



## South African Women's Agricultural Union – more than 80 years of community work

Henrietta Schoeman

On the 17th June 1931 representatives of the then four provincial agricultural associations, established between 1925 and 1930, met at Bloemfontein under the chairmanship of Major EW Hunt, president of the South African Agricultural Union. The four organizations TWAU (Transvaal), FWI (Natal), OFS WAU (Free State) and CPWAA (Cape) decided to form a national Women's Agricultural Union and thus SAWAU came into being in October of the same year.

In those early days higher education for women was the exception, rural areas were to a large extent isolated, and there was very real need for social intercourse. The years 1929 to 1932, a time of depression, made it incumbent upon the farmer's wife to help swell the family income, and to utilize to the full home-

grown products. The inspired idea of organizing country women and uniting them in a national body for the improvement of rural life and the advancement of culture thus came into its own.

The mission of SAWAU even today makes a huge impact. It is an educational organization which creates opportunities for women with the same values, to make a contribution and play a meaningful role in the development of our country. The vision is to equip members as homemakers and proper citizens by means of high quality programs and projects, to develop their knowledge and skills to the benefit of the community and the country and to share it with others.

In 1931 the first Executive Meeting was held and chaired by Mrs E O'Connor. Two days later, a lengthy agenda came under discussion, fifty-nine resolutions were discussed and a constitution was adopted.

For 16 years Mrs O'Connor guided SAWAU with unflagging zeal and vision. She had the faith that "our scheme – adult education – will assist us all". She also believed that SAWAU could become one of the greatest forces for good in South Africa, provided that it retained the principles on which it was founded, namely that of a non-sectarian, non-party political and bilingual movement.

Slowly but surely SAWAU was taking shape and became more effective. In 1935 SAWAU took part in the Empire Exhibition in conjunction with the Department of Agriculture. Exhibits included bottled products, soap, spinning, weaving, leatherwork, basketry and needlecraft. In 1938 twenty-seven articles were exhibited by SAWAU at the British Empire Exhibition in Glasgow.

SAWAU did not meet in conference during the years 1940 to 1944, and as from 1945 new trends were discernible. Endless resolutions



The Executive Committee of SAWAU: Back: Rina Potgieter (WAU Mpumalanga), Judy Steynberg (Northwest WAU), Tutti Rudman (Secretary), Elza de Bruyn (WAU Overvaal – Gauteng) and Bernadine Hay (FWI Kwa Zulu Natal). Front: Maureen Scholtz (Namibia), Tharina Rossel (WAU North – Limpopo), Henrietta Schoeman (SAWAU president) and Vanda Gagiano (Free State WAU)



At the ACWW Triennial Conference which took place in Chennai, India, this group of SAWAU members were the delegates

were curtailed in number, and by exchanging news and views, delegates were encouraged to become co-workers in formulating programs to establish SAWAU as a virile educative force. Because of continuous pleas by SAWAU and after many years, in 1946 all provinces as well as SAWAU were invited to become members of the South African Library Association, and at last books were made available to the population.

The Wool Board Trust Fund granted in 1946 the sum of five thousand pounds to SAWAU, as working capital, to increase the consumption of wool through the home craft of spinning and weaving. The interest of the loan was divided between the provinces, which in turn were requested to report on how money was expended.

In the period 1940 to 1955 due attention was paid to the desirability of an official magazine, but the stipulation as laid down, namely non-political, non-racial, non-sectarian, and with equal rights for both languages proved problematical. In 1956 "The Woman in her Home", a bilingual publication by the Department of Agriculture incorporated in "Farming in South Africa" served SAWAU interests, but thereafter the need for a national magazine was shelved. Today SAWAU has an insert in the Plus50 magazine called Bouquet.

The SAWAU Silver Jubilee was celebrated in Bloemfontein in 1956. Planning congresses around special themes such as Economic Prospects in South Africa (1957), Women and her Home (1958), Women in Public Life (1959) and How the South African Women can influence foreign opinions of South Africa (1960) evoked wider interest.

SAWAU is affiliated with the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW), an organization based in London, UK and has member societies from around the globe. Through the years many SAWAU members have been elected on ACWW committees, where they did work to better the lives of communities wider than just in our own country. In 1957 the then South West African (today Namibia) women's organization also affiliated with SAWAU. ACWW also has consultative status with the United Nations.

Several fields of study have been prescribed over the years. Education stayed the primary aim but fields like Health, Agriculture, Gardening, Arts and Crafts, Home making, Public Affairs and many more are part of the meetings held monthly. These fields of study must reflect the current situation in our country. Leadership courses, recipe books, water projects, the Clothe-A-Nation project in conjunction with Bernina, book projects and exhibitions are still part of the work SAWAU does today.

A tapestry competition was launched in 1979 by SA Wool, where SAWAU members had to design and embroider pictures depicting life in your area. Cash prizes were given by SA Wool and this competition ended in Pietermaritzburg in 1981. In 1985 a Kelim competition was also funded by SA Wool.

Other projects over the years included "Adopt a Granny", "Teddy's for Tragedy" and "Warm against the Cold". The last one was in conjunction with the national magazine, *Sarie*. Ongoing charity also includes donations to CANSA (the Cancer Association), schools and nurseries, hospitals and old age homes. In every town and city in South Africa and Namibia, women are supporting their local communities in many different ways.

Judges are trained by SAWAU to make sure that the standard of arts and crafts, needlework, knitting and crocheting stays high.



At the SAWAU 80th birthday celebration, Tharina Rossel (Vice-president SAWAU), Heleen Meyer (Recipe book writer) and Henrietta Schoeman (SAWAU president) launching the recipe book, "Spogresepte".



Makosikhazi project in Middelburg, Mpumalanga. SAWAU president, Henrietta Schoeman with a group of rural women, at one of the classes presented.

SAWAU has a bursary fund that pays out annually to the child of a member studying at tertiary level.

In 2011 SAWAU celebrated their 80 years of existence by launching a prestige recipe book called "*Spogresepte*" (Prize Recipes) with the help of LAPA Publishers. In the same year, a beautiful red rose cultivated by Ludwig Taschner, the rose king of South Africa, was named the SAVLU (SAWAU) Rose. Today this rose blooms in many a garden.

The members are involved in several programs where rural women are being educated in an informal way in a range of life skills, all to help them cope with day to day problems. This program is called Makosikhazi, which means "My name is woman". Leadership, health, financial literacy, education, social literacy as well as enterprise development courses are given to empower these women. They must be helped to make informed choices, and ultimately transfer their newfound strength, leadership skills and knowledge to their children.

SAWAU members are also involved with Merino farming in South Africa and Namibia. On the farm Monterey in the Prieska area, Northern Cape, Erika Lubbe (the current CWAA president) and her husband Danas, farm with Merinos. They have an intensive Merino flock of 3000 ewes. They use the intensive 5 Star production system, which is designed that ewes produce five lamb crops in three years. There are five lambing periods each year. Three groups of sheep are managed separately: a) breeding and pregnant ewes and rams; b) lambing and lactating ewes and lambs; and c) growing lambs (market lambs and replacements). If a ewe misses a breeding, she can still lamb three times in two years. The ewes lamb in cages and the lambs are then moved to a

feedlot. Two-thirds of the flock is in the feedlots at any given time, and the other third on grazing. They achieve an effective annual lambing percentage of 190, and wean about 170% lambs per year.

Mrs Wynnie Schumann, SAWAU president from 1963 to 1970 said: "Though circumstances in all provinces are not necessarily identical, there still are many spheres in which we need to speak with a united voice. Never in our long history has it been more imperative to combine in a central Union and to make of it the pivot around which our activities revolve and the instrument to express our ideals to the outer world." More than 40 years later, this still is true.

SAWAU has always played a huge role in communities and will do so for many years to come. The success lies in the fact that all over the country small groups of members do small but important

work in their local areas. Seen on a national scale it may not seem much, but the effect and impact these programs have on rural areas, are immense. Members give assistance and friendship. They also then benefit by knowing that a difference is being made by this network of dedicated members.

*To join SAWAU or for more information, contact: Henrietta Schoeman, President: SAWAU, 082 388 3104, henriettas@lantic.net. Henrietta is a qualified teacher who married a maize farmer from Middelburg, Christo, 35 years ago. The WAU had a branch near their farm and she became a member 30 years ago. They have a mixed farming enterprise with cattle, sheep and broilers. They have two children, Isabelle and Rudolph, who are both married. Her son and son-in-law are farmers. They plant maize, soya and potatoes. Henrietta is a proud grandmother of three, a boy and two girls.*