with the only other people who really understood. Even women on urban councils used to wonder at our urgency to get together with a little wine and large amounts of very loud laughter. Those gatherings were acknowledged as therapy, and played a valuable role in restoring battered egos and sanity.

But as well as having a degree of light-hearted, informal content, this chapter encapsulates the invisible side of the experiences of female councillors. The few records of counties that exist are confined almost exclusively to debates and decisions that were part of the public face of county government. As with any group, the public face conceals a wealth of informal activities that sustain both the individuals and the group as a whole. This chapter reveals a little of what was less visible but still significant, particularly for the women involved. It therefore provides valuable additional insights into the realities as they existed for at least some of the female county councillors.

The conclusion summarises the findings and returns to the questions with which I began. Was it different for the county women compared to those on urban

authorities? What were the differences and why did they arise? If gender discrimination was present, was it the norm, and how did female councillors react to it? Did Brian Talboys make an accurate assessment of county government or was he simply finding a way to avoid responding to my father's proud claim without actually stating what might have been a rather unpalatable truth; that county government barely rated in the political hierarchy. Talboys was a man of great warmth and courtesy, I believe his statement carried an element of both.

Background

Research into county councils, let alone the few women on them, is almost non-existent. Historical, sociological and even political writings, where they do explore the role of women in local or central government, implicitly or explicitly omit consideration of rural women. This in itself raises some interesting questions, which have helped to shape this study. Rather than simply seeking to find issues which face women on county councils that contrast with or parallel those for women on urban councils or in Parliament, it has become increasingly clear that the topic demands a more fundamental study.

Clearly the women who stood for election to New Zealand county councils did so in the same general context as those in urban local government electorates, albeit only since 1944 when the county franchise was extended to rural women. Because of delayed enfranchisement for counties, rural women pioneered their political role at a later date and in different social circumstances. But this could be argued to make political office more accessible to women – by the mid 20th century women lived a less circumscribed life than did their counterparts at the beginning of the century when both legislation and social mores more closely confined them to a wholly domestic sphere.

A study of women who participated in rural local government in Vermont examined elections over a 20 year period (1921-1941).²⁹ Although these elections differ in nature from those of New Zealand local government, the principles of women's participation in them provide some valid comparisons.³⁰ In her Vermont study, Ann Hallowell developed three hypotheses, two of which reflect the socialisation of women relative to the community in which they stood. These two are:

²⁹ Ann Hallowell, "Women on the Threshold: An Analysis of Rural Women in Local Politics (1921-1941)", *Rural Sociology*, Vol. 52 No 4, 1987, pp 510-21.

³⁰ The positions for which candidates stood include several that are more comparable to staff roles in New Zealand local government (e.g. health inspectors, animal welfare and registration officers). These positions, as well as the solely governance posts in the United States, also involve policy-making responsibilities equivalent to those undertaken by councillors in New Zealand.

1. Women's entrance into politics is governed by aspects of the socio-political culture – i.e. those in more liberal communities will make the move into politics sooner than those in more conservative ones;
2. Women are elected only to the kinds of offices that reflect their traditional roles i.e. will go into service roles much more readily than policymaking ones.³¹

Hallowell's arguments are supported by further research, also in the United States, which found self-concept and social bias mitigating strongly against the entry of women into politics at any level. Janet Flammang argues that historically women have been socialised to believe that politics is a man's world, and participation to be unnatural and degrading for women.³² Feminism sought to undermine this public/private, immoral/moral dichotomy, having progressive effect in the USA from the 1970s.³³ Flammang's argument is that social programming had a dual effect – women standing for public office faced external barriers from voters and political parties in terms of general acceptance in the political scene, as well as being limited by the internalised norm that politics was not 'suitable' for women. This latter construct made them less likely to think of themselves as potential candidates but to confine their political ambition, if any, to support roles for male candidates.³⁴ Flammang contends that female candidates for public office had to make the 'quantum leap' from supporter to decision maker; that traditionally women were socialised to be the supporters of 'real' decision makers, whereas men were socialised to be the makers of decisions. Gender pairings such as doctor/nurse, boss/secretary are quoted as examples of these traditional roles.³⁵ Thus women standing for election would typically be required to show – or at least declare – that they could 'play hardball' and not be a wimp in a political setting. Male candidates were assumed to be capable of being tough and hard unless they actually demonstrated themselves to be wimps.³⁶

Halligan and Harris's work in the New Zealand context supports these views. Their study analyses the trends in women's participation as candidates and councillors in a

³¹ Hallowell, p 514.

³² Janet A Flammang, *Women's Political Voice How Women are Transforming the Practice and Study of Politics* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997, p 154.

³³ *ibid.*, p 156.

³⁴ *ibid.*, p 157.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p 161.

³⁶ *ibid.*, p 160.

variety of communities in New Zealand ranging from major cities to small boroughs in the period 1959 to 1974. Unfortunately they completely exclude counties from their analyses: “The counties do not warrant further consideration because of the low level of participation [by women].”³⁷ But their study argues that socialisation has a strong effect on the candidacy of women, and extrapolates this to the rural situation, claiming that the low rate of female candidates and councillors on counties resulted from the ‘traditional division of labour’ in rural society. This is neither defined nor quantified relative to urban society, but general statements are made about rural politics. Halligan and Harris describe the counties as being controlled by one occupational group - farmers – and farmers were seen as male only. They also point out that only a very small number of rural women had careers independent of their husbands, linking this with a reluctance to seek office, although they do acknowledge the active part played by rural women in local organisations.³⁸

John Gyford, studying local government representation in Britain, supports and enlarges the socialisation argument.³⁹ He sees difficulty in achieving a cross-section of the community amongst members of local authorities as being problematic for many sectors, including women. Quoting Hills, Gyford suggests that the problem of recruiting more women into local government is an inherent problem of the socialisation of women: “Since women in Britain continue to define themselves in terms of the family rather than their economic role, and are expected to shoulder the dual burden of home and employment, the number of women prepared to enter formal participation in public life can be expected to continue at a very low level.”⁴⁰ It is a moot point, not addressed in Gyford’s study, as to whether this definition is a construct imposed upon women by society, or as it is stated above, one that women define ‘for themselves’.

A further factor arising from women’s political socialisation has been identified as the lack of confidence in the skills and experience that women themselves see as necessary for political success. Lack of confidence and fear of sex discrimination showed up in Janet Flammang’s study as two factors mitigating against women’s

³⁷ John Halligan and Paul Harris “Women’s Participation in New Zealand Local Body Elections”, *Political Science* Vol. 29 No 2 December 1977, p 102.

³⁸ *ibid.*, p 111.

³⁹ John Gyford, *Local Politics in Britain 2nd ed.* London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1984, p 15.

⁴⁰ J Hills, “Women Local Councillors: A Reply to Bristow” *Local Government Studies*, Vol. 8 no 1, 1982, pp 61-71, quoted in Gyford, p 15.

participation. This study also found, however, that after election women discovered themselves to be just as qualified as the men, by reason of the skills and experience gained in homemaking, parenting and voluntary work.⁴¹

Much of the research emphasises the tendency of women to lack self-confidence in a political context, often aligning this to the effect of social expectations and influences. This has a double effect; first a considerable degree of self-confidence is required to stand as a candidate, and after election it is a very necessary part of the armoury for survival in the council chamber. Reference has already been made to the need to claim the ability to foot it in the tough (male) world of politics, but once elected this can become a much more immediate reality. Several studies argue that a significant proportion of women seek to enter politics because they believe a female presence will change the 'gladiatorial' environment, or in the hope that it might. Evidence has also been produced to indicate that the electorate shares this expectation.⁴² But the reality is far from simple. In order to achieve credibility women find they need to adopt a confident and assertive persona, and in so doing become caught up in the conventions of the male-ordered macho environment rather than challenging or changing it.⁴³ The 'critical mass' argument - that change cannot be achieved until a certain critical mass of opposition is established - mitigates strongly against a very small number of women in a male forum. Thus, where women look at the possibility of entering politics, it is likely that the experience of those who have gone before will not provide an encouraging prospect. Karen Ross highlights the discomfort of "women in a mad man's world" in her study of women in the Australian parliament. She found that these women were realistic about expecting some problems because of their gender, but they were offended by the nature and magnitude of the culture shock they experienced, and they objected to their sex being used as the primary weapon of assault.⁴⁴ While being prepared to be targeted as members of the opposing side, they found the practice of being attacked on the grounds of dress and appearance both common and unfair. It was accepted

⁴¹ Flammang, p 162.

⁴² Marian Sawyer, "The Representation of Women in Australia: Meaning and Make-believe" in Karen Ross, (ed.) *Women, Politics, and Change*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p 7. See also many of the comments from women councillors quoted in Grant, and in *1993 Suffrage Centennial Women in Local Government Conference Proceedings* Wellington: Centennial Suffrage Subcommittee, Wellington City Council, 1994.

⁴³ Karen Ross "Women's Place in 'Male' Space: Gender and Effect in Parliamentary Contexts", in Karen Ross, (ed.), p 193.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p 194.

practice for the male members to shout and swear, but this was not acceptable from women. And bursting into tears, or displaying any 'emotion' was simply a death-knell to credibility: "...this is ridiculous, I'm one of the few reasonable people at the table, and I still lose. But I knew if I burst into tears or kicked or screamed and shouted, I'd still lose, so I had no option but to play it straight."⁴⁵ The other barrier associated with operating in the male culture was being ignored, or barely tolerated: "I'm very familiar with that facial expression which says 'A woman speaking, I don't need to listen'."⁴⁶ Even the redoubtable Lady Astor was taken aback by the hostility she experienced in the British House of Commons; "If I'd known how much men would hate it [her being in Parliament], I would never have dared to do it."⁴⁷

The importance of 'critical mass' is supported by a study of a suburban council in Sweden.⁴⁸ This showed that an increase in the proportion of women to a level approaching 50 percent led to recognisable changes in the political climate, with debate being reported as "more to the point", language more "concrete and accessible", male officials acknowledging family obligations and recognising them in administrative functions. At this level of representation women could break away from the need to operate as outsiders in a men's world, and became able to establish their own patterns of debate and decision making. There is, unfortunately, no comment in this study as to whether their male colleagues responded to this influence for change and, if so, how and to what extent.

Studies of women entering – or considering entering – both local and central government highlight the practical difficulties facing women particularly. Almost all studies of women as candidates note the problems raised by responsibility for child care. The scheduling of council and committee meetings has traditionally been driven by male needs, for example municipal committee meetings are commonly set for soon after 5pm, which is a convenient time for men in regular employment. It is particularly untimely for women with children as it disrupts the evening mealtime,

⁴⁵ Margaret Reynolds, Labour, Australia, quoted in Karen Ross, p 196.

⁴⁶ Kathy Sullivan, Liberal, Australia, quoted in Karen Ross, p 196.

⁴⁷ Pat Thane "What Difference Did the Vote Make?" in Amanda Vickery (ed.) *Women Privilege and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present*, Stanford; Stanford University Press, 2001, pp 272-3.

⁴⁸ United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women "Public Life: Women Make a Difference" *Women 2000*, No 2, 1992, p 5, quoted by Marilee Karl, *Women and Empowerment, Participation and Decision Making*, London; Zed Books Ltd., 1995, p 64.

and possibly bedtimes.⁴⁹ “It was difficult when there were 5:30[pm] meetings; ... when [the children] had to have their meals at a certain time, to get cleaned up to go out, lunches [to] get cut, all these things to be done before I could go to a meeting. It is, I would say, 10 times harder for a woman.”⁵⁰ Janet Flammang’s 1972 survey of 300 politically active men and women found that while the women devoted more time to political activities, they were far more likely to do so in activities that could be carried out at home. Women had difficulty, often to the point of giving up, with outside meetings which were consistently organised at ‘female unfriendly’ times.⁵¹ As already noted, many of these studies do not consider counties and the women on them. County meetings were held during the day, starting around 9:30 or 10am and finishing in the late afternoon. This created difficulties for women with school age children, as well as for those who were involved with regular farm duties such as milking.

The third of Ann Hallowell’s hypotheses is the ‘no other option’ theory identified in several studies. This postulates that women’s increasing participation in local government relates to smaller communities, where finding *anyone* prepared to stand for election is difficult and, in a situation of desperate need, ‘even a female’ would do.⁵² Elsewhere this is described as the ‘less desirable’ theory – that women have a better chance of being elected to the less powerful, less desirable positions in US local government, or being included in a group list where organisers are having difficulty filling the ticket.⁵³ This theory is more applicable to systems of local government where positions which would be filled by employees in New Zealand are elected, as is the case in many US local authorities where roles such as health inspector and dog ranger are filled at the same elections which determine governance roles. But it can also apply in the New Zealand context to situations where insufficient candidates volunteer. Famously, this is how one of New Zealand’s most notable political women, Dame Cath Tizard, first entered politics. Her husband –

⁴⁹ Refer several comments in Alison Stephens and Sue Upton, *Politics and Porridge A Study of Political Women*, Wellington: Society for Research on Women, Wellington Branch, 1986, pp 27-31. A poignant example is the comment by Vicky Duncan in *1993 Suffrage Centennial Women in Local Government Conference Proceedings*, p 18 “...those little arms went up around my neck and he said ‘Mummy do you **have** to go out to a meeting tonight?’ It’s awful, that guilt...”

⁵⁰ Stephens and Upton, p 27.

⁵¹ Flammang, p 164.

⁵² Hallowell, p 514.

⁵³ McManus and Charles, “Second Best? Women Mayors and Council Members: A New Test of the Desirability Thesis” in Lois Duke (ed.), *Women In Politics Outsiders or Insiders?*, 2nd ed., New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996, pp 112-124.

already very politically involved and active – was responsible for establishing a Labour Party ticket for the Auckland City Council, and told her he wanted her name on it to make up the numbers for the election. She objected (“Oh for God’s sake. Being married to you is a full-time job. I’ve got four kids, two cats, a budgie, three guinea pigs and two axolotls. And now you want me to take on something else”) but not sufficiently to have her name removed. She declined to take anything more than a very low-profile, supportive role in the election, but was, to her complete astonishment, elected.⁵⁴ To an extent it could be argued that this theory also fits under the heading of women’s socialisation. Traditionally women are more likely to respond to the ‘if I don’t do it no-one else will’ predicament than men, and to take up less rewarding tasks.

Nevertheless, the converse can also apply if political advantage can be seen in the sponsorship of a minority group. In Australia, the major move of women into parliament was achieved when a reforming government (Whitlam’s Labour administration) coincided with a high profile and articulate women’s movement. The government could see the advantage of association with an energetic and topical group, and the ‘femocrats’ saw the advantage of the opportunity to become insiders in a strong government.⁵⁵ Clearly, this symbiotic relationship is far more likely to arise when elections are based on parties, so while it could apply to urban local government it is unlikely to be a factor in rural non-party elections.

Alongside the literature describing the motivations which prompt – and discourage – the participation of women into elected office it is interesting to find studies seeking to show what sort of women are prepared to take this step. Biographies of the very early female pioneers in local government in New Zealand paint pictures of predictably feisty women. Public office does not sit happily with the image of the demure and subservient Victorian woman, and those who sought and gained such roles certainly do not fit that stereotype. Elizabeth Yates, New Zealand and the British Commonwealth’s first female mayor was described as an able administrator, but very forthright, dictatorial and inclined to disregard the rules of meeting procedure. She faced a hard core of local opposition both within the council chamber

⁵⁴ Cath Tizard “A Happy Series of Accidents” in Margaret Clark (ed.) *Beyond Expectations Fourteen New Zealand Women Write About their Lives*, Wellington: Allen & Unwin New Zealand Ltd., 1987, p 88.

⁵⁵ Hester Eisenstein, *Inside Agitators Australian Femocrats and the State*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1996, pp 204-5.

and outside it, and upon her election the town clerk and four councillors immediately resigned, closely followed by the entire fire brigade.⁵⁶ Louisa Raby, elected to the Petone Borough Council in 1897, objected to the smoke-filled atmosphere of the council chamber and tried to introduce fresh air. On being forcibly prevented from opening a door, she used “highly offensive language toward other councillors”, and refused to apologise. She was subsequently excluded from all committees, and became an outcast in council, often being the lone dissenting vote against decisions.⁵⁷ Similarly Mary Bellamy, a Tapanui Borough councillor from 1898 to 1901, experienced a stormy term in office and a particularly strained relationship with the Borough Clerk. Not one to mince words, she is recorded as saying there was little point in her being on council as there were enough “old women” without her.⁵⁸

More recently, Judith Aitken’s research project studying the women who stood as candidates for the 1977 local government election sheds much light on the characteristics of later 20th century New Zealand women who were prepared to face the hustings. Again, this study is confined to women involved in municipal elections, but it provides a clear profile against which county councillors might be compared. The profile Aitken revealed was that of a middle-aged Pakeha woman, well educated, a member of a political party, married to a man in a professional or managerial position and actively involved in a range of voluntary associations. She is more likely to be employed in a full or part-time professional, managerial or administrative occupation than to be a full-time housewife, but likely to still have dependent children at home for whom she has primary care responsibility.⁵⁹ Aitken also concludes that women entering local government are more highly motivated than men, since the women’s handicap in terms of time available is greater.

Studies from the United States examine the characteristics of women entering active politics. Susan Gluck Mezey’s research shows that women candidates are very likely to have politically active husbands, but men elected to office had wives who were very unlikely to be involved in either public or party office.⁶⁰ This has a major

⁵⁶ Local Government Business Group of the Department of Internal Affairs, *The Participation of Women in Local Government in New Zealand 1993 Suffrage Centennial Project*, Wellington, 1993, pp 6-7.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, p 8.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, p 8.

⁵⁹ Judith Aitken, “Women as Candidates for Local Government Office”, Research Paper for the Degree of Master of Public Policy, Victoria University of Wellington, 1977, p 48.

⁶⁰ Debra W Stewart, *Women in Local Politics*, New Jersey; The Scarecrow Press, 1980, p 220.

significance for women county councillors, in the strongly conservative rural society. Not only was it likely that male colleagues would regard women as interlopers in their world, but their wives, who saw the female role as quite separate and wholly supportive, would view a female in the political role as at best strange and at worst a threat or a diminution of their husbands' status. A more personal study of the characteristics of women legislators carried out by Debra Stewart identifies this group as "atypical incumbents of a role normally defined as masculine", and distinguishes them as recognisably different from both women in the general population, and elected men.⁶¹ These women showed low scores for ego defensiveness and anxiety, but high for intelligence, dominance, adventuresomeness and unconventionality. Generally they were women who were more comfortable creating a role for themselves than adopting a model dictated by pre-set and accepted norms.

But it must also be borne in mind that the category of women is far from monolithic. Anne Phillips points out that looking only at gender in relation to politics (however 'politics' itself may be defined) comes dangerously close to over-simplification. Gender can no more be isolated than can many other factors: "No-one is 'just' a worker, 'just' a woman, 'just' black. The notion that our politics can simply reflect *one* of our identities seems implausible in the extreme."⁶² Phillips argues strenuously that it is "profoundly undemocratic" to expect that women will speak only for women, or even mainly for women. She promotes the view that people should not have to somehow climb out of their sexual identities when they become involved in politics, but "neither should they have to define themselves by one criterion, in this case gender, alone".⁶³ The converse of this attitude has significant force for women in politics. It can be used by those wishing to appear inclusive, but in a manner which is in fact quite exclusive. They agree that the perspective of women provides a useful contribution to debate, but believe that "one or perhaps two women can quite adequately express that viewpoint". A higher representation is seen as quite unnecessary.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Emmy E Werner and Louise M Bachtold, "Personality Characteristics of Women in American Politics" in *Women in Politics*, Jane S Jaquette (ed), Los Angeles; John Wiley & Sons, 1974, pp 77-83.

⁶² Anne Phillips, *Engendering Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, p 155.

⁶³ *ibid.*, p 156. For fuller development of this argument see chapter 3 "The Representation of Women" in the same book.

⁶⁴ Halligan and Harris, 1977, p 112.

Marilyn Lake contends that the number of women actively involved in political structures, or even exercising the vote at elections, is too narrow a measure of the extent to which women 'do politics'.⁶⁵ She argues that less formal and ad hoc groups of women provide alternative means of expressing political views and cites examples of consciousness-raising activities of such organisations as the Women's Christian Temperance Union and Women's Service Guild.⁶⁶ Certainly New Zealand equivalents such as the National Council of Women and Federation of University Women have provided forums in which women became aware and active in relation to political issues. But membership of these was dominated by urban women for geographical reasons. Meetings were held almost exclusively in urban centres and the small number of country women who attended did so with difficulty and the problem of travel time and cost limited their ability to access the politically focussed workgroups which met separately.⁶⁷ In the formal political roles, women were much more highly represented on hospital boards and in the governance of educational institutions than any of the territorial or central government bodies, but the scope of this thesis does not allow in-depth study of this form of political involvement. Greater female participation in these roles is widely attributed to both a keener interest by women and a readier acceptance of them in fields of care and education which are acknowledged as 'natural' areas for women's activity.⁶⁸ The question which has been less fully explored is that of what these women's intentions were – to 'do politics' or to have a pragmatic involvement in something that was important to their world, and in which they believed they could make a practical contribution. The vast majority of the research examined above looks at women's involvement in local and central government in the light of the former, with only minor acknowledgement of the possibility of non-political motivation. The studies into "when, where, how and what kind of women" became involved in politics is acknowledged as limited,⁶⁹ the *why* is commonly restricted to political categories and seldom related to the social (as opposed to political) environment of the electing community. Lake's list of the political issues women sought to pursue prior to the 1970s include "legal and civil rights, reforms in divorce, pay rates, income support, child endowment, access to the

⁶⁵ Marilyn Lake, pp 158-161.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p 162.

⁶⁷ For example, women from the South Waikato car-pooled to get to Federation of University Women meetings in Hamilton (about 1 hour each way by car). This was feasible only when several attended the same meeting, limiting attendance to Branch meetings.

⁶⁸ Margaret Tennant, *Paupers and Providers Charitable Aid in New Zealand*, Wellington: Allen and Unwin New Zealand Ltd., 1989, pp 74-75, p 199.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p 161.

professions, custody and nationality rights, abortion and child-care services.”⁷⁰ In more recent times, research shows women politicians achieving legal and economic social reforms such as antidiscrimination laws, affirmative action and equal rights programmes. None of these bear any relation to the matters for which counties had responsibility, and - by default - raises questions in regard to the motivation and expectations of women seeking to become involved in county councils. In a purely political sense, issues relating to child-care such as rural schools and school buses were only peripheral to county responsibilities (being the direct responsibility of the education system) and child-care facilities were established in urban centres, with their management or regulatory control exercised by urban councils. To my knowledge, no counties have had direct responsibility for any hospital, educational or child-care facilities in the period during which women have gained election.

If the political motivation that has been shown to operate for urban women and female parliamentary candidates seems to have little relevance for rural local government, then what *is* the motivation that has prompted women to seek a minority position on a ‘white male’ authority? Were they in fact sufficiently interested in roading, rabbits and ragwort to make the commitment of time and effort as a councillor? Studies of rural communities might shed some light on the particular nature of rural society, and the influences to which women responded. This seems particularly valid in light of the responses to my question regarding issues that the women had in mind at the time of first standing for election. Ten of the thirty replied “none” and a further eight cited something along the lines of the general welfare of the ratepayers, indicating that about half had no recognised objectives or motivation in terms of specific political issues.

In her study of Waikato farm women in the 1950s, Sally Parker highlights the extremely conservative nature of the society in which these women lived. She notes women’s “lowly political placement in a male dominated society”⁷¹ and notes that “women listened to party political broadcasts because their men wished to... but their opinions were not sought, and in most cases not formed.”⁷² Equally important is the role that women themselves played in establishing and maintaining the traditional,

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p 166.

⁷¹ Sally Parker, “Waikato Farm Women in the 1950s: A Social History Perspective”, M Phil Thesis, Waikato University, 1988, p 187.

⁷² *ibid.*, p 188.

conservative role of rural women; in some women's views it was "the members of their own sex, rather than the men, who rigorously enforced women's traditional role."⁷³ Writing much later, this same author notes the "recent phenomenon" of women on the Cambridge Borough Council in 1986, and attributes the delay to the deeply held prejudice against women in public positions in a rural centre with typically "predominantly conservative attitudes."⁷⁴

Similar opinions are evident in much of the research into women's position in rural society in New Zealand. In her thesis detailing the lives of five women in a small rural district of Taranaki, Lesley Pitt notes the strong patriarchal influences that applied over several generations of women, the very conservative nature of the social system and the part that women played in maintaining that system. "Rural women have been excluded from the public sphere and policy making.... There has been a perception that women should be the cornerstones of stable rural communities by fulfilling their traditional roles in the family."⁷⁵ Deirdre Shaw's thesis examining the work of farming women reinforces this view, and associates it with the "woeful under-representation" of women on rural decision-making bodies. The three obstacles that she notes as standing in the way of women's involvement in rural politics are the lack of recognition of women's skills and experience, pressure of combining politics with family responsibilities and the underestimation of women's abilities by women themselves.⁷⁶ She also highlights the institutionalisation of these obstacles, in that public policy disregards the major contribution of rural women to many aspects of the rural economy and community, and fundamental information gathering institutions such as the census are quite specific in their exclusion of data which would recognise most forms of female farm-related work input. Her conclusion is that even as late as 1993 the contribution of women to rural society was becoming more widely and realistically acknowledged, but was still a long way from being accurate or complete. She quotes one of the women who is also included in my sample as noting that while things have improved since she was a young woman in a rural area, "Young farming women are still asked 'where's the boss?' by awfully

⁷³ *ibid.*, p 61.

⁷⁴ Sally Parker, *Cambridge An Illustrated History 1886-1986*, Cambridge: Cambridge Borough Council, 1986, p 162.

⁷⁵ Lesley Pitt, "Patriarchs, Paddocks and the Personal: Five Women from the Wharehuia/Te Popo District Talk about their Lives", Master of Social Work Thesis, Massey University, 1998, pp 31-32.

⁷⁶ Deirdre Shaw, "The Work of Farming Women", Master of Arts in Politics Thesis, Waikato University, 1993, p 157.

jokey travelling salesmen, [and] at gatherings of young farming couples I believe it is still common for the women, who keep the farm records, to be conversationally passed over in all those ‘how’s your production’ conversations....”⁷⁷ As recently as 2003, the female runner-up in the Young Farmer of the Year contest, Louise Collingwood, notes that women’s roles on farms remain invisible, and they are “conspicuous by their absence” in governance roles in farming and rural organisations. She hopes to own a farm in partnership with her husband in which she would take the primary farming role, but she also expects to have to deal with the ‘Hello, I want to speak to the boss’ problem.⁷⁸

In his investigation into many facets of New Zealand rural women’s lives, Brian Ponter notes the lack of women’s participation in leadership positions: “Since 1980 the level of women’s involvement on local body authorities has increased, but at a rate 20 years behind that of urban women on local bodies. Rural women are conspicuous by their absence from positions in Federated Farmers and political parties at a national level and tend to have a small presence locally.” This same work, it must be noted, also records a low level of interest among rural males in local government, so it may be that roads, rabbits and ragwort beyond the farm gate held little interest for either sex.⁷⁹ A similar pattern emerges from analysis of women’s participation in central government; Sandra Wallace’s study shows a steady increase in the number of women standing for the New Zealand parliament, but a consistent pattern of that involvement being in urban electorates. In her most recent category – the 1960s – 69 percent of the women standing for electorate (i.e. non-Maori) seats did so in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin.⁸⁰

Given, then, the pressures of a rural social system which acted to keep women in the home, or at least within the farm boundary, and the universal difficulties facing women attempting to break into the male dominated world of politics, the late entry and small numbers of women in rural local government becomes much less remarkable. Associating these barriers with the much later enfranchisement for most

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, pp 169-70.

⁷⁸ *New Zealand Herald* September 22, 2003, p E4.

⁷⁹ Brian Ponter, *Rural Women in New Zealand 1989*, Palmerston North: Federation of Rural Women and Massey University, 1996, pp 133-4. The levels of participation described as “occasionally” or more included only 9% of men and 1% of women in both 1983 and 1989.

⁸⁰ Sandra Wallace, “Powder-Power Politicians: New Zealand Women Parliamentary Candidates”, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Otago, 1992, p 77.

rural women turns the question from why so few and so late to one of how on earth did any make it to the council table at all? Closely followed by why would anyone want to set themselves up against such entrenched and widely supported opposition?

The following chapters focus on women's motivation for standing in rural council elections and their experience of being and remaining elected. This examination aims to explore the social aspects of candidacy and tenure more than it does the purely political considerations. As intimated at the beginning of this chapter, it seems likely that this may reveal more contrasts than parallels with the experience of women entering the world of central or local politics in an urban environment. The validity of comparing and contrasting political activity of women in the rural sector with those in urban centres must be taken beyond a purely political framework, given the research outlined above suggesting that the highly traditional and conservative nature of rural society has exerted a much stronger influence on women than that found in the urban environment. What were the women who stood for county office seeking to achieve and why did they choose this forum? Was it a political motivation that predominated, or was standing for election a statement of dissatisfaction with the social structure of the rural community – a feeling that women were making inroads into all-male preserves elsewhere and it must be time for counties to move with that change? Allied to this is the question of the county council environment itself – what relevance does the world of 'roading, rabbits and ragwort' have for the political or social aspirations of women, and in what ways might those aspirations be pursued in this forum?

The Development of Counties

The primary aim of this thesis is to examine the role and experiences of women on county councils in New Zealand. In order to achieve this, first a clear definition of county councils needs to be established. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the development and nature of counties, and of their governing bodies. While there is a significant body of literature analysing various aspects of local government in New Zealand in the period from 1867, little pertains to counties or to the differences between county councils and municipal local government.

Local government in New Zealand was first established in 1867, under the Municipal Corporations Act of that year.⁸¹ The name of the Act is significant – at that time there was no provision for rural local government equivalent to that established for the colonial settlements. But by 1875 Parliament had resolved to abolish the Provincial Councils, and the road boards set up under the provincial system became a part of a more comprehensive local government structure. The new Municipal Corporations Act⁸² and the first Counties Act⁸³ were passed in 1876. Again, it is significant that these were two distinct pieces of legislation. Many of the measures and the wording of sections in the two Acts are similar or even identical. Along with the expected powers to set and collect rates, administer elections and manage the finances of the district, both municipalities and counties were charged with the power to establish and maintain hospitals and charitable institutions, libraries and museums, market places and the other communal services required to support rural and urban businesses.

Most important for counties was the administrative control vested in them over the road boards that had been established under Provincial Government. Road boards had become the vital force in the developing regional communication system, with as much as a third of all public expenditure being absorbed by construction of roads and

⁸¹ *New Zealand Statutes (NZS)* 1867, No 24, pp 253-374.

⁸² *NZS* 1876, no 22, pp 287-352.

⁸³ *NZS* 1876, no 47, pp 153-198.

bridges in the period between 1871-81.⁸⁴ The system was, however, fragmented and inefficient. In 1875 there were 314 road boards in existence, roughly one for every 600 people in the areas covered by them.⁸⁵ Under the 1876 Counties Act, financial support for all roading flowed through the county system, and road boards could be merged into the county within which they were located. But merger was not compulsory. Schedule 3 of the Act allowed counties to opt out of several measures, including those pertaining to the direct take-over of road board functions.⁸⁶

Many of the 63 new counties invoked this 'escape clause', having the effect of giving the county administrative and financial control over the boards, but relieving them of direct governance and management. The road boards remained in existence, and retained responsibility for their staff. An important effect of the financial involvement of counties, however, was that counties were empowered under their legislation to raise loans, thus being able to anticipate income. This facility had been, and remained, unavailable to road boards and severely limited their ability to undertake major construction works too costly to be funded out of rates income. But the new regime was far from universally popular. The 1876 Act came under considerable fire from road boards and their supporters. The *Clutha Leader*, reporting on the new Act commented "... though the counties about to be created are in fact called counties they are virtually road boards... the county will act only as a distributing medium of any monies which may fall to the share of the road boards."⁸⁷ Though aimed at achieving greater efficiency, the reorganisation did not deliver as hoped; "...the number of counties was increasing almost as fast as the road boards were diminishing. By 1906 there were 98."⁸⁸ But the fundamental importance of roading for counties was well established in the first decades of their existence.

This was not without reason. As settlers moved into the rural areas under the Vogel policies of expanding rural settlement and production, roads and bridges were

⁸⁴ Dowie, *Studies in New Zealand Investment 1871-1900*, quoted in W J Gardner, "A Colonial Economy", Geoffrey W Rice (ed.) *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1992, p 72.

⁸⁵ W B Sutch, *Local Government in New Zealand – a History of Defeat*, Reprint of a paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Institute of Public Administration May 23 1956, Wellington: Dept. of Industries and Commerce, 1964, p 20.

⁸⁶ *NZS* 1876, no 47, p 197.

⁸⁷ Evelyn McLay, *Stepping Out A History of Clutha County 1876-1976*, Balclutha: Clutha County Council, 1977, p 37.

⁸⁸ Sutch, pp 34-35.

critically important to get farmers onto the land and product out. Given that the county electors were those who owned land, inadequate attention to these vital services would be a sure way of not being re-elected. There is no doubt that county councils devoted the vast majority of their time and effort to works aimed at optimising land transport. Without exception the histories of counties are full of tales of early road building, bridge construction and the problems of keeping river crossings operative in the face of flooding and land instability.

A further significant difference between municipalities and counties lay in the respective franchises. The original Municipal Corporations Act 1867 limited voting to property owners and allowed plural voting depending on the aggregate landholding value of electors within the municipality. Women were allowed to vote if they qualified under the land ownership rule. They were, however, included in a list along with undischarged bankrupts, insolvents, “persons attainted of treason or convicted of felony, perjury or any infamous crime and persons of unsound mind” who were not allowed to hold elected office.⁸⁹

The 1876 Municipal Corporations Act replaced plural voting with ‘one person one vote’ so long as that person owned land to the value of £25 or more. It also removed women from the list of ‘undesirables’, and thus those owning land could stand for election to a borough council.⁹⁰ The Counties Act of the same year did not include either of these measures. Plural voting continued to apply in rural areas, and only one person qualified to be on the roll in respect of each property. Importantly for women, where more than one name appeared on the valuation roll in respect of a property, only the first named person could be admitted to the electoral roll. Where land was owned jointly by husband and wife, in almost all cases the husband’s name would be the first.

Efforts to change the county franchise began almost immediately after women gained the parliamentary vote in 1893. Dr A K Newman introduced a Bill in 1894 aimed at removing all franchise impediments to women.⁹¹ This lapsed after surviving its first reading by one vote. This lone vote was that of the Speaker, who used his casting vote for the Bill because “...the women of New Zealand behaved so well at the

⁸⁹ *NZS* 1876, No 24, Section 36, p 263.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, Section 61, p 300.

⁹¹ *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates (NZPD)*, 1894, Vol. 83, p 404.

general election in the exercise of the privilege that was bestowed upon them by the last Parliament...that I feel it is my duty to give them my casting vote in favour of conferring on them the higher honour of their being henceforth privileged to take seats in this House....”⁹² Similar legislation was reintroduced by G W Russell in 1900 as the Removal of Women’s Disabilities Bill,⁹³ which proposed universal franchise for women and the removal of all legislated differences between men and women. This also lapsed after its first reading, and the difference between women in towns and in the country remained. In fact, it became greater as women in urban areas benefited from a number of minor changes to legislation over the ensuing years that enhanced their opportunity to participate in local government.

The Municipal Corporations Act 1900⁹⁴ granted franchise to anyone who owned land, who rented property at not less than £10 per annum or was a ‘nominated occupier’ – a person nominated for that property by the person who would otherwise gain entitlement to vote from it. This last provision enabled joint owners of more than one property to share the franchise, regardless of how their names appeared on valuation certificates. In addition, this Act provided that in the case of husband and wife any qualification possessed by either of them be deemed to be possessed by each of them. Later amendments made minor alterations to residential qualifications, but few women in urban centres would have been debarred from voting, and standing for election, from 1900.

This was far from the case with county rolls. Several amendments and re-enactments subsequent to the 1876 Counties Act varied the criteria for plural voting, but consistently affirmed the land-holding requirement for eligibility to be entered on the roll of electors. Not owning land outright, or not being the ‘first named’ on the valuation record, ruled out the majority of women. At last in 1944 the Local Elections and Polls Amendment Act of that year⁹⁵ stated:

Section 3 (1):

... every person of or over the age of twenty-one years shall be qualified to be an elector and to have his name entered on any roll of electors of any riding of

⁹² *NZPD*, 1894, Vol. 83, p 412.

⁹³ *NZPD*, 1900, Vol. 111, pp 148-54.

⁹⁴ *NZS*, 1900, No 50, pp 297-406.

⁹⁵ *NZS*, 1944, No 6, pp 40-47.

a county, or of any road district or subdivision thereof, who possess a residential qualification meaning thereby:

- (a) That he is a British subject either by birth or naturalisation having effect in New Zealand
- (b) That he has resided for one year in New Zealand
- (c) That he has resided in the riding, road district or subdivision as the case may be for not less than 3 months immediately preceding his enrolment or claim for enrolment as an elector.⁹⁶

More than 40 years after their urban sisters, rural women finally gained local electoral recognition. It is very hard to see why the difference had pertained for so long.

Dr Alfred Newman, a strong supporter of women's franchise rights, had argued in support of his Admission of Women to Parliament Bill in 1896 that women should be allowed to contest parliamentary seats: "It seems perfectly illogical to allow women to sit on local bodies and to refuse them admission to Parliament."⁹⁷ The seemingly greater illogicality of women being entitled to vote and stand in municipalities but not rural districts was not mentioned.

During debate on the unsuccessful Removal of Women's Disabilities Bill in 1900 the discrimination against rural women was directly addressed. Speaking in support of the Bill, Mr Hornsby, member for Wairarapa, stated "Look at the result of what has gone on in England since the County Council system came into operation. There we have had women sitting side by side with men legislating for a very much larger population than that of New Zealand – aye – ten times as large – with great success and with acceptance to the people."⁹⁸

Mr Willis (Wanganui) stated that he would like to see women on local bodies. In support of his opinion, he gave the House an example of a group of women investigating the operation of a local institution in which the men were "not treated in the way they should have been." A deputation went to the County Council responsible for its operation "time after time" and eventually it was found that "what these women had stated was perfectly correct." The council made changes to the

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, p 31.

⁹⁷ *NZPD*, 1896, Vol. 93, p 51.

⁹⁸ *NZPD*, 1900, Vol. 111, p 151.

operation of the institution, but in such a way “that little credit was given to the ladies.”⁹⁹

The only member speaking against the Bill, Mr Gilfedder, claimed that women’s franchise had been passed only because the open vote did not allow parliamentarians to vote as they truly believed; they “had not the courage of their convictions” sufficient to be seen to vote against the issue once Seddon had indicated his support. Gilfedder went further, claiming that “if the question [of franchise] were left to women themselves it would be wiped off the statute book today.”¹⁰⁰

The Bill completed its first reading and was sent to a select committee which worded the vital clause: “From and after the passing of this Act a woman may be nominated, appointed or elected to any public office or position to which a man may be appointed or elected.” This was passed by a majority vote in the committee (although Mr MacLauchlan, who voted for it moved that after the word “position” be inserted “in the army.” This lapsed for want of a seconder, and was presumably a joke.)¹⁰¹ Progress was reported back to the house, but appears to have stalled at that point. There is no further mention of this Bill in the following 20 years.

So it was not that the disenfranchisement of the majority of rural women was overlooked for the four decades prior to 1944. Rather, the role of governance in rural areas was seen as a male prerogative, and consciously kept that way. This may well have been much to do with the emphasis on construction and roading, activities dear to the hearts of most men but widely perceived as holding little direct appeal or relevance for women. Despite the fact that isolation brought about by lack of reliable access had a profound effect on the women who were essential for the establishment and survival of rural settlements, there was no expectation that they should be involved in this sphere of decision-making.

The close association of county councils with road boards was established at their inception, and while it was by no means the sole responsibility delegated to them it is the one that has clearly been afforded the greatest priority over a very long period.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p 151.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, p 150.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p 274.

The Counties Acts Amendment of 1885¹⁰² sets this out in its directive for use of funds: Section 19 of that Act requires the income of a county to be apportioned:

- a) To payment of debts and liabilities of the county as a whole
- b) Payments required under any Act(s)
- c) Payment of the cost of constructing main roads and county roads within the county and bridges
- d) Remainder to be apportioned to ridings in proportion to the amount of general rates received from each riding in such year.¹⁰³

Other measures in the same piece of legislation enabled counties to make bylaws covering the more social aspects of the community; preventing obstruction and nuisances on roads, maintenance of public health and convenience, preventing overcrowding in housing and the control of offensive trades. Few such bylaws were actually promulgated, and the attitude of most councils was that the overwhelming priority for time, money and effort was the roading system.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, counties were firmly established as male preserves, busily engaged in public works. But there was some recognition of other local needs. In the early years both Municipal and Counties Acts included responsibility for social services, notably hospitals and charitable institutions. Councils were required to support the work of local hospital committees, although there is little record of any enthusiasm for this function. In 1882, the Piako County Council moved a resolution “That in the opinion of this Council, the charging of the County with the sum of £644 ... for hospitals, maintenance and charitable aid is most impolitic and injurious, and cripples the finances of the County...”.¹⁰⁴ Similarly the Tuapeka County Council argued that maintenance of hospitals was not, and should not be, a local government responsibility. The committee operating the Tuapeka Goldfields Hospital applied each year for financial support, with no success until 1883 when the council unwillingly donated £25 with the comment “Expenditure on the new bridges at Roxburgh and Beaumont simply had to be accommodated.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² NZS, 1885, No 47, pp 179-92.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, p 184.

¹⁰⁴ Vennell, C.W., Gordon, Mona, FitzGerald, M.E.W., McMillan, T.E., Griffiths, G.Gilmore, *Centennial History of Matamata Plains*, Wellington: Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd., 1951, p 184.

¹⁰⁵ Robin Marks, *Hammer and Tap Shaping Tuapeka County 1876-1976*, Lawrence: Tuapeka County Council, 1977, p 395.

The balance of power in this unwilling alliance changed somewhat in 1885 when the Hospital and Charitable Institutions Act¹⁰⁶ was passed, establishing 28 District Boards for this function. They remained, however, closely tied to the local government system. District Boards under this Act were made up of one member appointed by each borough or county council within the district (or two members if the population of the authority was greater than 8,000). If there was not more than one county or borough in the district, then the chairmen of the road boards were empowered to elect at least three members. These District Boards were, in turn, empowered to levy contributions from the local authorities within their district. This continued to put the priority for health and welfare in direct conflict with that for roading, with both being supported by rates collected by the county from property in the district. The Waikato County Council circulated its opinion that the Act was “immature and unworkable, and would foster pauperism.”¹⁰⁷ Further south elected members voted with their feet – the meeting called by the Tuapeka County Council to elect their representatives for the Hospital Board lapsed for lack of a quorum.¹⁰⁸ Finance remained a source of friction between the hospital boards and local authorities until finally the Hospitals and Charitable Institutions Act 1909¹⁰⁹ set up publicly elected boards for all hospital districts, and responsibility passed completely out of the hands of municipalities and counties.

Concern was continually raised in regard to the effectiveness and efficiency of counties. In 1912, the Minister of Internal Affairs, the Hon G W Russell, introduced the second of two Bills (neither of them successful) aimed at rationalising local government. During debate, the Minister referred to the prolific growth of counties (they had increased to 119 by 1912), and described them as “... weak bodies which in many cases are compelled to employ incompetent persons.”¹¹⁰ He expressed his opinion that many of the roading priorities were politically motivated, grant money from central government for roads and bridges was used inefficiently and little attention was given to planning and pest control.¹¹¹ Writing much later, Graham Bush notes both the proliferation of counties and their resemblance to road boards: by 1940 most counties were in a “parlous state”; too small to be economic and with an

¹⁰⁶ *NZS*, 1885, No. 47, pp 154-78.

¹⁰⁷ Correspondence from Waikato County, quoted in Marks, p 396.

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p 396.

¹⁰⁹ *NZS*, 1909, No 11, pp 57-109.

¹¹⁰ *NZPD*, 1912, Vol. 158, p 80.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, pp 81-83.

average number of employees of 4.4 in the administration and clerical sections, and 53.3 outside staff.¹¹²

In the same 1912 Bill another attempt was made to increase the county franchise to all residents, but this was strenuously opposed on the grounds that it would give too much control to those who contributed little or nothing to local rates. It seems the disparity between the county franchise and that for municipalities continued to be ignored or condoned; this legislation failed to become enacted.

This is in marked contrast to the situation in Britain. As early as 1869 the local government franchise included all women aged 21 or over who owned property on which they were liable for rates. In 1918 legislation which was “rapidly approved and largely unopposed” extended the franchise further by including wives of men who were eligible to vote.¹¹³ Britain was not, however, immune from anomalies in female franchise; it is interesting to note that this same legislation enabled women to be elected to the British parliament from age 21, which was nine years younger than the age at which they could vote in parliamentary elections.

The continuing emphasis on roading maintenance and development for New Zealand counties was a necessity. After the early period of settlement in the farming regions, increasing agricultural production demanded reliable transport. The proliferation of dairy farms maintained pressure for dependable road access for farmers to get their milk to skimming stations or factories.¹¹⁴ There is no doubt that the preferences of the ratepayers and the councillors were in accord in terms of the emphasis on roading; what is much more difficult to ascertain is how much – if any – demand there was in country areas for the more social facets of governance that were included in legislation, but are conspicuous by their absence in the records of counties.

The Select Committee established by government in 1944 was charged with a complete review of the local government system. Their report, produced in 1945,¹¹⁵ highlights the limited role that counties had taken upon themselves. It advocated that no additional powers be granted to counties while those that were already imposed by

¹¹² Graham W.A. Bush, *Local Government and Politics in New Zealand*, Auckland: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1980, p 33.

¹¹³ Amanda Vickery, p 253.

¹¹⁴ A.H. Ward, *A Command of Co-operatives*, Wellington: New Zealand Dairy Board, 1975, p 49.

¹¹⁵ *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives (AJHR)*, 1945, I-15.

statute were not being undertaken, and recommended that counties should be forced to fulfil all roles under their empowering legislation. It pointed out that “...practically none accept responsibility for amenities such as libraries, rest-rooms, and parks or reserves; only a few are prepared to deal with noxious weeds. They have become to all intents and purposes concerned solely with the minor roads of their areas.”¹¹⁶

Clearly health and welfare were not popular causes, but counties did not limit themselves exclusively to roading. “Rabbits and dogs” were commonly reported as taking up a lot of time,¹¹⁷ and weed problems were beginning to emerge as a recognised threat to farming. By the 1950s these responsibilities were formalised in legislation, with the Noxious Weeds Act 1950¹¹⁸ and the Hydatids Control Act 1959.¹¹⁹ The latter required local authorities to establish a system of registration and control of dogs approved by the national Hydatids Control Council, while the former Act empowered councils to raise loans or levy special rates for the eradication of those weeds locally declared noxious. But the attention given to relevant legislation continued to be selective. As early as 1926 the Town Planning Act,¹²⁰ and the more comprehensive Town and Country Planning Act 1953,¹²¹ enabled all councils (municipal and county) to develop planning schemes and enact bylaws to support them. Very few county councils took up this opportunity, despite the considerable growth and development of small rural settlements at the time, many of which were not big enough to have their own borough council, and came under the governance of the county. This created problems when such towns grew rapidly, as did Tokoroa in the 1950s, and the Matamata County had great difficulty trying to control the location and planning for the new town. The county had no building bylaws and no urban planning apparatus in place, and were in a very weak position when New Zealand Forest Products started to establish its own ‘mill town’.¹²²

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*, p 152.

¹¹⁷ McLay, p 44.

¹¹⁸ NZS 1950, No 62, pp 776-96.

¹¹⁹ NZS 1959, Vol. 2 No 93, pp 696-714.

¹²⁰ NZS 1926 No 52, pp 562-75.

¹²¹ NZS 1953 No 91, pp 683-755.

¹²² Kai Jensen, *Crucible of Change: Matamata County since 1945*, Hamilton: Chesterman Communications Ltd., 1982, p 78.

But while some change had occurred, largely where circumstances had motivated the county council to see a material benefit in change,¹²³ typically the roads remained all-important. By the 1970s almost all public libraries were operated by municipal local bodies, and New Zealand had a very high proportion of library membership in the population. (In 1974 over one third of the population belonged to a library, and library book circulation in New Zealand was 3.5 times that of the United States).¹²⁴ But in 1977 only 23 of the 140 counties made any contribution to the libraries in their adjacent boroughs, and the total contribution made by rural authorities was described as “almost derisory”.¹²⁵

By the time women were being elected to county councils, the pattern was deeply entrenched. The experience of being a lone voice arguing in favour of a grant from county funds for libraries in the boroughs adjacent to the county, and the sole vote against the motion to make no grant, was encountered in various contexts by many of the women councillors.¹²⁶ Also typical was the comment to me from the chairman at a tea break shortly afterward one of these ‘library’ discussions, when he patted my arm and said “stick to roads and bridges and drains, dear, we don’t get involved in that social rubbish here.” One ex-councillor in my sample wrote “roading, rabbits and ragwort!!!” on the back of the envelope in which she returned her questionnaire. The words, underlining and exclamation points all seem entirely appropriate.

¹²³ The example quoted earlier of the Matamata County was motivated less by the hope of managing the planning of Tokoroa itself than by the desire to keep a very wary eye on the placement of the town relative to the mill. If these two were not clearly separated, the county would be at risk of losing the lucrative ‘rate take’ from the mill. Rights to the rates from the mill site continued to be a source of conflict between the county and Tokoroa town (later borough) until the whole district was amalgamated into the South Waikato District in the 1989 re-organisation.

¹²⁴ Bush, p 93.

¹²⁵ Bush, p 93.

¹²⁶ Jenny Simpson, Robyn Grigg, Rae Collins, Peg Liddell, Muriel Jones, Kate Mickelson, questionnaires.

What sort of Women became County Councillors?

The striking characteristic of the women who contributed to this project was their enthusiastically positive reaction. As indicated in my introduction, I chose this topic partly as a result of the exclusion I feel whenever I read about women in local government. The invisibility of women who served on rural councils is obviously keenly felt by the majority. Many questionnaires were returned with notes of thanks attached which quite explicitly expressed appreciation of being recognised - "hopefully we will not disappear without trace" and "thank you for gathering important history". This makes an interesting parallel with the comments noted earlier in regard to the general invisibility of farming women; clearly those women who held public office in farming electorates did not see this as providing anything approaching celebrity status!

The socio-economic characteristics identified by Aitken in her analysis of 21 urban women candidates generally apply to the sample I obtained of 33 rural councillors. It must be emphasised that Aitken studied a sample of women all of whom stood as candidates in the 1977 local government elections, and is thus a snapshot taken at a single time. My sample includes all the women I could locate who had stood for election over nearly two decades, from 1970 to 1988. Thus the social and political contexts that apply to my data vary across time, in contrast to the uniform environment pertaining to Aitken's sample.

Of the 33 women who contributed to my survey, all but one were Pakeha New Zealanders (the other being Australian), two of whom had taken New Zealand citizenship after immigrating here from Britain in early adulthood. There are at least three Maori women who have been county councillors but I was unable to locate any of them.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ These women had Maori surnames, and I was able to find colleagues who had known them and could vouch that they were of Maori descent, but were not able to give me current addresses or locations. A district council staff member confirmed that the Maori woman who had been a county councillor in the area had since died.

The average age at first election of the county group is 48, in a range from 25 to 64, with only one under 30. This makes the group older than Aitken's sample, which includes three under 30 and has an average age of 42 years at the time of the study. All but four of the county councillors were married at the time of election, the others being widows. This differs from the sample of urban candidates in that it is more traditional; Aitken's sample includes two divorcees, one de facto and three single women. This apparent conventionalism is probably a function of the rural situation – employment for single women, whether never married or divorced, would be less available in a rural environment than an urban one, so, unless women without partners had financial support such that they did not need paid employment, they would be likely to have moved to urban centres. A survey conducted in 1975 shows that this difference relates to the rural female population as a whole. The survey reports 90 percent of rural women as married, compared with 72 percent of urban women.¹²⁸ Not surprisingly, the vast majority of my respondents were married to farmers, or men involved in farm-related work, such as shearing, agricultural contracting and orcharding. One was married to a plumber-drainlayer, one to a building contractor and two reported their husband's occupation as full-time non-farming, without specifying the nature of the off-farm employment. It is not valid to compare this to the 'high occupational level' of the husbands of Aitken's group. Overwhelmingly, rural male occupation is dominated by farming; the professionals who figure prominently in the urban group are conspicuous by their absence outside urban centres.

Thirteen of the 33 county women had no dependent children at home, and the average number of children for those who did was 2.1. (Many, but by no means all, of these children were at boarding schools. I have not calculated the proportion of those who were living full-time at home as that question was not directly asked, and therefore the answers were not sufficiently clear to provide an accurate figure). This is roughly the same as Aitken's group, of whom 57 percent had dependant children at the time

¹²⁸ Women's Division of Federated Farmers (Wdff), *The Rural Women of New Zealand A National Survey*, Christchurch; University of Canterbury, 1976, pp 11-12. It should be noted that this difference is probably understated as the urban sample excluded women over 59 years of age. No upper age limit was applied to the sample of rural women, and the study acknowledges that the urban sample includes a "substantial under-estimate" of the number of urban widows. By excluding the group most likely to contain widows, the proportion married is inflated. Thus the claim that rural populations include a lower number of unmarried women than do urban populations, while not quantifiable on these figures, is supported by them. Census results for 1977 show the New Zealand figure for widows at 11% of total female population over 16.

of election. More of the county women reported older children (from 18 to mid-20s) at home, and it is possible that many of these were helping on the farm. While they would not be dependent in terms of childcare, it is likely that the mother cooked for all the residents at home, and kept house for the full complement.

Involvement in voluntary organisations prior to election is very high – the average for the group shows active involvement in more than four local groups, with one responding “too many to state”. Only one woman reported no involvement in community organisations. Aitken’s sample reported a similarly wide range from nil to many years of service with local and national voluntary organisations. Again, much of the difference reflects the variation between rural and urban opportunities; most of the rural women’s involvement was with local ‘necessities’ such as school committees, hall committees, sports clubs and fund-raising groups for local facilities. A minority reported membership of national organisations such as Red Cross, Plunket and National Council of Women (NCW), but these were much more common in Aitken’s sample. This high involvement in community work seems typical of rural women. In the national survey referred to earlier, voluntary community work was undertaken by 43 percent of respondents and was considered significantly higher than comparable figures for urban women, which was around 35 percent.¹²⁹ This same survey also indicated that rural women are more likely to be involved in a greater number of community activities than their urban counterparts.¹³⁰

A clear difference from Aitken’s group is the formal association with politics. Just over one third of the county women were members of a political party, although none of them stood on a party ticket. All 21 of Aitken’s respondents were, and stood as, members of a political party or team. Again, this reflects the nature of elections – in the vast majority of urban situations, and in all the cities, elections were, and still are, run on a party basis. I have found no county elections where parties or tickets had any involvement at all. Nevertheless, over a third of my respondents were, at the time of their first election, a member of a political party. This is a greater level of involvement than would be expected for rural women generally. The Women’s Division of Federated Farmers (WDFF) survey showed that in 1975 only 3.8 percent of rural women belonged to political associations, so it seems that those who became elected to councils were significantly more politically aware and active than average.

¹²⁹ WDFF, p 87.

¹³⁰ WDFF, p 91.

Of the 12 county women who were members of a political party at the time of standing not one reported any support from the party in terms of her candidacy or election. One woman, not a member of a political party, noted support from local members of Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) who attended her pre-election meetings and provided encouragement and moral support: "It was a wonderful boost to see women's faces at election meetings." While this support was not formalised in political terms it obviously had a very positive impact, and provided some of the team spirit that might have been available to urban candidates standing as part of a ticket.

The occupations of the rural women were, predictably, also different from those found by Aitken in her urban sample. Of those, Aitken categorises 11 of the 21 as being employed full-time in management, administration or a profession, three in part-time employment and seven not employed. The majority of my sample described themselves as partners in the farming operation, although their notes described this in a wide variety of involvement, from "full-time spare part" to "I did NOT milk". Several of the women gave quite a list of concurrently-held part-time occupations – one 'did the books' for her husband's plumbing business, was a motel receptionist and the office person for the local garage. Part-time or relief teaching was a regular occupation for seven, and a further three held administration or retail positions in a local town. Two described themselves as retired. Teaching was the only role that reflected training undertaken prior to marriage; many of the other jobs (including 'farm partner') are a measure of limited job opportunities available in rural areas, and the demands of farming.

The level of education shows a slightly different pattern from that of the urban women. Over half of the county councillors had not undertaken education beyond secondary school, five had completed a university degree and nine had a university diploma or a nursing or teaching qualification. This is generally a lower level of education than in Aitken's sample, but could be influenced by the older age of the sample – the county women left school earlier, at a time when the uptake of tertiary education by women was just beginning to increase. Aitken's study includes a group of three 'other', described only as "included completion of diploma courses."¹³¹ In the equivalent category, the county women had one nursing and four teaching qualifications, and three tertiary level diplomas. It is not clear if there were any

¹³¹ Aitken, p 29.

trained teachers or nurses in Aitken's sample, or if there were, how these were categorised.

Thus an examination of data relating to the life circumstances of the women who became county councillors indicates that they are not very different from their counterparts included in Aitken's study. Those differences which do apply are closely related to factors associated with the social characteristics of town and country. More distinctive is the motivation of the women which brought them to local government politics. Aitken's group were far more politically involved prior to standing for the 1977 election than were the county women prior to their first election experience. The urban women's involvement in party and political activities was described as "extensive and varied",¹³² and six of the 21 had already served on city and hospital boards. The majority saw entry into – or continuation in – local government as a natural progression of an established involvement in politics. Not so the county women. Two identified the lack of 'a women's voice' on council as their motivation for standing, and five others had been inspired either by attendance at a women's convention or by WEL to become involved. A likely source of support – Federated Farmers – was mentioned by only one woman, although many stated that 'the community' approached them, and this may well have included members of Federated Farmers or WDFP. The largest group (nine) were approached and encouraged by sitting or retiring councillors, but only two of those councillor/motivators were female, which is surprising, given the number of lone female councillors who commented negatively on their solitary status. This may point to a reluctance on their part to encourage another woman into a situation they themselves found less than comfortable.

The issues relating to women as county councillors are an integral part of the social context of women in rural areas. As previously noted, social norms in rural areas differ from those in urban centres and cities in the period under study. Little formal research is available and by far the major source of opinion is indirect or anecdotal. The employment data obtained from the county women's questionnaires is significant, particularly when compared to that of the urban women in Aitken's study. At the time of their election, the county women were nearly all involved on their home farm but to a lesser degree than their husbands (the 'real farmer'), or employed

¹³² Aitken, p 32.

part-time in local jobs for which they had no formal qualification or previous experience. Most of those who reported teaching as an occupation did so on a relieving basis, or part-time for less than 15 hours per week. Only one, a legal executive, worked full-time in a professional role for which she had undertaken specific training. This aligns with general studies into the lives of rural women who even recently are commonly “treated as the ‘farmer’s wife’ whose role was to make the ‘tea and scones’.”¹³³ This subordinate role is reinforced by the attitude of rural service workers and other (male) farmers who do not take women seriously in a farm/work situation, expecting all decisions to be made by a male.¹³⁴ Writing in 1983, Robyn Grigg related her experience when organising a sheep production seminar:

“A friend rang and asked ‘Are women allowed?’ It is an indictment on our rural society that women ask such questions – feel inferior. Farm advisers, farm accountants and our farming husbands all contribute to these attitudes. How many of you have ever been invited to a discussion group day?”¹³⁵

This frustration is widely held and expressed by rural women, and was part of my own experience when I ‘migrated’ in 1975, at age 33, from a corporate management position in Wellington to a South Waikato dairy farm. My Wellington position had attracted its own share of discrimination, but specific skills in a business setting were recognised and acknowledged, albeit at times reluctantly. By contrast, as a new arrival in a farming district, I became ‘just a person’, and a female one at that. The combination of recent arrival and female form rendered me pretty much invisible, and it is difficult to demonstrate any skill or ability while one is invisible. Nearly 30 years later it seems this has not changed significantly: Louise Collingwood attended the National Agricultural Fieldays prior to competing in the Young Farmer of the Year contest in order to familiarise herself with farm machinery in a very detailed and hands-on manner, and noted that in three full days of attendance only three people treated her as a potential customer.¹³⁶ As the overwhelming majority of employment in the rural area is either farming or farm-related, it follows that the majority of rural women are perceived to have at best a support role, at worst no involvement in

¹³³ Shaw 1993 and Keating and Little 1994, quoted in Lesley Pitt, p 31.

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, p 31.

¹³⁵ Robyn Grigg “Decisionmaking” in Mary Sparrow and Barbara Young, *Problems and Prospects for Women on Farms*, Christchurch: University of Canterbury, 1983, p 25.

¹³⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, September 22 2003, p E4.

important matters. This image does not lend itself to a comfortable fit with the role of elected representative, putting rural women candidates into a more extreme position of stepping outside accepted norms than applies to women standing for election to urban authorities. Not only would the urban environment be more accepting of women in leadership roles, but the women themselves, as demonstrated in Aitken's study, would be more likely to hold recognised status by virtue of their profession or employment.

If this is the case for women, what standards or expectations applied to men on county councils, and to men on urban authorities? This has proved very difficult to ascertain as I have been unable to find any studies which document the characteristics of male councillors. Those which examine women, such as Aitken's, do not record any comparable data for the men involved at the same time. Many of the historical records of counties laud the exploits and far-sightedness of early - exclusively male - councillors as they provided roads and bridges to give access to rugged and isolated areas. But by the time women were becoming involved as councillors, all this early pioneering work had been completed and the role of the councillor had become less trail-blazing and much more prosaic. Financial management replaced bridge-building and land clearance, and rapidly proliferating legislation both limited the scope of councils and forced them to attend to matters previously ignored.¹³⁷ Certainly the hero quality (or that perception) of county councillors had long gone by the 1970s. Some of the women respondents to my questionnaire noted that they were the only councillor with tertiary education, and saw this as a frustration when well thought out and carefully articulated points of view were discounted with a response along the lines of 'that may be an interesting point of view, but we don't do things that way here'. Certainly tradition had a strong hold in county meetings, where many of the male councillors could (and did) boast a long line of family members who had been councillors before them.

The rather broad and varied motivations of the women in my survey make it difficult to be clear about exactly what they expected to find in the experience of being a councillor, or what they might have hoped to achieve. More universal was the

¹³⁷ Jensen, pp 77-93. The description in this book of the development of Tokoroa and its separation from the county illustrates the legislative limits that prevented the county from retaining Tokoroa as part of its territory, and the reluctance (until forced by legislation) of the county to develop and document district schemes.

expression of how much needed to be learned both in terms of participation in council debates and processes, and in getting to grips with the raft of legislation under which local government operated. This indicates a low level of knowledge of what was being taken on, and, aligned with the individual nature of candidacy and tenure on counties, suggests that many of the women simply wanted to have an involvement in their community at a higher level than school committees or raising funds for local amenities. The realisation of the difference between local activities and county governance did not come until at least the election campaign was underway, or the woman found herself in the council chamber. By then, the feeling of a job needing to be done overcame misgivings as to the wisdom of this undertaking, and in typical female (especially rural female) fashion the sleeves were rolled up and the task tackled. While a few of the women in my survey found the whole process comfortable and non-discriminatory, most took the good with the bad and got on with it. This is described by one of the women who responded to my survey, as reported in an interview she gave during her time as a councillor: “The first term was very lonely; luckily I get on well with older men. In the first three years you are told to breathe deeply and learn. I breathed deeply for two and got stuck in.”¹³⁸ It says quite a lot about the incumbents when so many commented on both the loneliness and the ‘big learning curve’; this was not simply a bigger version of the small local organisations like hall committees and sports clubs. The women who responded to my questionnaire reporting discrimination served an average of just over eight years, or 2½ terms, so they survived that first period of breathing deeply (or sharp intakes of breath!) and carried on facing the challenge beyond the next election – the first opportunity at which one could gracefully bow out. This figure of 2½ terms would be far less than the average for male councillors but, as already noted, statistics can be misleading. The average for women is significantly truncated by their late appearance on councils and the termination of the period at the 1989 reorganisation. What it can be claimed to show is that very few of those confronted by some quite devastatingly difficult circumstances were prepared to walk away. Either the interesting nature of the job itself, the compensation of positive interaction with electors or sheer bloody-mindedness was sufficient to keep them going. Combined with the other difficulties such as travel to meetings, lack of monetary recompense and child-minding issues it is fair to claim that the women on county councils had an above average measure of ‘stickability’. This is rather less exciting than the

¹³⁸ *Broadsheet*, “Shaking up Local Bodies”, November 1986, p 27.

suggestions of risk-taking and adventuresomeness reported in overseas research, but does fairly reflect something about women who were elected onto counties. The role did not have a high profile and was probably a good deal less recognised than that of urban councillors; the work was far from glamorous and involved a lot of relatively mundane issues associated with roads, drains and various pests. But it all related to the well-being of the inhabitants of the area and their ability to live and work in the district. It was a job needing to be done, and just like all the others that women did at home and on the farm there was no question about it being done. This is summed up by one of my respondents, who related some quite extreme examples of discrimination, had a journey of two hours each way for council meetings and described her advent into local government as happening “almost by accident”, but is glad it did happen; “I learned so much, made many contacts, visited so many places [within the county but outside her riding] and I enjoyed the “hands on” experience of being a councillor... to be frank I didn’t think about gender issues much, just got on with whatever job needed to be done.”¹³⁹ Another who answered the question regarding discrimination from other councillors “DEFINITELY!” (and clarified that this was a negative ‘definitely’ with several examples quoted elsewhere) also said of her time on council in general “I loved the experience, and felt I was doing something worthwhile.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Margaret Moir, questionnaire.

¹⁴⁰ Muriel Jones, questionnaire.

The Country Road to the Council Chamber

The absence of political parties in rural local government has already been emphasised, and this is very clearly seen in a study of the nomination and campaign processes for local government. In Judith Aitken's research, all but four of the 21 urban candidates had encouragement and support from a political party or organisation. Of those four, three recorded 'self and personal supporters', and one 'self only' as their motivation and aid for the campaign.¹⁴¹ Not one of the rural women indicated any form of organised political support in either the nomination or election processes, although seven were contacted by sitting councillors and asked to put their names forward, and a further two were approached by retiring councillors who encouraged them to stand for the upcoming vacancy. This was not always the wholly supportive move it might have seemed: one of the respondents described being approached by a group of current councillors to stand in somewhat unusual circumstances. A councillor had died shortly after the triennial election, and the council voted to hold a by-election rather than appoint the highest polling defeated candidate, who had previously been on council. The group of councillors that had forced the by-election and approached this woman provided "all the help and support [she] needed" in her campaign against the (male) candidate who could have been appointed, and she was successful. But after three months on council, she realised "In my naivety I thought they were supporting me for myself, when in reality they wanted someone who would support their ends as well as defeat the other candidate who was very outspoken."¹⁴² Although no formal parties were involved, this by-election certainly had many of the features of organised political factions.

An informal community spirit, which has operated on many levels for a very long period, has to some extent negated the need for more formal associations in rural areas. Histories of rural areas are full of stories of farmers getting together to share farm equipment and manpower, and women co-operating to look after families and workers at times of need such as childbirth or illness.¹⁴³ If a need existed someone –

¹⁴¹ Aitken, p 19.

¹⁴² Colleen Twin, questionnaire.

¹⁴³ An example is P J Wood (ed.) *Women of the Wamakariri*, Rangiora: Waimakariri District Women's Suffrage Centennial Committee, 1993, which includes descriptions of women co-operating in a wide

or as many as were needed - would be found to meet it, and the same applied in many local government elections.

Most of the women who returned questionnaires indicated that they handled the mechanics of their nomination themselves – filled out the form, found two ratepayers to sign as nominator and seconder and made sure the form was delivered to the county office before closing time. One did this only after she had unsuccessfully canvassed several men in her local area that she felt would be suitable for nomination. It was her husband who suggested that she herself have a go, she had not considered the possibility: “To be absolutely honest it really had not occurred to me until then! Can you believe that???”¹⁴⁴ Apparently it had not occurred to any of the men she approached either.

In 1980, a woman standing in a Waikato county as first female candidate reported a “degree of panic” in the electorate when the local paper announced her candidacy, triggering a rush in the local Federated Farmers branch to find a male candidate. “Eventually they came up with one – a local Dutchman. I suspect that had a ‘real joker’ been found I may not have won the election. One local woman told me that when his voting papers arrived her husband exclaimed ‘Oh no! I’ve got to choose between a woman and a Dutchman!’”¹⁴⁵ Another woman had a similar experience, with a more personal outcome. As soon as it was known she was to stand for election her brother-in-law, who farmed the neighbouring farm, announced he would also stand for the same seat. This was a multiple seat riding, and in the event both she and her brother-in-law were elected, but she had no doubt as to why he had stood – “my brother-in-law... didn’t want to see me on council so he stood too. He wasn’t a bit pleased when I was elected.”¹⁴⁶

In some cases the electorate showed less apprehension than did officialdom. At my first election in 1980 I stood against a local man who had very good credentials for a seat on the county. He was the son of a former county chairman, had lived all his life on the family farm within the riding and was well known throughout the district. I was at the opposite end of the traditional spectrum, having arrived from Wellington

range of activities from housework to the arts. Other county and district histories have countless examples of farmers co-operating in farming and public activities.

¹⁴⁴ Margaret Moir, questionnaire.

¹⁴⁵ Jocelyn Fish, questionnaire.

¹⁴⁶ Dorothy Booth, interview, 19 February 2004.

only four years earlier. I had no trouble finding friends to sign my form for me, although to be honest I think they did that with the clear expectation that I would be defeated. When I delivered my nomination form to the office, the county clerk was more forthright. He told me I was not eligible as I was not a ratepayer. At that stage I had not researched the qualification criteria so I was somewhat taken aback, but told him to keep my form, I wanted to check it out. I will never know if his statement was a bluff or simply a mistake, but he phoned a few days later to say “It is alright, you are a nom. occ. which means I can accept the nomination.” I was not willing to admit I had no idea what he was talking about, but on checking found that I was qualified under the 1944 Act, and that a “nominated occupier” is the first named person on the rates record. I happened to be the first named on one of our two properties but this had had no relevance to the qualification to vote or to stand for election since 1944.

Having a nomination form accepted was, of course, only the start of the process. Where individual riding (or ward) seats existed within the county it was not the norm for sitting councillors to be challenged, and often only one nomination would be received for a vacancy. But not all counties operated the riding system, and in some cases one riding warranted more than one councillor, meaning a group of candidates could stand with several being successful. Of the women who responded to my questionnaire, 21 stood for election in single councillor ridings, and seven in group contests for two or more seats.¹⁴⁷

In rural local elections the run-up to polling day tends to be less structured than in urban centres and cities. The women’s campaigns were very informal, as were male candidates’ campaigns in rural areas. I have never seen or been aware of billboarding or any form of public advertising for county elections. Most local newspapers carried interviews with candidates, those with women commonly focussing on their strangeness as female candidates. One woman reported several papers contacting her wanting an interview with the major issue being ‘why she was standing as a woman’. They all reported personal details such as her family responsibilities and her age, although none ever got the latter correct.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ Of the remainder one was co-opted onto council and the rest did not answer sufficiently clearly to enable accurate interpretation.

¹⁴⁸ Dorothy Booth, questionnaire.

The common feature of most rural election processes was the Federated Farmers meeting. Candidates were invited to address meetings of local branches, with opportunity for questions and discussion after the addresses. This presented a much more daunting prospect for female candidates than it did for their male counterparts. At that time women were rarely members of Federated Farmers,¹⁴⁹ so while it was familiar territory and a gathering of friends and colleagues for male candidates, for women it was unfamiliar. Often the female candidate was the only woman present. That did, however, have some advantage. Knowing this would be the case, women worked carefully and came to the meeting anxious but well prepared.¹⁵⁰ This was raised at a gathering of rural candidates at one of the Women in Local Government meetings. Robyn Grigg and Vicki Duncan both stressed the need for careful preparation of campaign addresses in a workshop on 'Getting Elected'. The process in rural elections was significantly different to that faced by urban women candidates and the Federated Farmers' meeting was critical in establishing the female candidate as a credible politician rather than 'just the farmer's wife' as she was already known.¹⁵¹

Some of the women adopted traditional campaign tactics such as letter-box drops and door-knocking, possibly without realising that these were not the norm in county elections.¹⁵² One candidate who stood against her male neighbour, a sitting councillor, believes her personal delivery of an information pamphlet to around 450 homes was the major reason for her electoral success: "People appreciated being individually contacted and listened to."¹⁵³ This points to a possible gender difference, but it is difficult to evaluate to what extent the difference arose because of gender as opposed to simply being an individual way of going about the process. Certainly there is a common thread through the comments of the county women that indicates the vast majority of them were very aware of their gender and of the effect that it had in the circumstances. It is interesting that this was also the case for the women parliamentary candidates studied by Sandra Wallace, but in a much earlier period. She notes that "...many of them found it necessary to justify why they, as women

¹⁴⁹ Only two of my respondents were members.

¹⁵⁰ Notes with questionnaires from Jocelyn Fish, Jenny Rowan.

¹⁵¹ Notes from Women in Local Government Conference, Auckland, 1986.

¹⁵² Jocelyn Fish, Margaret Casey, Joyce Fawcett, Robyn Grigg, Sue Lane. Unfortunately I did not include questions about campaign tactics in my questionnaire, the only input is from those who volunteered this information.

¹⁵³ Jennifer Rowan, questionnaire.

offered themselves....This is something no male candidate ever needed to do.”¹⁵⁴ But she goes on to state that over the period of her study (1919-1969) this declined, and by the 1960s only just over half of these candidates included in their speeches a justification of why they were standing, suggesting that “...the idea of women standing for and entering Parliament had become more acceptable, and so did not require an explanation to the same extent as it had previously.” While the majority of these women stood in urban electorates, more than 20 percent were candidates in wholly rural situations or in centres with populations less than 15,000.¹⁵⁵ Wallace argues that social controls exerted a major influence in discouraging women from “entering new spheres”, and that these controls and barriers remained strong for longer in rural areas. Nevertheless she also states that such barriers were being eroded to the extent where “even those women outside the main cities felt able to risk stepping outside women’s traditional role in order to contest a parliamentary seat.”¹⁵⁶ If this was the case in the 1960s for parliamentary candidates it is the more surprising that so many of the women candidates for county councils found very real and significant barriers to their acceptance as county council candidates two decades later.

There is no doubt that gender was, if not an issue, a major point of interest at first election, and especially the election of the first woman on a council. But this focus receded as the novelty wore off and the performance of the individual became more clearly recognised. One woman commented that she believed women’s votes were critical at her first election. “Most of the women in my riding voted for me, I suspect after having had a good argument with their men.” But she also believes that most of the men supported her at the second election, when she attracted more votes than any other candidate in the county.¹⁵⁷ Statistics verifying the proportion of male and female votes are, of course, not obtainable, so it is not possible to ascertain to what extent female votes ensured the initial arrival of women into the rural council chambers. But several women who responded to my questionnaire felt sure this was the case. They were also certain that the support and encouragement of women made a difference. At the very least the feeling at the time that women could ‘have a go’ engendered a new spirit with which women could consider possibilities never contemplated by their mothers or even older sisters. As one respondent to my

¹⁵⁴ Sandra Wallace, p 144.

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p 78.

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p 79.

¹⁵⁷ Jennifer Rowan, questionnaire.

questionnaire put it: "I decided to stand for election after discussing it with family and also the local branch of NCW who, full of the spirit of the 1970s realised that women should take a greater share in decision-making at all levels." Importantly, women not only encouraged but provided practical support as well – the same respondent reported that her group of friends worked with her and kept her spirits up when she felt the prospect of election was totally hopeless. "One dear friend rang around on the closing day of voting to neighbours etc who, she had found out, had not voted. Then she went and collected their papers and took them to the County office – about 25 of them – by closing time... in a vote of about 650 I won by about 25 votes."¹⁵⁸

Of the county women who stood for election against one or more opponent, the vast majority (83 percent) reported friends and family as their campaign support. One recorded WEL as providing significant although not organised support and one noted assistance from Federated Farmers. This is in sharp contrast to the urban women in Aitken's study, of whom over 80 percent were supported by political organisations. It is clear from discussions both at the time and now that rural women had to 'invent their own wheels' in terms of electioneering. There were no established processes within parties or ratepayer organisations into which new and inexperienced candidates of either sex could fit. All county campaigns relied on the initiative of the individual and the individual's ability to access the attention of the electors - and to get help to do that if needed. The special difficulty that rural women had was that they were seen as being outside the networks that were relevant to the business of farming and governance; in other words simply not involved with the concerns of a county council. As noted earlier, female candidates had to convince voters of their ability to 'foot it' with male candidates and councillors. For women in rural elections this was exacerbated by the need to convince voters that they also warranted a place in the male world of farm-related decision-making.

While for most this was a major challenge, it was not universally so and some women found ready acceptance. As already noted some women were approached by male councillors or members of the community and asked to stand, and one was co-opted by the council to fill an unexpected vacancy. This certainly meant the women concerned were not seen - or treated - as quite such an oddity as those who arrived at

¹⁵⁸ Jocelyn Fish, questionnaire.

the council chamber as the result of a self-managed election. Comments from women who worked through the election process frequently refer to the difficulty of trying to achieve credibility in a farming area, and particularly in a governance role. One woman's story encapsulates both the problem and the difficulties of overcoming the societal barriers:

My friends/supporters and I felt it would be counterproductive to be nominated and seconded by a woman as that would have relegated me to being a woman's candidate i.e. NOT a REAL one. I approached several leading men in my area but they muttered and said they would let me know etc and I got the message it was not something they were prepared to do. I was in the [local] NCW as Past President and my former Secretary and her husband owned the local engineering works in my riding so her husband was quite happy to nominate me and a woman friend seconded it. He was excellent – came to all my meetings – without his wife - so it didn't look as if he was being pushed into it – and gave me sponsorship to produce my electioneering pamphlet. As a non-farmer he was perhaps separated from the confines of “blokiness” in the area – and was known as a good honest independent sort of chap.¹⁵⁹

This was an election in 1980, where clearly not only was particular effort required of the female candidate to establish her own credibility in the male world, but also that of her supporters, even if they themselves were male!

Of course, the success or otherwise of these campaigns was counted in votes on election day. Unfortunately the material I have been able to access does not allow useful analysis of the success rate for women candidates. Few county records were retained by district councils when these were established in 1989, and those not retained were only rarely sent to archives. Most of the records of county elections have been lost, and I have been able to trace only women who did achieve election to county councils at some time. Those who stood but were never successful are, in my experience, not traceable. Of the women I was able to contact 20 were successful at their first election, seven were unopposed at first election, four were not successful first time but elected at their second attempt and one stood three times before being

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*

elected. One was co-opted into an extraordinary vacancy. It must be born in mind that these figures do not relate to elections at the same time, nor are they comprehensive in that the sample includes only those who were at some time successful. Department of Internal Affairs figures derived from the 1980 local government elections show that women standing for election to urban councils (excluding mayoralities) had a success rate higher than for men – 61 percent of male candidates were successful compared to 68 percent of women. In county elections the reverse was true; 76 percent of men succeeded, and 71 percent of women.¹⁶⁰ At the same elections, 19 percent of candidates in urban electorates were women, but only seven percent in county elections. These results could be a reflection of both the social barriers acting against women in rural communities, and the critical mass argument identified in overseas studies. Fewer rural women were prepared to step outside the traditional norms, and the small numbers meant any challenge to those norms was unlikely to succeed.

¹⁶⁰ Dept. of Internal Affairs, *Local Authority Election Statistics 1980*, Wellington, 1981, p 125.

A Councillor... Like all the Other Councillors?

Any new role places the incumbent in a strange or at least unfamiliar setting. Few of the female councillors had a very clear idea of what to expect at their first council meeting. Of the 33 women who returned a questionnaire, four said they had little or no prior understanding of what a county council did. Seventeen had some superficial knowledge of the general purpose of councils and, of these, two had attended council meetings as observers and one had been introduced to the role and responsibilities of local government at a WEL seminar. A further two had appeared at county meetings as members of ratepayer groups, and eight had held positions associated with local government and which had given them a significant degree of insight into at least some aspects of council work. Of these eight, four had close relations who were or had been county councillors, although not all of these relations were on the same council as the one to which the women were subsequently elected. A further two had direct local government experience, one as a member of the local hospital board, the other as an NCW delegate to a county council sub-committee.

Conversely, many councils were not well prepared for the arrival of a female. Several of the respondents reported some form of the 'toilet debate' as part of their first meeting, in which the male councillors debated the implications of a female using the councillors' toilet facilities. In my own case, discussion went on for some time canvassing suggestions of alterations or even the addition of a new toilet. Having worked in a variety of workplaces with shared toilet arrangements I was taken aback by this concern, and had some difficulty deciding if it was a genuine discussion or a strange sort of joke. A considerable time later I was able to check out the councillors' toilet and found it to consist of separate cubicle arrangements which ensured complete privacy. No doubt the men who perceived this problem were acting with the welfare of their new female councillor at heart, but it does demonstrate an unexpectedly prim attitude. The vast majority of male county councillors were farmers, and well used to ad hoc toilet arrangements while working on farms that were far less civilised than shared facilities. It points up the degree to which women in the council chamber were seen as different – and also seen as not relevant to debate. None of the women reported being asked how they felt about 'the problem', or asked for any contribution toward the solution.

While it could certainly be argued that discrimination in various forms existed in many workplaces at the time, there is little evidence that this extended to toilet arrangements. By the 1980s both workplace and public facilities were generally provided adequately for both sexes. It seems possible that this debate was a form of turf-guarding by the men; illustrating their problem of acknowledging the presence of a female *as a councillor*. This is supported by the existence of similar debates in other situations where the men were reluctant to accept a female into the same status as that which they perceived for themselves. Carol Rankin includes a section headed 'Plumbing' in her study of the changes wrought by the presence of women at parliament.¹⁶¹ There seems in this case to have been less debate, but on-going difficulty in the practical achievement of workable solutions. Where signage on existing toilets was changed to increase the number of female facilities, it was common for the new sign to promptly disappear. In one example the male parliamentarians simply carried on using the re-labelled facility, which included a urinal, leaving any women users with the dilemma of waiting until the coast was clear, or "boldly walking by."¹⁶²

But toilets were a minor problem in comparison to some of the 'welcomes' experienced by pioneering female councillors. One woman who had defeated the sitting councillor at election endured a first meeting in which the chairman welcomed her, but made it clear that he regretted that the new councillor was not in a younger age group (she was 60 at the time). He also referred twice to her predecessor, saying what a pity it was to have lost him. The new female councillor wondered if she "had the courage to turn up next month."¹⁶³

Most female county councillors report being formally welcomed to their first meeting by the chairman, in a courteous and genuine manner. Most were introduced to senior staff either before the first meeting or soon after. A few chairmen were in the habit of visiting councillors at home shortly after the election, and one used this opportunity to ensure his first female councillor would adhere to a suitable dress code. It was made clear to her that "stockings and a dress or skirt" were required, there were to be

¹⁶¹ Carol Rankin, *Women and Parliament 1893-1993 100 Years of Institutional Change*, Wellington: Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives, 1993, pp 34-36.

¹⁶² *ibid.*, p 35.

¹⁶³ Neroli Osborne, questionnaire.

no trousers gracing other than male legs.¹⁶⁴ It is quite possible that, in a similar manner, the men were told to wear ties. Ties were almost universally worn by all male councillors for council meetings, although shorts were not uncommon during summer, and ties could be removed on hot days. (It is not quite comparable to remove pantyhose on hot days, even if that would accord a female councillor at least equivalent comfort!)

One new female councillor arrived at her first meeting aware that a former councillor had strenuously stated his opposition to women and threatened that if ever a woman was elected he would resign. He was no longer on the council by the time this first woman did appear, but knowledge of his opinion was widespread, and she knew that it still had some support. When an opinion was sought from her regarding an issue involving her area the chairman ruled that she could not speak as she had not yet been sworn in. Swearing in took place at the second council meeting,¹⁶⁵ which the chairman did not attend, nor did he attend any further meetings for several months until he finally resigned. She acknowledges there were some health issues that may have contributed to his absence and resignation, but “he had been able to attend all meetings up until my election.”¹⁶⁶ She was left with the definite impression that there was a connection between her arrival and his departure, and the message was clearly one of disapproval.

Many of the women noted their feeling of being treated as ‘different’ by their fellow councillors especially early in their period in office. ‘Patronised’ is a word commonly used, and various ways of describing a feeling of ‘oddness’. Many commented that an initial period had to be dealt with before the rest of the council would take a female perspective seriously.¹⁶⁷ This equates quite closely to the similar requirement during elections. Women, having achieved election against male candidates, then had to prove all over again that they had the ability to understand council issues, present valid perspectives and arguments and ‘foot it’ in the governance role to which they had been democratically elected.

¹⁶⁴ Brenda Twose, questionnaire.

¹⁶⁵ I have been unable to verify whether holding a meeting prior to having all councillors sworn in was the norm for this particular council. It certainly was not for most other councils, the common practice was to hold a special swearing in ceremony soon after the election, prior to the first council meeting.

¹⁶⁶ Colleen Twin, questionnaire.

¹⁶⁷ Elaine Taylor, Neroli Osborne, Heather Little, Pamela Jennens, Jocelyn Fish, questionnaires.

This apparent lack of acceptance was only rarely displayed in an openly rude or aggressive manner. Most of my respondents report that they were treated with courtesy and a form of respect, but many of them note that this could be a significant disadvantage and possibly more difficult to deal with than overt antagonism. There is a vast difference between being treated with courtesy and being taken seriously. I felt a huge frustration for most of my first term because whenever I spoke at a council meeting everyone would be politely quiet, and as soon as I had finished they would get on with the meeting. I was by no means alone in this feeling.¹⁶⁸ Even framing an opinion as a motion was not always useful as that too could languish if no support was forthcoming. A councillor who for her first six months was the only woman on council noted that her male colleagues “rarely seconded any motion that I put forward.” She found that on a one-to-one basis the men were courteous, supportive and willing to discuss issues, but in a formal situation were not prepared to be seen as the supporter of a female opinion.¹⁶⁹ Put-downs were, while possibly not intended, a common experience. Being prompted by another councillor “you’re quite an intelligent woman, what do you think?” left one councillor in no doubt where his opinion of most women fell, and while pleased to be seen as ‘quite an intelligent woman’ it was, to her, a clear case of being damned with faint praise. She believed that for a long time she had to go on proving that she knew what she was talking about, in order to continue to be recognised as a ‘sensible woman’.¹⁷⁰

Nonetheless, many women had some sympathy for the male councillors, believing that they had the problem of not knowing how to cope with this new phenomenon, and needed time to work it out. Rightly or wrongly, several women believed the men stereotyped them: “they thought I wouldn’t know much”¹⁷¹ and “I doubt they thought I had a brain until I got to the stage where I would debate an issue.”¹⁷² Another who was the lone female but, unlike most of her male colleagues, had faced an election felt herself to be at a disadvantage because “the other councillors and the staff believed I would not have the knowledge or the political nous to be effective.”¹⁷³ Sufficient understanding and ability to win an election was apparently not seen as

¹⁶⁸ Nora Faulks-Beck uses almost the same words, and Jocelyn Fish and Jenny Wilson make very similar comments. Two of the reporters also commented on the ‘polite silence’ commonly afforded to the women, but which did not include any apparent attention.

¹⁶⁹ Dorothy Booth, questionnaire.

¹⁷⁰ Muriel Jones, questionnaire.

¹⁷¹ Jocelyn Fish, questionnaire.

¹⁷² Colleen Twin, questionnaire.

¹⁷³ Joyce Fawcett, questionnaire.

enough to make an effective councillor. She also stated that she was later told they did not really know what to do with her, particularly in terms of appointment to committees, highlighting the sense of 'oddness' about a female – there had been years of 'doing with' a variety of male councillors.

Many of the new female councillors willingly acknowledged their own shortcomings and lack of experience, for example one felt unprepared for her role as a councillor as she had "only been a housewife and teacher". This was exacerbated for her by comparison with the only other female on council who had some legal training, providing a basis for the respect that this one felt she lacked. Her perceived inadequacy allowed the "more knowledgeable men" to intimidate her, and it was a long time before she felt she could be as assertive as she wanted to be.¹⁷⁴

Where exactly the perception of superiority of the male councillors came from is hard to pin down, but it certainly reinforced to those who were female and therefore inferior that men were the REAL decision makers. In many cases there were men who were just as new on council as the women, so it was not entirely dependent on lack of experience. There was, however, a form of group qualification to which the men had automatic claim – on average, the males would always have greater experience than the women (or most often, woman). In various forms, the solidarity of the men is reported by many of the women: being "not part of the old boys' network"¹⁷⁵ and another who "refused to be drawn into the [male] power play and lobbying, and remained independently issue-motivated."¹⁷⁶ One described the situation as difficult for women alone or not: "...it is a male dominated area, and the men just don't want to accept women."¹⁷⁷ This was reinforced by a higher authority than the council when, at a Counties Conference in the 1980s, the then Minister for Local Government told the assembled delegates that all the women present should be at home doing their ironing.¹⁷⁸

The view of the 'them and us' (or more often 'us and her') attitude among the male councillors was not simply in the women's imagination. A reporter observing council meetings about four years after the first woman had been elected could see it

¹⁷⁴ Rae Collins, questionnaire.

¹⁷⁵ Muriel Jones, questionnaire.

¹⁷⁶ Peg Liddell, questionnaire.

¹⁷⁷ Dorothy Booth, questionnaire.

¹⁷⁸ Quoted by Dorothy Booth, questionnaire.

still in operation. "...the whole thing was just blokey.... There seemed to be this level of 'we'll tolerate her'...I'm not suggesting there wasn't some respect for her...but there seemed to be this level of tolerance which they didn't share amongst themselves – I mean this was an interloper in their little blokey club."¹⁷⁹ The woman on this council herself noted that she felt she was being treated differently only for the first year or so "until they relaxed." Ironically, she believed she had achieved a good degree of acceptance by the time this observation was made by the reporter.¹⁸⁰

Two of the reporters commented quite strongly on the level of effort put in by female councillors. They were convinced that the female worked harder to establish a good background knowledge of issues in readiness for debate at meetings. They also related this to the need to prove competence where it was not expected of a female. Many of the female councillors were aware of the added burden that what they did (or did not do) was taken as a reflection of all women. A "token woman" quoted in *Politics and Porridge* sums up the anxiety felt by many of the county women:

You have a very high visibility. People notice any mistake you make much more readily. And your mistake is not only your mistake it's a mistake of women as a whole. Now if a woman politician says something bizarre or stupid, you can hear people say 'I would never vote for a woman'. If they said that about every bizarre and stupid comment which was made by a male politician we wouldn't have any.¹⁸¹

This feeling of responsibility for the reputation of 'all women' was widespread, expressed in various forms by several of the respondents. Twenty-one of the 33 believe they spent more time on council work than most of the male councillors, by reading the documentation thoroughly as well as canvassing ratepayer opinion. This they saw as a contrast to many of their male colleagues: "Most of the male councillors did not read the papers [documentation sent to councillors prior to meetings] and made judgements on the day. On the other hand some spent a lot of time on the phone – gossiping and politicking to keep their electorate support alive."¹⁸² More bluntly, another compared the work ethic of her male colleagues even

¹⁷⁹ Philippa Stevenson, interview December 9 2003.

¹⁸⁰ Jocelyn Fish, questionnaire.

¹⁸¹ Stephens and Upton, p 36.

¹⁸² Colleen Twin, questionnaire. A very similar comment was made by Anne Flutey, questionnaire.

less favourably: “I read my minutes, did my homework, came to council meetings prepared etc, and did not go to sleep after lunch!”¹⁸³ Again, this was supported by the observation of reporters, “... the overriding thing was that you did your homework and a lot of the men didn’t and it was very obvious....a lot of them thought you were lightweight and didn’t know what you were talking about. When in actual fact you did and they didn’t.”¹⁸⁴ One woman, somewhat more optimistic than most, believes her example rubbed off on at least some of the men: “[I was] effective and hardworking, brought issues to the table and several [of the male councillors] had to lift their performance.”¹⁸⁵

Few female councillors experienced situations of overt hostility, although these did happen and had to be survived. One woman, having been verbally attacked at some length by a male councillor who “ranted and raved”, was “acutely embarrassed and really hurt and upset” at the savagery of this public humiliation, but vowed never to let it happen again. She felt herself to be usefully toughened by the experience.¹⁸⁶ In less dramatic form other women commented on their need to stand their ground, defend their opinions and if necessary put up with personally aimed rudeness.¹⁸⁷ They too commented that this provided useful motivation to be at all times well informed on background information as well as ratepayer opinion.

But not all women encountered behaviour they felt was discriminatory or uncomfortable. One Waikato council (Waipa) was seen by the two female councillors and the press reporter as providing an environment of gender equality. Katherine O’Regan was elected in 1977 as the first woman on this council, and describes it as a very positive experience: “ ...I was lucky not to meet the intense discrimination that many other women had experienced in similar situations. However there is a tendency for men to promote each other for ‘jobs’ while women are overlooked, ignored. This was solved for me when self-promotion became a necessity.”¹⁸⁸ This view was echoed by the second woman to be elected to this same council two years later. She notes no discrimination, no bad language, the men were “unfailingly polite, opened doors for us, poured drinks and considered us all to be

¹⁸³ Jenny Rowan, questionnaire.

¹⁸⁴ Gay Belton, interview 1 December 2003.

¹⁸⁵ Heather Little, questionnaire.

¹⁸⁶ Margaret Moir, questionnaire.

¹⁸⁷ Examples in questionnaires of Jenny Wilson, Peg Liddell, Jocelyn Fish.

¹⁸⁸ Katherine O’Regan “The Thread is Politics” in Margaret Clark (ed.), pp 149-50.

councillors rather than men and women.”¹⁸⁹ Another woman on a different council is also quite clear about the lack of discrimination; her situation may have been influenced by her position as second woman elected onto a council where the first was described by the reporter as “pretty much useless, and often [she] made quite silly statements”.¹⁹⁰ The comparison may well have helped, but the second woman (who described her predecessor much more kindly than did the reporter) had several factors in her favour which might have allowed her to become part of the ‘us’ in council. She had lived all her life in the district, and was both a member of and married into long established local farming families. Differences between women may have helped some females become part of – or closer to – the male clique. One councillor who felt she was not taken seriously for the four and a half years during which she was the sole female found this changed when a second woman was elected. Her new colleague displayed “strong feminism”¹⁹¹ which the men found very uncomfortable, and their attitude to what might be seen as the lesser of two evils became very much more accepting. The senior female councillor was not only aware of the enhanced respect which she suddenly gained, but also the clear difference between the attitude of her colleagues to herself and to the new ‘feminist’ councillor.

Other women have commented that relative newness to the district was stated quite explicitly as a reason for “not understanding”.¹⁹² On more than one occasion I was told to talk to Dudley (my husband, and long time local farmer) as he would be able ‘explain things’ to me. I did, and Dudley was completely baffled as to what it was he was supposed to tell me that I apparently did not know. It seemed to me, and to others who had similar experiences, that this was a last resort reaction when there was little basis on which a female argument or suggestion could logically be negated. One of the reporters makes a similar observation when she suggested that at times the female’s point of view was disagreed with simply because it came from a woman, and related her conversation with the female councillor which went along the lines of “I’ve suggested that three times and now a bloke’s suggested it so they’re taking it up.”¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Bunny Mortimer, questionnaire.

¹⁹⁰ Mary Ann Gill, interview 28 January 2004.

¹⁹¹ Ann Lewis, questionnaire.

¹⁹² Jocelyn Fish, questionnaire. Jocelyn notes that she had lived in the district for more than 20 years she but was more than once reminded that she was the only ‘non-native born’ councillor.

¹⁹³ Philippa Stevenson, interview 9 December 2003.

It certainly seems clear that a combination of relative newness to the district (in comparison to those who had lived and farmed there for decades) and not being a visible part of the farming community counted against women. The two women on the Waipa County quoted above were both long time residents and both had a relatively high profile in farming terms. One grew up on a local farm and married into another local farming family, the other was highly respected as a conservationist and the driving force in a well-known local arboretum. Another woman who reported no discrimination – or at least being well able to hold her own at council - had been the district health nurse for many years prior to election.¹⁹⁴ Not only would this provide a respected status in the community, but also a degree of authority – it did not pay to argue with the district health nurse, and she provided a vital and highly respected service.

Age was a factor which sometimes influenced male acceptance of female councillors. The district health nurse quoted above was also considerably older than most of her council. The only member of her council older than her was the chairman, thus giving her some status by virtue of both reputation and seniority.¹⁹⁵ Another councillor reporting no discrimination was elected as one of a group of six new councillors (the other five all being male) all of whom were aged close to 40, making them many years younger than the three sitting councillors. This new group brought with them a youthful solidarity and were not about to let the previous status quo dictate how they operated.¹⁹⁶ Few of the women who responded to my questionnaire commented on their age relative to that of the other councillors, but those who did noted that they were one of the youngest on their council, or were part of a small group of councillors younger than the majority.¹⁹⁷

The ‘traditions’ of council have already been referred to in terms of what is and is not council ‘core business’. Any person coming into a new situation will be faced with the need to fit into the status quo and to understand the established culture. This certainly pertained in council chambers, as previously described, and applied not only to what was taken seriously but also how things were to be done. In most councils, a form of collective responsibility was clearly understood – votes could be recorded

¹⁹⁴ Barbara Fisher, interview 7 April 2004.

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ Noeleen Buckland, questionnaire. She reported the advantage of having “only 3 old farts”.

¹⁹⁷ Jenny Wilson, Katrina Gardiner, Robyn Grigg, Sue Lane.

against a motion if requested, but with the decision came a recognition that the debate was ended, both inside the council chamber and outside it.¹⁹⁸ Nevertheless some local traditions overruled the generally accepted codes of democracy. One woman described her experience:

In applications for loans (can't recall who from) we had to state how many councillors had voted for and against the proposal. It was always hinted that we would not get the loan if there had not been unanimity among councillors. However I knew that the proposal did not have general approval among the population and that a unanimous vote FOR the loan would in no way represent the views of my constituents – so I voted against it – a lone vote. The chairman was horrified; called an adjournment for tea and came over to me looking like thunder, saying what did I think I was doing etc etc. So I told him I was there to represent the views of my ratepayers et al, not to represent the County view to the people out there – so off he went huffing.... And the County got the loan anyway. I presumed a myth had grown up about the need for a unanimous vote and I had disproven it --- and kept faith with my voters.¹⁹⁹

A major tradition which many of the female councillors fell foul of was the 'jobs for boys' process. Most county councils operated a system of sub-committees which met separately from full council each month and made recommendations to council for specific areas of responsibility.²⁰⁰ Typically these were finance, planning, roads/engineering, parks and reserves, various social services, dogs and weeds. There existed a definite hierarchy among these committees; those associated with finance and engineering were the 'plums', with dogs, weeds and social services at the lower end of the scale. Some councils operated a system of rotation so that all councillors had one term on each committee and moved on, but in the majority appointments were made by the chairman, usually on an annual basis. The committee appointments recorded by the women who responded to my questionnaire reveal a fairly even distribution across the various categories, although less than half of them ever chaired

¹⁹⁸ Commented on by many women in their questionnaires. See also the comment by a county councillor in Grant, p 34.

¹⁹⁹ Jocelyn Fish, questionnaire.

²⁰⁰ Of the 27 councils included in the responses I received, 17% did not use the sub-committee system; for most of those, additional full council meetings were held to fulfil the functions carried out in other counties by sub-committees.

a committee. Of the committee chairmanships held, nearly 70 percent were in the social categories of housing, parks, and various local services, with the remaining 30 percent being planning and finance. Several of the women noted their frustration at being ‘typecast’ into the more social service areas, while others expressed stronger views that this was so, and they were denied membership on the more ‘serious’ committees even when they had relevant experience or qualification: “It took me three years to get on the finance committee in spite of my Economics degree.” The same woman, however, acknowledged that her gender was an advantage in making her “the obvious choice for county representation on things like the Library, Council of Social Services etc.”²⁰¹ It must be noted that many of the women had a real interest in social issues, and had done prior to being elected, so their inclusion on these committees was welcomed; it was being limited to only these that disappointed them.

Contrary to my chairman’s stated opinion that I was too young and junior for a committee chair,²⁰² I experienced an example of the Hallowell ‘no other option’ theory – in which women will be accepted into roles that no-one else wants.²⁰³ During my second term, a New Zealand-wide local government computer consortium was established and it became apparent we needed to look seriously at becoming part of this. None of my colleagues had any experience with computing, and none had any wish to become involved with something about which they had neither knowledge nor interest. As I had had previous experience in the computer industry I said I would be willing to take a role, and the suggestion was taken up with much relief; apparently I was neither too young nor too junior to be chairman of *that* committee.

There is no doubt that seniority (length of time on council to a greater degree than age) was used as a criterion for allocation of jobs and roles. Other measures such as specific experience or qualification, and level of polling success also rated, but all of these enjoyed a significant degree of flexibility depending on the situation. A woman who topped the poll at her second election noted that she was not offered the position of deputy council chairman, nor was she allocated a committee chairmanship.²⁰⁴ Another noted that she polled higher than the sitting county chairman at her first

²⁰¹ Muriel Jones, questionnaire.

²⁰² I was neither the youngest nor the most recently elected, and the male who was both was already a committee chairman.

²⁰³ Hallowell, p 514, refer earlier discussion in Chapter 2, p 21.

²⁰⁴ Jenny Rowan, questionnaire.

election, and believed because of that she “was lucky to be on any committee whatsoever!”²⁰⁵ In her six years on council she was allocated places on the Housing for the Elderly and Parks and Reserves committees, and represented the county on the local hospital advisory committee.

Soon after being elected at a by-election, a South Island councillor requested support from her council to attend a WEL conference aimed at encouraging and assisting women to enter local government. This was held in Auckland, and the county councillor had heard that a neighbouring borough had voted financial assistance to their female councillors to enable them to attend. Such requests were not uncommon; it was recognised that training for local government was not available in any structured form at that time, and had to be accessed individually, as and when possible. This woman was less surprised that her request was turned down than she was by the reason given – that the chairman considered “such a seminar would only confuse” her. She attended anyway, using her own funds, and found it a most useful investment.²⁰⁶

This hierarchical system of allocating roles within council seems to be a tradition unique to local government. Using the Dairy Board as an example, it is clear that an elected group of farmers – or at least dairy farmers - could and did operate in a highly egalitarian manner. The system which applied on the Dairy Board in the 1980s had been deliberately designed to introduce and provide experience for new board members. Each board member was assigned an area of responsibility, either a region of the world where New Zealand dairy produce was marketed, or a specialised product group. New board members were assigned along with a more experienced ‘buddy’ who was able to introduce the new member to the important people and marketing contacts in the area, and mentor him until he was fully involved. This gave all board members a first hand understanding of the functions and international involvement of the business for which they held governance roles. All but two of the 13 board members were farmers, the other two being government appointees, and the chairman was elected from among the farmer-members. Seniority held no status, nor was any differentiation made between elected farmer members and those appointed

²⁰⁵ Pamela Jennens, questionnaire.

²⁰⁶ Elaine Taylor, questionnaire.

by government. At the time there were no women on the Dairy Board. These came in the following decade, and were integrated in exactly the same manner.²⁰⁷

The role of a councillor pertains as much outside the council chamber and beyond the council meetings as it does within. As councillors, the women interacted with staff and residents of the district, as well as with social groups such as their own family and friends and the spouses of other councillors.

Almost all the women commented favourably on the attitude of members of the county staff. Some experienced an initial period during which it seemed the staff, particularly the senior members, treated them with caution or condescension, but generally this passed more quickly than did the similar attitude of fellow councillors. One summed up the experience saying “Initially the County Clerk used words of one syllable, but later discovered this was not necessary.”²⁰⁸ One other woman felt that she was “not always listened to seriously by staff” and gave no indication that this changed over time, but this was the only case among all the respondents.²⁰⁹ Several commented very positively in regard to the support and assistance that was provided by staff, exemplified by one who noted that staff were “very helpful in providing information in preparation for debates” and believed that this reflected an understanding of the difficulties faced in the council chamber.²¹⁰ This was clearly claimed by one who stated that she had no doubt that staff “took the trouble to work harder for the two women councillors because they understood how the male councillors were not being helpful.”²¹¹ It was not only the male councillors who were less than whole-heartedly helpful. This same woman related her experience early in her time on council when she was deliberately left in ignorance by the whole meeting. On behalf of a large ratepayer group, she presented a petition seeking replacement of a bridge which had been declared unsafe. She had studied the use of the bridge, argued a “good case” for the work and was delighted when \$10,000 was agreed for the project, until the county engineer approached her after the meeting, and laughingly told her “You will have to work hard on that one.” She had “no

²⁰⁷ Sir James Graham, interview, 16 April 2004.

²⁰⁸ Jocelyn Fish, questionnaire.

²⁰⁹ Nora Faulks-Beck, questionnaire

²¹⁰ Muriel Jones, questionnaire.

²¹¹ Elaine Taylor, questionnaire.

knowledge about costs of bridges, but the more experienced male councillors [and the engineer] were fully aware that \$10,000 was not enough to complete the work.”²¹²

Staff dynamics seemed to be a common issue which impacted on female councillors. Several of the women responding to my questionnaire commented on the position of the county engineer as one of significant power. This relates to the origins and *raison d'être* of counties already alluded to – roads, drains and bridges were all-important giving the engineer and his²¹³ staff a status not enjoyed by their urban counterparts. Conversely the county clerk's status was diminished relative to that of a borough or city clerk because a large proportion of the mana was expropriated by the engineer. This led, in many counties, to a power struggle between these two positions which often involved both of them endeavouring to establish themselves as a member of the male 'us' of council. Where the women were already at a disadvantage because they were seen as 'the other', the problem was exacerbated by alienation (albeit usually very polite alienation) by one or both of the senior staff members.²¹⁴ In one case this was highlighted by the fact that the county clerk was female; the sole female councillor “got on very well with the clerk, but the county engineer was another matter!”²¹⁵

A problem comparable to that which sparked the 'toilet debate' attended the dilemma of how to address a female councillor. In meetings and any formal setting, members of council were customarily addressed as 'Councillor Smith', but both staff and male councillors seemed to find this not entirely acceptable when the councillor was female. Used to the informality of the farm - and offices in Wellington - this discussion came as another surprise to me. I suggested 'Sue' would fine, but was completely ignored and the debate finally finished with the decision to try Councillor Mrs Lane for a while. How long and what criteria of evaluation would be applied were not defined. Many of the respondents to the questionnaire noted this difficulty and they continued to be “er - Councillor Mrs...”, or “Mrs - er - Councillor...” (or worse, introduced as “this is our lady councillor”²¹⁶) Another woman had to insist on being addressed as “Councillor” (as were her male colleagues) rather than “Madam

²¹² Elaine Taylor, questionnaire.

²¹³ I have found no evidence of any female county engineers; a few women held the position of county clerk.

²¹⁴ Nora Faulks-Beck, Jenny Rowan, Sue Lane, questionnaires.

²¹⁵ Jenny Rowan, questionnaire.

²¹⁶ Dorothy Booth, Joyce Fawcett, Joyce Crowley, Elaine Taylor, questionnaires.

Councillor” which she felt differentiated her too much from the rest of the male team.²¹⁷ A common experience was receiving invitations to county related functions heavily twinkled out where “Councillor and Mrs” had been typed and replaced by an ever-changing variety of alternatives. It was not at all uncommon to receive letters from the county office addressed to “Councillor Mrs...” and beginning “Dear Sir”.²¹⁸ While this was no doubt more a slip of the word processing mail merge than any intended slight, it certainly did nothing to repair already dented egos.

But generally members of staff below the two top jobs were friendly and helpful. At the time there was little legislation aimed at protecting employees, and staff, particularly female members of staff, approached their female councillor with work related problems in the belief that they would receive a more sympathetic hearing than from other councillors or even their own (male) superiors. Many female councillors recognised the value of the more junior staff members and gained useful background and information from planners, dog rangers, road workers - those who were directly involved in the work of the county and in carrying out the decisions of council. The sequel to the story quoted earlier where a female councillor had won the battle for bridge funding but at a level recognised as too low to complete the job, demonstrates the value of good relationships with staff, as well as the understanding of staff for council dynamics. That councillor found she “had an ally in the Engineering Dept.” who personally took up the project and managed it via a series of small contracts so that it was in fact achieved for no more than the apparently inadequate granted amount.²¹⁹ Of course many of the male councillors also developed useful relationships with staff members, but one woman noted that she was one of the few councillors who went to staff social functions; “other councillors felt it was demeaning to mix with staff.”²²⁰

A similar situation applied to relationships with ratepayers. In answer to the question “Did you feel you were treated differently by electors/ratepayers because of your gender?” the vast majority replied “No”, or stated a positive difference. Four expressed some initial wariness on the part of the electorate, but all said this had disappeared by the end of their first term. The votes of female supporters had often

²¹⁷ Grant, p 34.

²¹⁸ Muriel Jones, Sue Lane, questionnaires.

²¹⁹ Elaine Taylor, questionnaire.

²²⁰ Colleen Twin, questionnaire.

been critical in achieving success at first election, but approval from male voters at least equated that from females by the second election.²²¹ Advantages of being female in respect of on-going interaction with electors included having more time (i.e. not in full-time employment or working full days on the farm), being ‘more approachable’ and having an apparently greater ability and/or willingness to understand the issues behind complaints and requests.²²² This is a little surprising as many respondents mentioned in some form the difficulty of making and maintaining contact with male residents – in those days women were unlikely to be members of Federated Farmers and very rarely attended discussion groups or other on-farm meetings. Thus they were denied regular access to the forums of which most of the male councillors were an integral part.

Overall, most of the women found the going fairly tough and some were surprised at just how tough it was. Almost universally it was recognised that hard work and careful preparation would help to gain respect – or certainly that lack of either would reinforce the dismissive attitude of male colleagues. Over 60 percent of the women respondents considered they spent more time on council business than most of their male colleagues, an opinion shared by all of the reporters interviewed. Nevertheless, many of the women expressed appreciation of the situation of their male colleagues, and gave credit where it was due. One very specific comment relates being told by a male colleague during a heated debate “That is your criticism, what is your constructive suggestion?” She describes this as a “huge favour” and disciplined herself thereafter always to provide both.²²³ Other women relate positive comments made about them by their male counterparts, such as “you always did your homework” and “you were a breath of fresh air”²²⁴, but it seems this positive feedback was all given after 1989, when the reality of having to deal with a woman in men’s territory was no longer an issue for them. The comparable retrospective view of the women was somewhat less charitable, the majority opinion being summed up by one councillor who simply said “It seems that men in positions of responsibility lose their sense of humour, they can be very pompous.”²²⁵ Not all by any means, but certainly some. For the women in the council chamber, the relative numbers who did

²²¹ Jocelyn Fish, Jenny Rowan, Peg Liddell, questionnaires.

²²² Joyce Fawcett, Kate Mickelson, Joyce Crowley, questionnaires, Robyn Grigg, interview, 11 June 2004.

²²³ Muriel Jones, questionnaire.

²²⁴ Margaret Moir, Joyce Fawcett, Peg Liddell, questionnaires.

²²⁵ Colleen Twin, questionnaire.

and did not fit that description meant a great difference in the quality of their council experience.



THAT'S ACTUALLY A VERY GOOD SUGGESTION MRS. BROWN. NOW WHICH OF YOU GENTLEMEN WOULD LIKE TO SUGGEST IT?

The above cartoon has been recreated for this thesis by Scott Pearson, a Hamilton illustrator. The original was described by several of the women who responded to the questionnaire, and by one of the reporters. They said they 'might be able to find a copy in their files somewhere', but alas, none of them could. I could not find any record of the original in any archives in New Zealand, and thus am unable to acknowledge the source.²²⁶

Those who remembered the original have seen this recreation and verify that it accurately represents their recollection. They, and several others who had not seen the original, were delighted by this depiction of the underlying message – that if a suggestion was good or valid, it simply must have come from one of the male councillors.

²²⁶ At the very last minute a copy was found. The original was published February 9 1988 in *The Bulletin*. The cartoonist's name is not clear, but is, I think, Duncan. As the copy is not of good definition I have retained the use of this recreated version which does have the same message, but in the context of a county meeting rather than that of the business meeting of the original.

Stories from the Women's Room

As already indicated, by far the majority of female county councillors were the sole female on a council of men, often with an all male senior county staff. Thus any occasion when it was possible to be together with other women in similar circumstances was a special joy. These times were grasped as opportunities to spend time with those who understood the difficulties and loneliness; to relax, to laugh and generally bolster flagging spirits. The decade of the 1980s was a time when effort was being put into encouraging women to go into local and national government, and seminars and conferences were organised by groups such as WEL and Women in Agriculture to get this message across. County conferences, which were formal national gatherings of delegates from all counties, were not well attended by women, largely because their councils were reluctant to nominate them as one of the two official delegates, or to support their attendance as an observer.²²⁷ Smaller regional meetings were also held, where geographical groupings of county staff and councillors met two or three times a year.

Gatherings of women within the mixed forums were not popular with the male majority,²²⁸ so they were kept low-key, and held discreetly. Mostly we would find a private space, get in some wine and cheese and avoid the bar where our male colleagues happily indulged in just the same sort of networking that they found discomfiting when women did it. We needed separation from the 'old boys' and their networks, we definitely believed we needed the wine, and we certainly needed the privacy as the laughter was seldom quiet.

These occasions provided the opportunity to share anecdotes and battle stories, taking relief in being able to air them in a supportive environment. Many of the experiences had been really painful at the time, so the sharing and laughter were a way of knowing it was just as tough for others, of healing the hurt and being able to go back into the fray and get on with the job. This chapter records some of these stories. It

²²⁷ All counties sent two councillors as delegates, and usually a third councillor as non-voting observer. Most County Clerks and County Engineers also attended, but did not have speaking or voting rights.

²²⁸ Jenny Rowan, questionnaire: "... the men just couldn't cope [with the knowledge that the few women present were meeting in a corner of the venue during a break]... such was the threat!"

must be acknowledged that that each is a 'one-off' and therefore not truly of historical significance. But they are, nevertheless, examples of experiences that typified the predicament in which lone female councillors found themselves; struggling to find ways to be effective as a people's representative, and repeatedly dealing with one obstacle only to be confronted by another. They are also small illustrations of some of the theories described in chapter two, developed from research both within New Zealand and overseas.

The 'toilet debates' which greeted many of the 'first females' at their inaugural meeting have already been noted. In a variation on this, one woman suffered a baptism of fire in terms of embarrassment, although this was almost certainly not the intention:

At my very first council meeting the Engineer went to the toilet during the meeting and came back into the room and said "Mr Chairman, I know things are different now that we have a woman on Council, but this is taking things to extremes!" The Chairman looked at the Engineer who refused to enlarge and so he went to have a look. He came back just overwhelmed with laughter and finally explained that the urinal cistern had needed a small repair and the local plumber had come in and placed a chair in front of the urinal to fix it as it was up high – he had left the room to go and get something from his van and the engineer had at that moment gone to use the urinal! The implication of course being that as a woman I would need a chair to use the urinal. I have to say I was just so embarrassed and blushed and blushed and blushed...²²⁹

The woman involved could see the funny side, but the incident illustrates something about the sensitivity of the men, and their readiness to share a joke among themselves at what must have been the obvious discomfort of the sole female present, who was an outsider in terms of both newness and gender. Not surprisingly, this same woman stated that she felt that one of the real essentials for survival on the council was a sense of humour!

There were also times when being treated altogether *too* equally was a shock. One woman described the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the formation of her

²²⁹ Margaret Moir, questionnaire.

county. All councillors were presented with a set of suitably monogrammed cufflinks. "It was suggested I could turn them into earrings or a brooch perhaps. I did neither."²³⁰ It is unlikely that a male has ever been given a pair of earrings with the suggestion that he turn them into cufflinks. This and the many examples of the toilet debate point to the complete acceptance by the male majority that this was a man's world, and any women present simply had to cope with that. Changes were not readily made to accommodate what was seen as an intrusion.

Social occasions were, for many, uncomfortable experiences. Several women have noted the value of the support they had from their husbands, and this was very much so in social situations. The male councillors were often not good at socialising with women, but in some cases their wives were not keen to welcome a female councillor. I had the impression with more than one of the wives of my colleagues that my presence on council somehow lowered the status of their husbands, so social relations with either group was to some extent strained for the first few years. Not so for my husband; the male councillors were more than happy to gather him into their circle – he had the advantage not only of being male but of having been a farmer in the district for a long time, and he fitted the accepted mould of councillor better than I did. This was brought home very clearly during a trip the council took to Taranaki, visiting other county councils places of interest. "Wives" were invited to accompany us, so I told my husband I would not survive five days in those circumstances without him. He came, and gained a first hand understanding of my difficulties as a result.

Our first stop was at Mokau where the local councillors (Clifton County) met us and were to show us their back roads. These were spectacular in that the country was very steep and unstable, and the roads unsealed. As we were having afternoon tea prior to the trip over the back roads, our chairman came to me and told me that 'the girls' were continuing in the bus direct to our accommodation, would I like to go with them. I said no I wouldn't do that as I was present at the ratepayers expense and wanted to see the things we had come to learn about, namely these problem roads. "Oh" said the chairman, "but we are going in cars, if you come there won't be room for Dudley." Somewhat taken aback I told him that was fine, I was the councillor, my husband was not. He'd go in the bus with the other spouses. The chairman

²³⁰ Joyce Fawcett, questionnaire.

was clearly not a bit pleased to hear this, and went off to huddle with his deputy and the Clifton chairman. Five minutes later he was back, much relieved, to tell me all was well, one more could be squeezed into the cars, so both of us could go.

Later in this same trip it became clear that the chairman was delegating to each of our councillors the task of presenting the 'thank you' speech at the various councils and sites we visited. I noticed that all other councillors had performed this duty, two of them twice, but I had not yet been asked. As we left the New Plymouth Power Station, I mentioned to the chairman that I could see the task was being shared around and assured him I would be happy to take my turn. His response was polite but unenthusiastic, and I was curious to see if anything would come of my offer. It did when we visited a large Taranaki dairy company. Up until then the chairman had simply introduced the councillor as "Councillor Jones, a dairy farmer and councillor for the [whichever] riding will say a few words on our behalf." On this occasion he took some trouble to explain that councillors were taking it in turns to give the vote of thanks. He then introduced my husband who was at that time chairman of the Milk Board. Having introduced *him* (to the point where we both had the impression he was going to be asked to give the thanks) the chairman finally said "and Sue is his wife and is going to thank you today."²³¹

This anecdote highlights how invisibility could be very effectively constructed even when the female councillor was perfectly visible. It also illustrates several of the influences described in the research quoted earlier. The chairman in this case simply could not bring himself to introduce a female in what he considered to be a male role. He was, at the time, aged probably around 70 and could be fairly described as an old-fashioned gentleman. He was never overtly rude, and was normally very courteous. But his interaction with his female councillor was quite different to that with other councillors, and with the husband of his female councillor. It was often painfully clear that he had a problem with the conflict he felt between his social attitude toward women and the need to recognise one as a councillor. His habits of a lifetime overcame the 'modern' need to deal with a female intruder into his male world, and he was by no means alone in this difficulty. One of the women respondents who said

²³¹ Sue Lane, questionnaire.

she never suffered any discrimination in the council chamber suggested that this was because she was first elected at the same time as five men, and all six of these new councillors were aged 40 or younger: “We were really lucky as we only had three old farts.”²³² Enjoying the egalitarian environment that applied in her own council, she was aware that others were treated quite differently, and why.

Mention has already been made of the habit of some male councillors to indulge in an after-lunch snooze. This was widespread, and many of the women who filled out the questionnaire - as well as the reporters and the employee who were interviewed - commented on the formidable lunches, the afternoon snoozing and the attitude to council meeting as a ‘day out’. There is no evidence to suggest that any county council meetings were held other than during the day – beginning at 9:30 or 10am and concluding around 5pm, almost always with drinks after the meeting was closed. Food was an important item in the ‘day out’ and while morning and afternoon teas were substantial, “the dreadful midday dinner”²³³ was quite staggering. A common tradition was to adjourn to the local pub and have a roast dinner – at least two courses – with beer or whisky. Hardly surprising that the afternoon session of the meeting was accompanied by gentle snores and a lot of ‘Oh um, could you repeat that..?’ Many of the women related their efforts to change both the cost and the effect of this midday meal; moves that were not greeted with enthusiasm.²³⁴ One woman felt very awkward having a sandwich and fruit juice while her colleagues tucked into their drinks and roast dinners, and would have gone home for lunch had her husband not disagreed with her doing that.²³⁵ Over time, many managed to introduce a lighter (and less expensive) lunch served on site, but unfortunately the snoozing habit seemed to have become established.²³⁶

Women were very aware of the need to demonstrate their ability to ‘foot it’; to understand issues, finances and be able to hold their own in a debate without a hint of ‘becoming emotional’. This was something of a two edged sword, and there was a very fine line between being sensible and being too clever. The same woman who would have preferred to go home for lunch did do that during one meeting, as she

²³² Noeleen Buckland, questionnaire.

²³³ Robyn Grigg, questionnaire.

²³⁴ Robyn Grigg, Jenny Rowan, Jenny Wilson, Joyce Fawcett, Sue Lane, questionnaires.

²³⁵ Neroli Osborne, questionnaire.

²³⁶ Joyce Fawcett, Dorothy Booth, Robyn Grigg, Sue Lane, questionnaires. Gay Belton, interview, 1 December 2003.

wanted to phone a ratepayer's solicitor for clarification of details relating to a planning matter that was being discussed. She made the call and gained the information she wanted before returning for the afternoon session. Appraised of this additional information, the council decision was influenced her way, but "the chairman was not amused!!"²³⁷ A similar reaction was experienced by another woman who took the trouble – and used her own contacts – to ensure she was well informed:

The County Engineer, who was also the County Planner, saw a [battering from an unpredicted wind later classified as a cyclone] as a catastrophe and wanted to bring in some new (to us) Standards building regulations pertaining to High Wind areas; it would have put up costs of farm buildings and houses in the affected area so was very unpopular with farmers. But the Engineer argued that the County would be liable if this was not instituted and it seemed this would be agreed by council. I went to Wellington about that time and discussed this with my Standards Council friend/NCW member. She instantly made an appointment for me to see the engineer at Standards to discuss the problem. He hooted with laughter when he heard of how [this council] was using the Wind Standards information; said the special High Wind classification was not for the odd burst but was for super – and constantly – windy places such as Wellington Heads and Foveaux Strait etc.

So at the next county meeting I relayed this to the meeting and the engineer and everyone else was struck dumb – especially at a woman commenting on such a topic. The engineer suggested – sotto voce – that my view should be disregarded, but the chairman said it was valid information offered by an elected councillor and must be heeded."²³⁸

A female councillor needed to overcome the expectation that she would be dumb or silly, but being intelligent and resourceful required careful handling.

The private sessions of 'laugh and therapy' provided a forum in which to share not only the humour of funny stories but also suggestions for coping. Mention has already been made of the need to be thorough and careful in preparation for meetings.

²³⁷ Neroli Osborne, questionnaire.

²³⁸ Jocelyn Fish, questionnaire.

The group shared a wealth of experience in dealing with legislation, particularly in relation to the various – and constantly changing - planning Acts and legislation regarding the financial responsibilities of councils. Some of these informal meetings came close to training sessions as the women described things each of them had discovered ‘the hard way’, in the hope that the knowledge would make life easier for their colleagues. This also applied to meeting procedure itself, as a good understanding of the rules of parliamentary procedure was often the only way to overcome being continually ignored. Knowing that a valid procedural challenge could come from a female councillor certainly helped to focus a chairman’s mind. It did not always work, however, as I found to my cost:

Meetings of our council were scheduled to start at 9:30am. This meant a major rush if I was milking, and/or feeding calves, as I usually did. But often I would complete about three hours work, get showered and changed, grab a quick breakfast if I was lucky and be at the council chamber by 9:30, only to find the meeting didn’t start until 15 or 20 minutes later because the county engineer was not present. I was in no doubt that this was our engineer’s way of exerting his ‘authority’, and could see absolutely no validity in either his behaviour, or the response of the chairman in delaying the meeting. Encouraged by women from other councils, I finally became sufficiently annoyed by this charade to move a motion to the effect that this being a publicly notified meeting (as it was required to be) it should start at the advertised time, or as soon thereafter as a quorum of the council were present. The motion was greeted with stunned silence, and finally the chairman pointed out that “we wait for the engineer, and the engineer is a busy man.” I responded that we are all busy people and, as he is not required for a quorum, if the engineer cannot be present on time we should start without him. After another long silence, one of the councillors seconded my motion ‘pro forma’ to enable the discussion to continue and a vote to be taken. After a very short discussion the motion was put and lost, with just one vote in favour. The clerk said, almost in passing, “you don’t want that recorded in the minutes, do you?” and seeing the chairman was about to agree I said yes I did, it was a moment worthy of record that this council had, in effect, actually voted to start its meetings late. The engineer was visibly triumphant. I had not only

lost my little battle, but had, in the process, reinforced his position of power.²³⁹

Comments made outside of meetings could often be dealt with more effectively than those that were formalised by the meeting environment. 'County tours' were commonly undertaken every year; an occasion when all the council travelled around the district viewing roading works and sites of particular interest. During one of these one female councillor was asked as the bus passed her home farm "who is looking after your children?" to which she gave "a matter of fact reply and asked who was looking after his."²⁴⁰ This woman believed the enquiry was not unusual for the time, but it is doubtful the questioner felt the same about the response.

Even those rare women who became county chairmen (in this sample of 33 there were two, who between them held office for a total of four years²⁴¹) were not immune from being overlooked, or assumed to be the 'lesser half'. At a meeting with the National Roads Board (NRB), a major occasion in the life of county councils, the female County Chair was "lined up with the County Clerk (male) for introduction to the NRB representative and the NRB rep automatically stepped toward the Committee Clerk."²⁴² Even more surprising was that the chairman of a neighbouring county made a similar gaffe – counties had a high degree of involvement with each other and it seems incredible that a chairman would not be well aware of the leaders of his neighbouring counties:

On one occasion when I was County Chair we had a meeting with a neighbouring county over an issue which if we agreed to it would be to our County's disadvantage. During the lead up to the meeting the other County Chair had believed our agreement was a formality. When we had the joint meeting and he lost his motion he accused me of 'not behaving like a Gentleman'. There was huge laughter when I stood up indicating myself and said 'I take great pride in not being a Gentleman'.²⁴³

²³⁹ Sue Lane, questionnaire.

²⁴⁰ Jenny Shipley, questionnaire.

²⁴¹ Ann Lewis, Chair of Golden Bay County 1986-89 and Katrina Gardiner, Chair of Mt Herbert County 1980-81.

²⁴² Katrina Gardiner, questionnaire.

²⁴³ *ibid.*

There was also huge laughter in our group, hearing a put down that had a male on the receiving end. The county chairman interviewed for this study stated that he was pleased that his female councillor could argue a successful case without ever saying “yaboo sucks or anything like that.”²⁴⁴ It was as well he was nowhere near these private sessions because that sort of thing was said a great deal as frustrations were vented in the privacy of the all-female group.

²⁴⁴ County chairman, interview, 11 March 2004.

Conclusion

This thesis was initiated with the broad aim of examining the experience and work of female county councillors in New Zealand. The introduction referred to the frustration at the absence of reference to counties and their councillors in the various studies and histories of local government that have previously been published. Thus I hope that my research has gone some way toward filling that gap. As this study developed, it became clear that the gap was not simply an historical silence in terms of county council women, but also a lack of analysis of rural women's roles separate from the farmhouse – or more pertinently, their absence from those roles. Studies examining the contribution of rural women on farms, to voluntary organisations and in rural employment go some way toward making rural women more visible both economically and historically, but the vast majority of such work centres upon the role of women in association with their family, their farm or their work and economic contribution to the farm or family income. Involvement in elected office differs from this in that it is a decision-making, governance role, providing little or no positive contribution to anyone's income in the period under study.²⁴⁵ Almost all the women councillors who contributed to this study were in fact wives on farms; one of the interesting facets that evolved from analysis of the information they supplied is the quantum and nature of the differences they found between their two roles.

The other obvious gap is the absence of rural women in studies of women in local government. Partly because of their small numbers and partly because county government itself has enjoyed little in-depth study in New Zealand, women in boroughs and cities have attracted much more attention than has been focussed upon their rural counterparts. This is, to some extent, explained by the analysis in Chapter Two, which traces the development of counties as they evolved under legislation separate from municipalities, with quite different regulations and priorities. While cities, boroughs and counties together made up territorial local government in New

²⁴⁵ Payment to councillors was limited to mileage for travel to and from the county office, plus a very small meeting allowance – around \$15 per day. The meeting allowance varied depending on the population of the county. In the Matamata County, which was one of the larger counties, the meeting payment was sufficient to cover the cost of a relief milker for one milking but not two. The county chairman interviewed noted that payment in his early days on council was £2 per day at a time when he had a tractor and gear business that he charged out at £2/10/- per hour.

Zealand, the legislation has consistently made this a far from homogenous mix. Boroughs and cities in New Zealand have historically had major similarities, and all our municipalities have developed in a relatively short period from small colonial settlements. While varying in size they share their essential bases of compact urban populations with a local economy dependent on a variety of roles and industries. Counties, by contrast, had authority for small, sparse populations supported almost exclusively by farming. Given that around 80 percent of the population in the period of this study lived in municipalities, it is not surprising that examination of local government generally focussed on urban authorities which not only represented by far the majority of all local government, but which also had a high degree of uniformity. The 'country cousin' was tiny by comparison, and had sufficient major differences to make inclusion with municipalities either difficult or misleading.²⁴⁶

Of the 76 women identified who have ever served on county councils, only 39 could be traced. Some are no longer living and at least one chose not to respond to my questionnaire because of ill-health associated with advanced age. If ever a study of these women was to be made, now is none too soon. This alone makes the study seem worthwhile, especially in light of the enthusiasm that was widespread among the women who responded to my request for information.

The typical female county councillor was a Pakeha New Zealander, aged in her forties, married to a farmer and heavily involved in local community organisations. She had one or more children at home, was well educated but probably not to tertiary level and involved in a supporting role on the family farm. This makes her not very different from her urban colleagues on municipal councils, the salient differences being those arising from the social systems which applied in town and country. Prominent among these are employment related factors, including marital status. The rural scene in the period before 1989 offered very little paid work for women, thus a female finding herself in need of her own income would be very likely to move to town. Conversely farming required 'all hands on deck' and most family members

²⁴⁶ An inexplicable example of this is found in Grant, p 2, where an age analysis is calculated for women standing for election in 1980. Average ages are calculated for the combined group of city and borough candidates, and compared to the group standing for "counties, hospital boards and other authorities" (other authorities include licensing trusts, harbour boards and electricity authorities). There is justification, as outlined above, for not amalgamating county figures with those of city and borough councils, but hard to understand why they should be included with the even more diverse group of what seems to be 'everything else'.

living at home were to some extent involved in the farm operation. It was most unusual for wives to have no involvement. Those who were not directly involved with milking, calf-rearing, stockwork and the like were the keepers of accounts, maintainers of stock records, and all were 'message runners' – collecting supplies from town, and answering phonecalls and relaying messages in the days before cellphones.

So if the women who were involved in county governance were not very different to those on urban councils, how did their experience of local government compare? In short, very differently. In fact, the similarities as summarised above are to a large degree superficial, reflecting only demographic generalisations. The nature of this project precludes an in-depth examination of personal characteristics – this would take more time than is available, and the scope of this study does not extend to the examination of personality traits. Thus I am not able to comment in depth on such characteristics as lack of ego defensiveness and anxiety, or intelligence, dominance, adventuresomeness and unconventionality as found in overseas research discussed earlier. It is, however, fair to claim that the women who contributed to this study were willing to take risks. Offering oneself for election in a county electorate was more “adventurous and unconventional” than doing so in town because of the conservative nature of rural society and the greater likelihood of being the first woman to do so. Having said that, it is also evident that many of the women involved did not approach election as a considered risk. They saw their action as in line with the general shift in acceptance of women in governance roles,²⁴⁷ and were surprised at the degree of shock and often opposition that was generated by their candidacy. Mention has already been made of the reaction in some elections to find an alternative candidate, who was in all cases a male. For some women, this was quite a personal backlash when the alternative was a relative or close neighbour. Combined with the non-party nature of rural politics which required all candidates to individually manage their own campaigns, this left the female county council candidate in a situation where she truly had to stand on her own two feet. Anyone suffering from ego-defensiveness or anxiety would be struggling to survive the campaign, let alone a term in office.

²⁴⁷ The conclusion of a speech at a WEL seminar by Heather Little, one of the women who contributed to this thesis, summarises the attitude of women in 1977. Her speech is quoted in Grant, p 48.

In fact, many did struggle. The majority of respondents commented on how difficult all or most of their first term was as they came to grips with the culture of the council which was almost universally strange for them, and often to some degree hostile. County councils were significantly different from urban councils, and much of the difference seems to have evolved with the development of each type of authority. By the 1970s it was standard for urban councils to meet at night, allowing most urban citizens to serve on a council with little or no effect on their income earning ability. County councils met during the day, with the council meeting taking a full day and committees, or council-as-committee taking a further two or three. Only those who could regularly take days off work could afford to participate. Thus county councillors were likely to be older farmers who were either retired or semi-retired and with the financial ability to be off the farm without needing recompense. It has not been possible to find statistics giving average ages of county councillors, but anecdotal evidence suggests that they tended to be older than their urban counterparts. (“Old farts” is a term used by more than one of the women who responded to my questionnaire and two of the reporters interviewed, denoting both age group and conservative/traditional attitude.)

Mention has already been made of the difficulty women experienced trying to break into – or operate in spite of – the ‘old boys’ network’ that was very evident in most county council chambers, although by no means confined only to them. There seems to be some likelihood that this grew up with counties from historical beginnings when being a county councillor was synonymous with being part of the colonial ‘landed gentry’, and holding the associated status in the district. Several women commented on the reluctance of male councillors to fraternise with groups of county staff below senior level, and on the usefulness of this contact for themselves. The feeling of togetherness among male councillors was commented on by all the reporters, and was well recognised by female councillors. The difference in the views of this, however, was striking in terms of gender perspective – the men saw it as inclusive but the females were very conscious of the degree to which it could or did exclude the female minority. The county chairman interviewed as part of this research was very proud of the team spirit with which his council operated, referring to it several times. He was also confident that the sole female was just as much a part of that team as any of the men: “She fitted in extremely well as part of the team.... She doesn’t mind a drink

and can tell [an outrageous] story...”.²⁴⁸ This was in marked contrast to the view expressed by the woman to whom he referred, who said that she was quite uncomfortable at the start of her time on council “...until the language and dirty jokes were modified” and was “appalled at the attitude [to social issues both formal and informal] of the other councillors.”²⁴⁹

This begins to answer the first question framed in my introduction – was it different for county women compared to their urban counterparts? I have been unable to find the same degree or nature of ‘old boys’ network’ in borough or city councils, although it would be very surprising to find that it did not exist at least to some degree. In municipalities it is, however, at least partly overcome by the almost universal application of party systems in urban politics; the parties (or tickets) provided the ‘us’ and the ‘them’. On most county councils the male councillors all belonged to the ‘us’ majority. Any group is reinforced by the existence of a recognised ‘other’ and this was provided in many cases by the female councillor(s). It is interesting to note the variations on this which occurred when a second female was elected – where she was seen as more alien than the current female councillor this could enable the first, and initially ‘other’ female to become ‘one of the boys’. Clearly this flexibility would not apply under the party system of politics on urban authorities. Only two of the 33 women in this study gained acceptance in this manner; it was by no means widespread. Those who reported little or no discrimination had achieved membership of the majority group by virtue of their status prior to being elected. They were, if not born in the area, very long-term residents of the district, and seen as part of long-established local families either by birth or marriage (or often both). Those unable to claim this status had no way of ever achieving it. Because the vast majority of male councillors were born in the county, and usually in the riding in which they were elected, it has not been possible to examine the degree to which a male could overcome the disadvantage associated with being a recent arrival in the county.

The importance of being native born is much less relevant in municipalities, where populations are more mobile and association with the land does not have the

²⁴⁸ County chairman, interview, 11 March 2004. It is interesting to note that his assessment refers to behaviour outside a council meeting, assuming of course the stories and drinking happened after the meeting, not during it.

²⁴⁹ Questionnaire. This woman is not identified here as doing so would identify the chairman quoted above.

significance it holds in farming areas. It is also overcome by party/ticket associations and the nature of elections. In urban elections it is unusual for candidates to be elected unopposed; in rural local elections the reverse is true. This is partly because it is more common to have multiple seats per ward in municipalities than it was for there to be more than one member per riding in a county. Candidates are more willing to put themselves up for election where there is more than one chance of success, and thus a lower level of risk. In an urban election most candidates have the support of a party group, plus the more immediate support of those in the same party standing in the same electoral area. Meetings, advertising and campaign strategies could be planned in common, with each individual candidate being part of the group process and able to benefit from the combined resources and contacts of the party. In rural ridings, each candidate remained entirely individual and managed their own solo campaign. This made the process especially difficult for women as they had limited access to contacts other than those in their circle of friends and family. Organisations such as Federated Farmers, discussion groups and dairy company committee structures were far more accessible to males, who were likely to have been members for years.

And having battled through the election process, what awaited in the council chamber? For most female councillors, a strangely alien atmosphere. The few women who reported no discrimination found what would be expected – a forum in which issues were raised and debated, regulatory responsibilities carried out and county resources used to enhance the lives of county residents. For the remainder, the majority, this was a place where other people carried out these roles, while the usually lone woman endeavoured to be involved, or at least contribute, in an atmosphere where at times she wondered if she was actually present. (Or, often, why on earth she was present.) There is no doubt that some urban councillors - male or female - on occasions felt similarly ostracised, but I can find no evidence that this happened so consistently as it did for many female county councillors. The feeling of being ‘unwanted’ is described in various ways; being ignored while speaking, having suggestions discounted or disregarded, or being given the clear message that a female would not know or understand sufficiently to participate effectively. Therein lies a major difference with urban authorities. Women on municipal councils would be very likely to have party/ticket colleagues who could mentor them through their

introduction to council, and provide support and help.²⁵⁰ Municipal women would also be more likely to have a wider variety of business contacts and experience that would be both recognised and helpful. The feeling of 'other' was heightened for rural women not only because they were so often the sole female, but also because the 'otherness' was implicitly or explicitly reinforced outside of the council chamber. Reference has already been made to the habit of history which excludes counties and especially their women from groupings of urban councils and urban women councillors. Even in meetings of women in local government the isolation of rural women was not readily understood: at the Auckland meeting in 1983 an announcement that all rural women (those on or standing for counties) would meet at a certain place and time was greeted with disapproval from the remainder of the gathering. Quite serious objections were raised opposing this division into different 'factions'. Once the rural group had explained that most of them were 'one offs' and this was one of the few opportunities to get together the opposition disappeared. A sympathetic hearing was achievable from the others in this all-female group, but the initial reaction, and the need to plead special consideration, did little to dissipate that consistent feeling of being odd.

Those who stayed beyond one three year term gradually diminished their isolation within the council chamber, mostly by hard work and perseverance. An overwhelming majority of respondents note the importance of thorough and careful homework, of not getting overwhelmed by the politics and lobbying of the male clique(s) and of maintaining good communication with residents. In other words, they understood the job they were there to do, and they worked to ensure that it was done regardless of any impediments that made it difficult. Mention is also often made of 'the learning curve'; the women involved were willing to put in effort to find out how systems and legislation worked, and equip themselves to work within them. What is really surprising under the circumstances is how universal the comment was that almost all of them look back on their time on council with gratitude and some pride. The learning was valued and the pride was taken not just for a job well (or at least adequately) done, but for having done it despite the difficulties.

If the answer to the question was it different for women on counties is yes, as I argue it most definitely is, the next question which must be addressed is why did the women

²⁵⁰ Several examples of this are given in Grant, see particularly p 13.

stay, and how did they cope? Coping mechanisms are not obvious in the material provided by respondents, but 'between the lines' they are clearly present. The private sessions for relief and support have already been described, and while these were important and effective they were far too infrequent to be more than isolated boosts. Without exception, the women stated that residents of the district showed no discrimination, although some qualified this in terms of their first election and all or part of their first term. The relationship with their electors was a significant source of encouragement and satisfaction. For most of the women – certainly all but the three or four who reported no discrimination from other councillors – there was little or no positive support within the council chamber, and likely to be implicit or explicit negative feedback as already described. Thus the women had to sustain themselves by means of their own self-esteem. So long as they knew they were doing a good job, or as good as could be achieved in the circumstances, this was sufficient motivation to keep them going. Many of them comment on the low expectations that were associated with their gender, and turned this to advantage by performing at a level higher than that low expectation. Several noted that they were more willing than their male colleagues to ask questions, and often had the feeling that the men were very glad to have someone else ask the questions they were not prepared to voice. Some remained on council at least partly through sheer perversity – the expectation that a woman would not be able to foot it was too insulting to let it become a reality by giving up.

An important source of support and survival came from husbands. This is a somewhat surprising two-edged sword. The huge majority of women participating in my survey reported that their husband was their main source of encouragement, although a few of those reported a mildly surprised reaction to the initial idea that his wife should enter politics. This indicates a relationship at home that was less conservative than applied generally in rural society. Living in a liberal environment must have emphasised the intensely traditional climate of the county council. It is completely speculative to ponder how women would have found the council experience if they had been elected from a family background that was more typical of conservative rural society. They probably would not have stood. One respondent might exemplify that situation. She reported being aware of gender discrimination from councillors and the county staff, but not the residents: "they were all supportive." But her husband, who was a councillor on the local Regional Council, clearly did not expect her to operate without his approval in her role on the county:

“My husband would question me after each meeting. ‘What did you achieve today? Did you speak on this subject, [in] this discussion?’” In response to the question “Why did you cease to be a councillor” she said that she “felt peace at home was more important. I am glad I stood...but my husband’s interference was not helping – I decided to put my energies into backing his participation in his local authority work.”²⁵¹ If support and acceptance in one part of our lives made the lack of it at council more frustrating, it is obvious that lack of support in either would be simply untenable.

Did these women achieve any change in the council chamber? Clearly most of them were far from happy with the ‘male culture’, but it is hard to claim any discernible changes that resulted from a female presence. As established in a number of studies, change would require a critical mass of opposition to the status quo, and one lone female would certainly not be sufficient to achieve that. Because the reorganisation that abolished counties happened in 1989, just as women were becoming more numerous and establishing some sort of a presence in rural local government, the history comes to an abrupt end. What might have happened over the next decade is a matter of futile speculation. Nevertheless, almost all the women returning questionnaires reported political successes. They were effective in achieving outcomes for their residents in the form of bridges and sealed roads, establishing systems such as civil defence, supporting planning applications which may not have been approved without their work and input to the debate and even gaining grants for local libraries. The question was not directly asked, and while many of these stories arose from the basis of gender-related issues in the council chamber, the pride in the achievement of the successful outcome in spite of the difficulties is loud and clear. While this study is focussed on the social issues faced by women (often the lone woman) on county councils, it is important to recognise the political role that was the reason they were there – just as the women themselves did not let the social problems stand in the way of the job they were there to do. As already noted, the history of counties is cut short at 1989, one can only speculate on how council chambers, and county government, might have changed in later years.

The converse of the question is also difficult to answer with any sort of quantifiable surety – did being on a county council change the women? There is a sense of

²⁵¹ Neroli Osborne, questionnaire.

change in the tone of comments from the questionnaires. Many stated that they gained from the experience, difficult and all as it was for most. The learning experience was clearly valued, as was the increased knowledge and understanding of legislation. There was even a lot of positive comment about the process of getting to grips with a strange and unfamiliar culture and learning to operate within it. To this extent it could be claimed that the women did accept the 'male' culture, and became part of it. But this is a superficial conclusion. Discernible change was simply not possible. What most of these women did was to recognise the adage 'if you can't beat them, join them' and go along with those parts of the culture that did not compromise their integrity. They stepped outside the norms only when either it could be done without compromising the objective, or it was simply too foreign (or absurd!) to do it the male way. The council employee interviewed had the clear opinion that there was little choice: "Women [did] themselves a disservice unless they [did] things the men's way."²⁵²

So was Brian Talboys accurate in his assessment? Generally the comments and experience of the women in my survey support the existence of male chauvinism in county council chambers. But the degree of it varied, and it is also fair to say that the presence of the few female stalwarts did present some challenge to it. Almost all the county women reported a steady increase in acceptance by their male colleagues, albeit slowly and with varying degrees of reluctance. The 'comments in hindsight' are interesting – by far the majority of women say that the experience was valuable and they are glad they had those years in local government. They also relate comments made to them by their former male colleagues, indicating that they too, in hindsight, were pleased to have a female on their council (even if it was only so that there was someone who was prepared to ask the 'dumb' questions that they all wanted answers to). Hindsight can be very different from the experience at the time, and free from the pain and frustrations of that immediacy there was certainly a lot to be appreciated. There is no doubt that the women gained a great deal more knowledge about legislation, resource and planning considerations, debating and governance in general. There is also pride in the achievement of good outcomes for ratepayers, small and hard-won though they might have been.

²⁵² Julie Hallam, interview, 21 February 2004.

Of the 33 women who contributed their memories to this study, 14 continued in local government after the 1989 reorganisation and two entered parliament, one of whom went on to become New Zealand's first female Prime Minister. Many others used their experience and contacts to become members of boards and councils outside local government. While it was not only their county council experience that motivated these women to stay in politics, the time spent there must have provided a basis on which they wished to build. It may have been difficult, for some at times almost impossibly difficult, but the positive learning experience and the opportunities for personal development was worth the trouble. Brian Talboys was an astute politician, perhaps his words were as much a challenge as a warning. New Zealand's farming women have a history of meeting challenges with resilience and determination. The women who served on county councils have upheld that tradition, and are justified in having their latter day pioneering stories included in the history of rural New Zealand.

Appendices

Copies of the following questionnaire form, information sheet and consent form were sent to all the female ex-county councillors I was able to trace.

The questionnaire as sent out was formatted a little differently than shown on the following pages, in order to provide sufficient space for the respondents to write answers.

A slightly modified version of the information sheet was sent to the reporters, staff member, county chairman and the chairman of the Dairy Board prior to their interviews. Those modifications solely reflected the more limited information gathered from these sources, and that it would be collected via interview, not by questionnaire.

All those who were interviewed were sent a transcript of their interview, which they were invited to alter as they wished before I used any of their information. When referencing interviews, only the information in the confirmed transcript has been used.

Signed consent forms were obtained from all who contributed, whether by questionnaire or interview.

Women on New Zealand County Councils

When you first stood for election:

1. What was your age?
2. What was your marital status?
3. Did you have any children at home?
If yes, please give ages.
4. Did other candidates stand against you?
If yes, how many, and were any of them sitting Councillors?
5. Were you successful at your first election?
If not, how many times did you stand for election before being successful?
6. What or who motivated you to stand for Council?
7. What was your awareness of the role of a County Council prior to your election?

What was your background:

1. How many years did you complete at secondary school?
2. Did you attend tertiary education?

If yes, please state institution and highest qualification gained (and if not obvious, please indicate field – e.g. BA in history)
3. What work experience had you had after completing your education and prior to standing for election?
4. What voluntary work and/or community organisations/projects had you been involved in?

Were these all in the community in which you stood for election?
(if not, please indicate those that were in the community of your election)

5. What was your occupation in the district at the time of standing for election?
(or if you were not in paid employment, how were you supported? If part of a farming operation, to what extent, if any, were you involved in that?)
6. What is your ethnicity?

Do you have any other ancestry that is significant to you?

Your 'political' background:

1. Would you describe your family of origin as being politically active?
If so, what form did this take?
2. Would you describe your family/household at the time of your election as politically active?
If so, what form did this take?
3. Were you a member of a political party at the time of your first election?
4. If yes, did that political party support your candidacy in any way?
5. What support (if any) did you have for your campaign?
6. Did you have specific issues/areas of interest in mind before you were elected?

Your time on Council:

1. How many terms did you serve?
(Please give dates, e.g. 1980-83)
2. What sub-committees did you serve on?
(Please give length of time – approximate if necessary)
3. Did you hold the position of chair of any sub-committee?
(if yes, please indicate which Committees)
4. Did you represent a Riding (or other division) of the County?
If yes, please give the name of the Riding, and the largest town or settlement included in that Riding.
5. What issues were you particularly interested in once you became a Councillor?

6. Approximately how much time did you spend on Council-related work per month (including meetings, homework, talking to ratepayers, researching etc)
7. Do you think this was about the same/more/less time as was spent by your male council colleagues?
8. Do you think you used your Council-related time in much the same way as your male colleagues?
If not, in what way(s) did you operate differently?
9. Were you at any time the only woman on the Council?
If yes, for how long?
Were there any advantages or disadvantages in being the only woman?
10. What was the reason you ceased to be a Councillor?
11. Did you feel you were treated differently by other Councillors because of your gender?
12. Did you feel you were treated differently by Council staff because of your gender?
13. Did you feel you were treated differently by electors/ratepayers because of your gender?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions 11, 12 or 13, I would be grateful if you would be willing to enlarge on how those differences were manifested; whether they seemed to you to be positive or not; how they affected your ability to function as a Councillor. Examples would be wonderful if you are willing to share them.

I would be very happy to have any other information that you may wish to provide that relates to your time on Council.

RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

**Women on New Zealand County Councils
MA Thesis (History)**

The research for this thesis is being carried out by Sue Lane, a post-graduate student at Massey University. My supervisor is Professor Margaret Tennant, also of Massey University.

Contact details are:

Sue Lane



Professor Margaret Tennant

School of History, Philosophy and Politics Phone ([REDACTED])

Massey University

Private Bag 11-222

Palmerston North

e-mail: M.A.Tennant@massey.ac.nz

The research:

This project aims to record and examine the history of women who served on County Councils. Women were elected to Counties much later and in smaller numbers than they were to Borough and City Councils. Reasons for this 'slow start' will be examined, along with the experiences of these women during their time on Council. Little has been recorded of women's involvement with rural local government and, as the 1989 reorganisation abolished Counties, this part of New Zealand history could soon be lost. I am particularly interested in this topic as I was myself a Councillor on the Matamata County Council for the period 1980-89.

I have obtained your name from public records – those held by current District or City Councils, and from various publications which include lists of women County Councillors, or full lists of County Councils where gender is recognisable. This letter, the consent form and the questionnaire will be sent to all the women County Councillors I have been able to identify and locate.

If you would be willing to participate in this research, I would be very grateful if you could fill in and return to me the enclosed consent form and the questionnaire.

Participation is totally voluntary and you may decline without giving any reason. I will not follow up forms not returned to me.

Currently I believe there may be about 80-90 women who served on County Councils prior to the abolition of Counties in 1989, but as some have moved away from the district in which they were elected, I may not be able to contact them all.

Data collected will be used primarily in the production of my thesis, with the possibility that it may be used later for articles in academic publications. If any participant requests anonymity for some or all of the information supplied, the data will be identified only by "County Councillor" and the year, with possibly 'sole female' or 'one of two' where appropriate. Please note, however, that the information given may mean that absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

I intend to send the questionnaire to all ex-Councillors willing to participate. The questions will cover the general areas of

- Age and marital/family status at time of election
- Education and work experience prior to being on Council
- Ethnicity
- Political experience/background
- Reason(s) for standing
- Circumstances of election
(unopposed/unseated a sitting member/successful 'first time')
- Experience(s) while on Council

I would also like to conduct some interviews, which will be recorded as oral histories. I would be grateful if in your response you could indicate if you would be willing to take part in an interview. Interviewees will probably have to be selected by reason of geographical accessibility (I am near Hamilton) as I have no funding to support travel.

I do not expect the questionnaire to take more than a maximum of 1 hour to complete, although I would like to encourage you to add any additional information that you think is relevant. I would expect the interviews to take no more than another 2 hours (excluding set-up time and pauses).

All data collected will be held in my home office for the duration of my project, and for 5 years beyond the completion of the research. After that your questionnaire (and interview tape if applicable) will be returned to you, destroyed or archived with the National Library, as requested by you.

All information will be gathered under the protocols laid down by the Massey University's Human Ethics Committee. This means that prospective participants in the research have the right to:

- decline to participate;
- decline to answer any particular question;

- withdraw from the project at any time;
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that their name will not be used unless they give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded
- ask for the audio tape to be turned off at any time during the interview, where participation in an oral history has been agreed.

Please use the enclosed stamped envelope for return of your form and questionnaire. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this project, please do not hesitate to contact me or my supervisor at the above addresses. I will be happy to accept collect calls.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my request, and especially I am very grateful for any information you are willing to share with me toward this project.

Sue Lane

MA Thesis (History) Sue Lane

Women on New Zealand County Councils

CONSENT FORM

**THIS CONSENT FORM WILL BE HELD FOR A PERIOD OF FIVE (5)
YEARS**

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the any further details I require of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I also understand I can withdraw from the study at any time, or decline to discuss any topic, at my request.

I agree/do not agree to my questionnaire being archived with the National Library at the conclusion of the project.

I agree/do not agree to being interviewed using audio tape.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature:

Date:

Full Name – printed:

Bibliography

Personal communications:

Written information provided by former county councillors: (refer questionnaire Appendix 1)

Gladys Bestic; Rotorua County.
Dorothy Booth; South Wairarapa County.
Noelene Buckland; Taumarunui County.
Margaret Casey; Winton County.
Rae Collins; Patea County.
Joyce Crowley; Taranaki County.
Nora Faulks-Beck (formerly Beck); Strathallan County.
Joyce Fawcett; Ohinemuri County.
Jocelyn Fish; Piako County.
Barbara Fisher; Waikohu County.
Anne Flutey; Patea County.
Katrina Gardiner; Mt Herbert County.
Robyn Grigg; Banks Peninsula County.
Pamela Jennens; Buller County.
Muriel Jones; Cook County.
Sue Lane; Matamata County.
Ann Lewis; Golden Bay County.
Peg Liddell; Horowhenua County.
Heather Little; Waipara County.
Kate Mickelson; Egmont County.
Margaret Moir; Westland County.
Bunny Mortimer; Waipa County.
Shirley Nalder; Golden Bay County.
Neroli Osborne; Ellesmere County.
Jill Penn; South Wairarapa County.
Jenny Rowan (formerly Simpson); Inglewood County.
Jenny Shipley; Malvern County.
Janice Skurr; Oxford County.
Elaine Taylor; Waimea County.
Colleen Twin; Waimea County.
Brenda Twose; Waipara County.
Patricia Wells; Clifton County.
Jenny Wilson; Matamata County.

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