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Women for a Peaceful Christmas: Wisconsin Homemakers Seek to Remake American Culture

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Women for a Peaceful Christmas criticized store-bought gift wrap for being wasteful and harmful to the environment. On December 15, 1971, a mother and her children gathered to decorate their own wrap.

WMoH win 0910

This button from the Women for a Peaceful Christmas papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society Archives was among those materials deliberately not copyrighted. Recipients were encouraged to customize them for local use.

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WOMEN FOR A PEACEFUL CHRISTMAS

**WISCONSIN HOMEMAKERS
SEEK TO REMAKE
AMERICAN CULTURE**

BY NANCY C. UNGER



What's an alternative Christmas? Well, it's a way to celebrate Christmas without any of the hassle of crowded shops and bursting budgets, but with more of the peace and love of the season. It's the quiet, caring, back-to-the-earth style Christmas that's pictured on cards, but hard to find in the frantic shopping centers. How do you do it?¹

In the autumn of 1971, sixteen Madison homemakers, including Nan Cheney and Sharon Stein, began "Women for a Peaceful Christmas" (WPC), a unique attempt to do nothing less than remake American culture.² Under the slogan "No More Shopping Days 'Til Peace," WPC organized ostensibly powerless homemakers into a "quiet revolt against 'an economy which thrives on war and the destruction of our earth's resources.'"³ WPC urged the public (especially women, the sex that did the vast bulk of holiday shopping) to take economic, political, and environmental matters into their own hands. "If you don't want your Christmas celebrations to be controlled by the monoliths that corrupt governments and pollute environments . . . Don't buy the pre-packaged, disposable Christmas! Make your own."⁴ Rather to the surprise of the group's founders, WPC was immediately inundated with queries and requests for its informational materials. In five months' time, the movement had spread to almost every state, with members ranging in age from teenagers to grandmothers. WPC received national press coverage. The group disbanded in 1975 when the Vietnam War wound to a close, but

its effort to highlight how women's spending contributed to the waste of natural resources was taken up by others. The movement raised the national consciousness of the role that everyday Americans could play, for better or for worse, in the deepening environmental crisis.

The story of Women for a Peaceful Christmas also reveals how an ostensibly powerless group (women not employed outside the home) wielded real influence as it challenged thousands of Americans to rethink the relationship between their private consumption, public policy, and the world's resources. As feminism was just beginning to flower, these women gained prominence not by achieving public office

or by taking on high paying positions, but by asserting their authority as full-time wives, mothers, and homemakers. Their efforts provide, among other things, a fascinating look at the intersection of two rising movements in the early 1970s: feminism and environmental activism. Although both movements seemed new, even revolutionary, their foundations had been established decades earlier.

Wisconsin Women's Environmental Awareness: A Far-Reaching History

Wisconsin women's history of civic engagement had long included environmental concerns. By the progressive era (circa 1890–1917) the prescribed gender spheres limited most women nationwide, even in rural communities, to activities primarily inside the home. The emphasis on the male sex as provider left men perhaps understandably focused on short-term profits, rarely able to afford the luxury of concern over the long-term environmental damage that reaping such profits might entail. This male imperative ultimately encouraged the notion of women, in Wisconsin and elsewhere across the increasingly industrialized and urbanized nation, as uniquely qualified and therefore obligated to seek environmental reforms. By 1915, a women's university bulletin noted, "The woman's place is in the home. But today, would she serve the home, she must go beyond the home. No longer is the home encompassed by four walls. Many of its important activities lie now involved in the bigger family of the city and the state."⁵ Many women agreed that, in the words of environmental historian Carolyn Merchant, "Man the moneymaker had left it to woman the money-saver to preserve resources."⁶

In Wisconsin, many women received their environmental education through the Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs (WFWC), the state branch of the national network of women's groups that provided its members with opportunities to serve their communities as well as socialize with each other. By the 1930s, the WFWC's Conservation Division was calling for forest preservation, protection against water pollution, and more humane animal traps to replace "steel trap atrocities."⁷ It also urged measures to prevent erosion, including a halt to the cutting of trees, shrubs, and vines along streams and fences so that their roots might keep soils in place. Leaders in the conservation division included Wilhelmine LaBudde. LaBudde was the first woman to serve on the Wisconsin Conservation Congress, and successfully pushed for conservation education in all Wisconsin public schools. In 1940, the WFWC submitted a formal resolution to Wisconsin Governor Julius Heil, the Wisconsin Conservation Commission, and the state legislature, endorsing the creation and maintenance of shelter belts (plantings placed along main highways) to check the drying and eroding winds created primarily by the large-scale removal of timber.

WFWC wasn't the only source of women's education about their environmental obligations. In 1943, the long-running



Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963. Along with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* it inspired many women to environmental activism.

Madison-based radio program, the “We Say What We Think Club,” written and performed by five women active in the Dane County Rural Federation, devoted a two-part broadcast to “What Women Should Know About Soil Conservation.” It urged that, for the sake of future generations, every farm woman was obligated to recognize the dangers of soil erosion, as well as to persuade her husband to put into practice the strategies to combat it. The broadcast concluded, “MAN MUST WORK WITH NATURE, NOT AGAINST HER.”⁸ By 1949, the sentiments of the We Say What We Think Club were being echoed by the WFWC, whose conservation theme had broadened considerably: “Every clubwoman should know the conservation status and needs of her own community,” because “Conservation of our Natural Resources is the HOPE of the FUTURE.”⁹

Silent Spring and The Feminist Mystique Pave the Way

In 1937, the WFWC’s Conservation division included in its goals for the year the passage of a law making the disposal of Christmas trees less wasteful, lamenting,

A sight that almost makes me weep
Is a Christmas tree on the rubbish heap.¹⁰

That effort failed, but thirty-five years later, another group of Wisconsin women took up with a vengeance the issue of wasteful practices associated with Christmas. The founding members of Women for a Peaceful Christmas were influenced, directly and indirectly, by a variety of factors. Many had grown up in Wisconsin, attending state schools where they received the conservation education mandated by earlier women activists. Some were influenced by the Women Strike for Peace, an organization that grew out of a day of protest against nuclear testing by the United States and the Soviet Union in 1961. The strike was carried out by white, middle-class women who claimed authority as mothers, decrying the presence of radioactive nuclear fallout in both mother’s milk and cow’s milk.¹¹ Many of these women were influenced by two paradigm-shifting books: Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. Both works, written in non-technical terms for general audiences, were wildly popular, directly or indirectly changing the way many women viewed themselves and their relationship with the environment.

In 1962, pioneer ecofeminist Rachel Carson dramatically challenged conventional notions of progress and celebrations of prosperity with *Silent Spring*, first serialized in the *New Yorker* and then published in book form. A *New York Times* bestseller and Book of the Month Club selection, *Silent Spring* reached a wide audience, much of it female. In Wisconsin it was read in October 1962 in ten half-hour installments on the 1:00 p.m. “Chapter a Day” program of the Wisconsin State Broadcasting Service (today’s Wisconsin Public Radio).¹² The many

When it was reestablished in 2003, Another Mother for Peace (originally founded in 1967) used its famous logo, designed by Los Angeles artist Lorraine Schneider, to carry forward the struggle for peace.



COURTESY OF DON BERCEY. PHOTO BY JOEL HEIMAN.



Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson helped found Earth Day. The first Earth Day was April 21, 1970. This photo shows the celebration that took place in Madison on that day.

homemakers listening heard Carson use some of the established beliefs about gender to give credence to her message about the need for environmental protection. Carson had already publicly proclaimed women's "greater intuitive understanding" of the value of nature as she denounced a society "blinded by the dollar sign" that was allowing rampant "selfish materialism to destroy these things."¹³

Following an investigation by President John F. Kennedy's Science Advisory Committee that validated Carson's conclusions, her insistence on the interconnectedness of all life could not be dismissed as feminine romanticism. No longer would the traditionally male emphasis on the immediate, market-dri-

ven need to exploit natural resources for profit trump women's "sentimental" emphasis on future generations. Increasingly, people accepted as scientific reality Carson's notion that any disturbance to the web of life affects the whole. Through her refusal to adhere to prevailing gender stereotypes of female subservience to male wisdom, Carson made the public aware of attempts by the scientific-industrial complex to manipulate and control nature to the ultimate detriment of all. Her critique of the country's dependence on chemical pesticides has since been widely recognized as one of the most influential books of the twentieth century.¹⁴

Silent Spring, which attacked the government's misplaced and ineffectual paternalism, appeared just one year before Betty Friedan's assault on patriarchy, *The Feminine Mystique*. Many of the women "awakened" by Friedan's work to take themselves seriously took their first steps into finding a larger place in the world by responding to Carson's call, written in terms they could understand about a cause with which they could identify—to question authority. Friedan's urging that women throw off patriarchy contributed to Carson's message that they no longer assume "that someone was looking after things—that the spraying [of pesticides] must be all right or it wouldn't be done."¹⁵

Just as *The Feminine Mystique* did not single-handedly launch the modern feminist movement, *Silent Spring* cannot take full credit for inspiring the modern environmental movement. Both books, however, did play major roles in making the vital need for reform clear to large sectors of the general public. Carson's message inspired untold numbers of the local grassroots groups and movements that continued to multiply in cities, suburbs, and on college campuses throughout the 1960s and attracted many female members. As environmental historian Adam Rome notes, "Carson cultivated a network of women supporters, and women eagerly championed her work."¹⁶ *Silent Spring* was cited in educational pamphlets written by women and in their letters to editors and petitions to politicians. Individually and in groups, women campaigned to ban the bomb, clean up rivers, save forests, and stop pollution.

Women's organizations particularly active in promoting environmental awareness and protection included the League of Women Voters, the American Association of University Women, the Federation of Women's Clubs, and the Garden Club of America.¹⁷ Women also took part in Earth Day, founded by Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson and first celebrated in 1970. Many demonstrations took the form of teach-ins to bring national awareness to environmental concerns. On that first Earth Day, and in each subsequent annual celebration, women carried signs in marches and gatherings nationwide, gave speeches, led and participated in discussions, and planted trees.

One additional factor contributed to the creation of Women for a Peaceful Christmas. By 1971, the year of the group's



In 1971, Congressional Representative Bella Abzug endorsed Women Uniting to End the War, an Ann Arbor, Michigan-based activist organization. Along with Dorothy Day and Jane Fonda, Abzug's high-visibility endorsement helped raise awareness of the activists' efforts.



Women for a Peaceful Christmas encouraged families to make gifts rather than purchase them. Returning to traditional activities, like this mother and her children baking cookies in 1958, offered one alternative for homemade presents.

WHI IMAGE ID 06815



Nancy Abbot crafted this image for her organization, Women Uniting to End the War. It challenged viewers to never underestimate the power of women acting in solidarity.

founding, its members had been profoundly influenced by the nation's ever-lengthening war in Vietnam, a war that no longer had the support of the majority of the American population. Opposition continued to grow in response to the war's mounting human and economic costs. A widespread counter-culture youth movement decried the war abroad and materialism and conformity at home. During the 1960s and 1970s, even "conformist" homemakers frequently made their own contributions to the combined call to save the earth and stop the war in Vietnam. The non-partisan, non-profit group Another Mother for Peace was founded in 1967 by a group of mothers seeking to encourage women take an active role in eliminating all war. Los Angeles artist Lorraine Schneider designed the group's logo: a sunflower and the slogan "War is not healthy for children and other living things." The simple drawing and words became an iconic image that was displayed prominently in peace demonstrations and marches and appeared on bumper stickers, posters, key chains, t-shirts, and medallions.

In 1971, Women Uniting to End the War, a group made up of diverse women in Ann Arbor, Michigan, organized a nationwide women's boycott for peace. By

refraining from making any purchases for one day, women exercised their consumer power. Because time not spent shopping was spent writing to Congress or otherwise contributing to the peace movement, their actions demonstrated the magnitude of women's opposition to the war. They selected June 21, the longest day of the year, for their protest against "the longest war in our history."¹⁸ The boycott was endorsed by a number of prominent women, including Representative Bella Abzug of New York (a co-founder of the Women Strike for Peace of a decade earlier) and activists ranging from Dorothy Day to Jane Fonda. It was covered extensively by the national and international press, and merchants felt the momentary pinch.¹⁹ What it inspired in an "ecumenical group of 16 ingenious and determined" Madison homemakers lasted considerably longer.²⁰

Wisconsin Homemakers Attack War, Environmental Degradation, and Commercialism

At a small protest held in Madison's Capitol Square on June 21, 1971, women decorated a Christmas tree with peace symbols and urged the local citizenry to refrain from buying commercial Christmas gifts until the troops in Vietnam were given a definite withdrawal date.²¹ Although the speakers at the demonstration introduced by Nan Cheney included Assemblywoman Midge Miller, Cheney and the fifteen other mothers in their thirties and forties were disappointed that they "couldn't get started in Madison in time" to have staged a major protest.²² They set their focus on Christmas instead, and Women for a Peaceful Christmas was born. Citing Gallup Poll figures reflecting that seventy-eight percent of American women wanted the United States out of Vietnam by the end of the year, these women decided to "speak in a language all men can understand: refuse to support a wartime economy."²³

WPC did not propose a holiday boycott. In the words of Cheney: "Boycott Christmas? Never! We women do not ask abandonment of the peace, love and joy the season brings."²⁴ They proposed something perhaps even more radical: Americans should purchase only essential goods and services, not only during the holidays but every day of the year. And those essential goods and services should pointedly not be purchased from businesses that profited from the war. WPC urged participants to inform businesses about the rationale for their shopping choices.

Members of WPC wanted more than "just" an end to the war in Vietnam. They sought a "re-ordering of national and personal priorities," beginning with a turning away from the

waste and conspicuous consumption that had come to characterize Christmas and Hanukkah celebrations.²⁵ They complained that the tinsel and trappings that appeared earlier each year clouded "the clear and simple meaning of true Christmas."²⁶ They lamented the fact that Christmas had "become a time of tremendous waste of resources, with mountains of wrapping and packaging materials thrown away and tremendous pressure to buy badly-made toys."²⁷ Commercialism had distorted the message of peace, love, and joy, persuading consumers that "peace is the product of exploitation, that love is

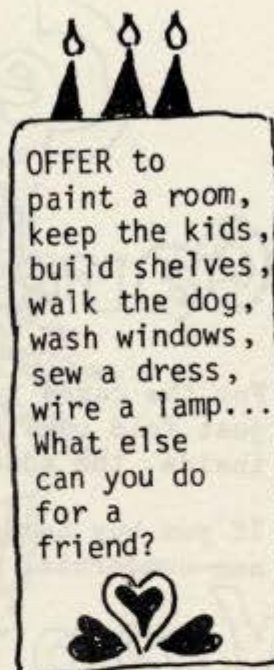
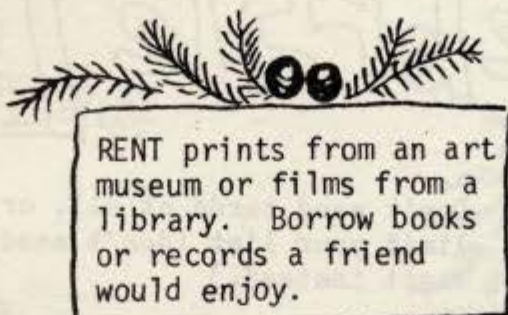
COURTESY OF NAN CHENEY



A rare photograph of Women for a Peaceful Christmas members assembling booklets in November 1972.

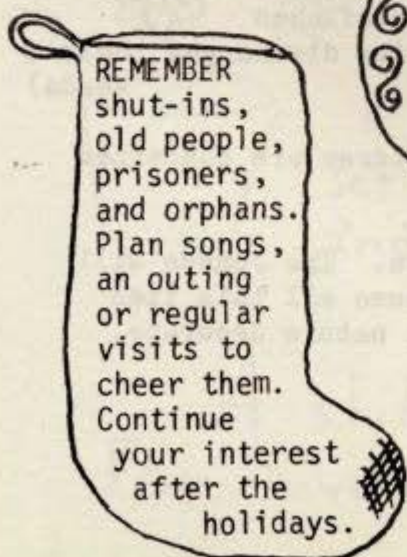
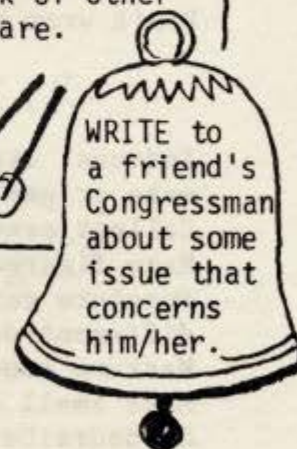
This selection from a Women for a Peaceful Christmas booklet outlines "Alternatives to Buying" (left).

WMI IMAGE ID: 67724



Alternatives to buying

TEACH someone to play a musical instrument, bake a pie, enlarge a photograph. Think of other skills you might share.

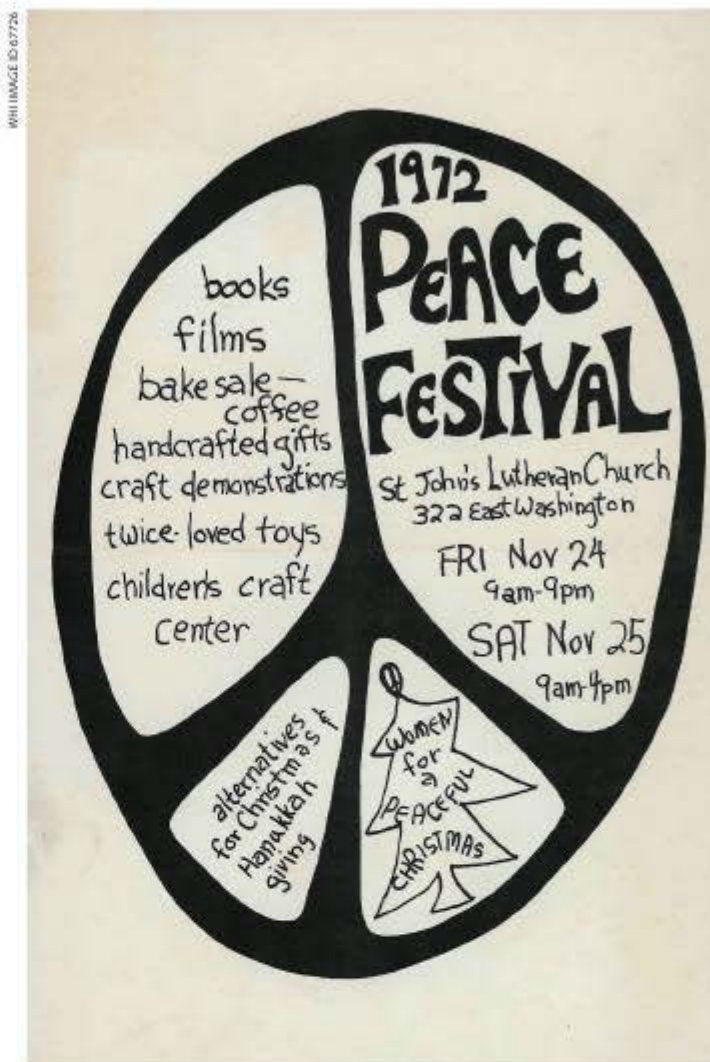


measured by material possessions, and that joy abounds in compulsive consumption."²⁸ "What we're really aiming for," explained Nan Cheney, "is a change in attitudes. We're trying to raise people's consciousness about the wartime economy and what they can do to control their own consumption of resources."²⁹ According to Cheney, "If our economy is based on dishwashers that must be replaced every five years and automobiles that we can't find parking places for, then something is seriously the matter with our values, and this is part of what we are talking about."³⁰

In its many publications, including a booklet by members Peg Davey and Dorothy Lagerroos, WPC emphasized not only what to avoid in order to make the world a better place, but what to embrace.³¹ Members of the WPC believed that the holiday season "should be a time for people to commit themselves to issues of peace, environmental concerns, and the giving of oneself that is Christmas."³² WPC offered suggestions to make celebrations "more meaningful, less commercial, less wasteful, and more peaceful," emphasizing activities that encouraged personal involvement on the part of those bestowing gifts, to give more of themselves than of

Festivals provided yet another venue for Women for a Peaceful Christmas to organize and foster a vision of solidarity. This poster advertised one such event held at St. John's Lutheran Church in Madison (right).

Nan Cheney (misidentified as Jan Cheney) prepared preserves in this November 11, 1972, article for the *Capital Times*. Preserves were yet another gift offering suggested by Women for a Peaceful Christmas (below).



Women for Peaceful Christmas Shun Opulence

By WHITNEY GOULD
(Of The Capital Times Staff)
Instead of that expensive backyard barbecue set, how about a home-grown herb garden this Christmas? In place of an electric blanket, a home-made patchwork quilt. Teach someone to play a musical instrument; make beads for the kids from beans and noodles; offer to paint a room; give a friend a membership in the Wilderness Society.

These alternatives to holiday extravagance are suggested by Women for a Peaceful Christmas, a group of about 25 local peace activists staging a quiet revolt against "an economy which thrives on war and the destruction of our earth's resources."

Co-op Meeting Is Scheduled For Weekend

Representatives of co-ops, communes, and intentional communities will meet in Madison this weekend, Thursday through Sunday, for the Madison Community Co-Op Conference. The theme is "Building Co-operative Communities."

The conference will be held at St. Francis House, 1901 University Ave. Workshops and meetings will be held at the conference.

Now in its second year, the group will hold a Thanksgiving "twice-loved" (second-hand) range from teenagers to grant is spreading. Peace Festival Friday, Nov. 24 children's toys are some of the members, are pledged to buy and Saturday, Nov. 25 from 9 alternatives for holiday gift-giving only essential goods and services. They have no illusions of making much of a dent in an economy that encourages over-



Home-made preserves are Jan Cheney's answer to Christmas gift-giving extravagance. Ms. Cheney and other members of Women for a Peaceful

Christmas will hold a Peace Festival Nov. 24 and 25 at St. John's Lutheran Church. (Staff Photo by Carmie Thompson)

consumption. But their message is spreading.

The Christian Science Monitor, Washington Post and Women's Day magazine have all publicized the group's efforts "and we've had letters from all over the country," says Nan Cheney, 6214 N. Highlands Ave., one of the founders.

"What we're really aiming for is a change in attitudes. We're trying to raise people's consciousness about the wartime economy and what they can do to control their own consumption of resources."

Do children feel cheated if they're deprived of all those Barbie Dolls and shiny toy snowmobiles they see on television?

Ms. Cheney doesn't think so. "I think my kids are actually relieved not to have to get all the junk on TV," she

says. "Last year I made quilts from scraps for them; I gave my husband and sister and brother-in-law memberships in the Sierra Club, in hopes we would go on some outings together. And now I'm making jams and jellies."

These sorts of things make Christmas more meaningful because "you give of yourself," she says.

Not everyone is enthusiastic about the efforts of Women for a Peaceful Christmas. Some critics complain their mild-mannered economic boycott amounts to an attack on the free enterprise system.

But Ms. Cheney disagrees. "If anything, what we're doing will make the system more free," she says. "We're urging people to buy things from individuals and small craftsmen, not big business."

Here are some other ideas for a peaceful, non-consumptive Christmas:

Write a family history, a song, a poem; give memberships in the Wisconsin Ballet Company, the Madison Art Center, other local groups; weave a potholder; build a bird feeder; adopt a pet from the Humane Society; offer to share your boat, sewing machine or summer cottage with someone; wrap gifts in newspaper or last year's wrapping paper; buy a live tree that can be used year after year.

These and other suggestions are offered in a little booklet, "No More Shopping Days 'Til Peace," available at 25 cents a copy from women for a Peaceful Christmas, Box 5095, Madison 53705.

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their bank accounts. Rather than passively consuming manufactured goods, WPC urged others to "Greet your distant friends with your own wish, written your own way. Decorate your tree with fruits, cookies, and homemade trinkets. Gift your loved ones with a song or poem or something personal or handmade." The rewards, they promised, would be many: "Not only will you save money and conserve energy, you'll also discover your creative personality. But most importantly, you'll find a way to say what has become so difficult for us to say—I love you."³³

WPC's list of gift ideas was long and varied: Write a family history; weave a potholder; build a birdfeeder; adopt a pet from the Humane Society; offer to share painting skills, a privately-owned boat, sewing machine, or summer cottage; give music lessons.³⁴ They recommended giving homegrown herb gardens rather than expensive barbeque sets, homemade quilts instead of electric blankets. The organization promoted buying locally, suggesting tickets to local activities, events, and memberships rather than products. Organizations deemed worthy included the Wisconsin Ballet Company, the Madison Art Center, and the Wilderness Society. WPC urged decorating live trees that could be used year after year, and eschewed lights in favor of strings of popcorn and/or cranberries. For outdoor Christmas lights, "instead of supporting a giant defense contractor, G.E., and simultaneously contributing to the energy crunch," they recommended luminaria: lighted candles inside small paper bags weighted with sand.³⁵ The glowing bags, which could be decorated or left plain, were an attractive way to line walks and driveways.

What about those without the time, energy, or skill to make the kind of homemade Christmas advocated by WPC? Buy gifts from independent craftspeople or from service organizations such as UNICEF and the Sierra Club. Or pick up ideas, skills, and handcrafted items at the Peace Fair, an event held annually in 1971 through 1974 on the Friday and Saturday immediately following Thanksgiving. (That Friday has become the country's biggest shopping day, known as "Black Friday" for its ability to move many American businesses out of the red ink and into the black.) The Peace Fair promoted environmentally-friendly ideas and gifts and celebrated the ability of formerly conventional shoppers, primarily women, to "however infinitesimally, slow down the breakneck speed of American consumerism" and preserve precious natural resources.³⁶ Available at the fair were form letters to be mailed to local businesses explaining the reasons for women's refusal to participate in their usual rounds of holiday shopping.

The fair (held three of its four years at Edgewood College, and once at Madison's St. John's Lutheran Church) featured demonstrations and products by weavers, potters, needle workers, and other local artists. Additional products for sale or swap included environmentally friendly canvas shopping bags, organic cleaning products, and "twice loved" (donated sec-

ond-hand) toys. Lessons were available on how to make gift breads and marzipan, and how to wrap and decorate gifts in non-wasteful ways. The atmosphere was made festive by folk dancing performances, puppet shows, a bake sale, books, films, and coffee.

Women for a Peaceful Christmas: Mothers in Action

Many WPC founders had previously worked in various political campaigns, mostly behind the scenes. They found, however, that the altruistic campaigns by women within the domestic sphere bore no results because they were perceived as "just housewives" who wielded no power. "We've voted, written letters to congressmen, senators, presidents, state and local officials. We've given money and time to candidates and peace groups. We've marched and protested in various nonviolent ways," explained Nan Cheney, all to no avail, but "pressure from the business community will have an effect on our president."³⁷ "Money talks," agreed Judy Olson, another WPC founder. "This is our non-violent form of pressure."³⁸

Their status as mothers played a significant role in the rhetoric and actions of the WPC. Co-founder Sharon Windler noted pointedly, "We do not want to support the economy which is killing our sons."³⁹ Emphasizing their authority as mothers, they spoke of the impact of current holiday practices on future generations. One headline summed up the group's dedication to the long-term goal of preserving simplicity and controlling waste: "Christmas Can be Saved for Future Generations."⁴⁰ They focused on current youth as well. Member Sharon Stein's "big beef" was "consumeritis." She wanted to teach her children that "they don't have to keep buying things to have a nice Christmas."⁴¹ Nan Cheney promoted the immediate benefits of rejecting even the most aggressively promoted products: "I think my kids are actually relieved not to have to get all the junk on TV."⁴² Maintaining that "a Raggedy Ann is infinitely more attractive [to children] than a Chatty Cathy," fellow WPC member Judy Sikora explained that "Children are much more receptive to 'creative' toys, where the child's imagination comes into play, than to toys which depend for their usefulness on batteries and mechanical parts."⁴³ WPC members incorporated their own children into the movement in a variety of ways. Children were encouraged to give of themselves rather than their allowances: "A child might create a certificate reading 'This entitles Aunt Bessie to one car wash from Tommy.'"⁴⁴ A photograph under the headline "Children Display 'Recycling' Talent in Wrapping Christmas Packages," in the Madison *Capital Times* featured Elizabeth and Katherine Davey joining with Curtis Liposcak (all children of WPC members) helping prepare their families' gifts in ways they'd seen demonstrated at the Peace Festival: they wrapped the gifts in newspapers, magazines, and paper bags, using potato prints, pictures cut from magazines, and pinecones as decorations. "Ribbons" and "to-from" labels were hand drawn with markers.⁴⁵

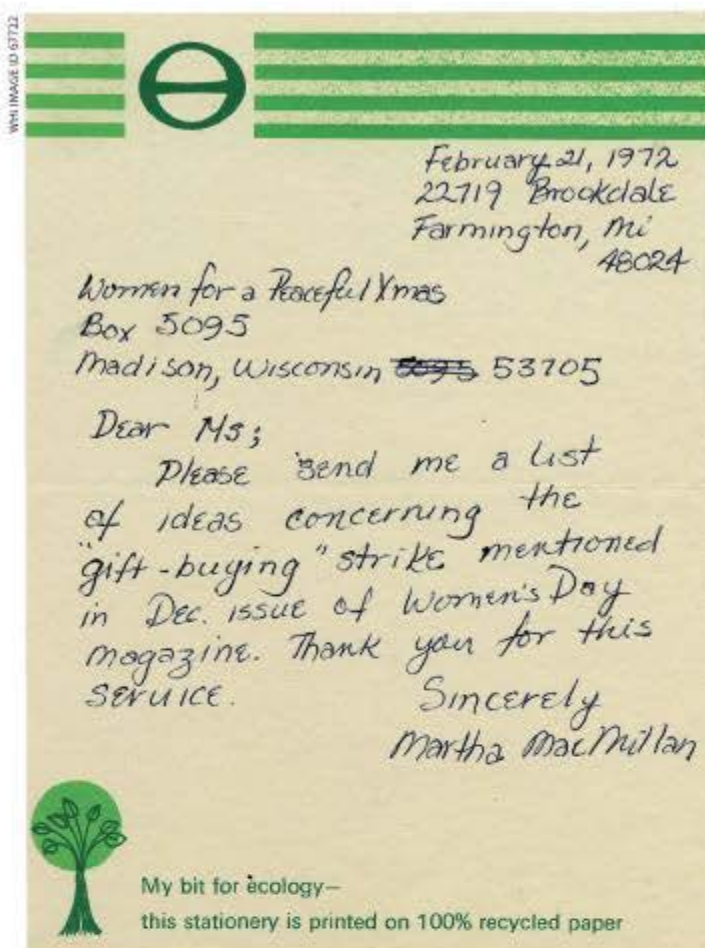
A Local Movement Goes National

WPC's core membership entertained "no illusions of making much of a dent in an economy that encourages over-consumption," and so were amazed at how eager others were to spread the word of their plan and to put it into action. Initial support came from the Madison chapter of Church Women United, which publicized WPC in its August-September newsletter, invited a WPC representative to speak at a fall forum, and sent packets of Women for a Peaceful Christmas materials (including the group's mission statement and the booklet of suggestions by members Davey and Lagerroos) to all chapter presidents and state officers throughout Wisconsin. Urging that "Liberal organizations must help each other in order to survive," the Madison branch of the NAACP encouraged its members and friends to patronize the WPC Peace Festival, noting that a portion of its profits would be pooled with the proceeds of their own Christmas bazaar, with the proceeds to fund gifts for the teenaged members of Madison's needy families.⁴⁶ Press coverage that began in local church bulletins mushroomed to include several national publications, including *Newsday*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Women's Day*. By November 1971, the Madison women who couldn't organize in time for the Michigan Women's Boycott for Peace found to their delight that "Ann Arbor has joined us."⁴⁷ They also found their energies so consumed with answering the huge volume of mail that they lacked time to promote the project locally.⁴⁸ "The labor has been like giving birth," said Nan Cheney, "agonizing but exciting."⁴⁹

WPC promotional materials emphasized the importance of thinking globally while acting locally: "In the United States we remain the gross consumers of our planet while other people in the war-torn world suffer. Women for a Peaceful Christmas believes that those in the peace movement have to take more self-sacrificing directions and that people of peace must match their personal priorities and lifestyles with their ideals."⁵⁰ The number of people who took this message of personal sacrifice to heart is impossible to know. In its first year alone, WPC answered some 15,000 queries, sending to organizations and individuals "battle plans," buttons, and their signature bumper sticker, which read, "No More Shopping Days Until Peace."⁵¹ Deliberately, none of the materials were copyrighted, and the recipients were encouraged to adapt them to their local needs. Letters of enthusiastic support continued to pour in. Some spoke movingly of their anguish at events at home and abroad. A woman from New Orleans applauded WPC as "a means of 'bringing home' to the nation the bridgeless gulf between a consumers' circus at home and death in southeast Asia."⁵²

Focus on the Environment

WPC's political interests were not limited to the conflict in Vietnam. In a November 1973 news release, the group announced that not only were "foreign involvements as ques-



Women from all over the country expressed their solidarity through letters to the organization. In her letter on Earth Day stationery, Martha MacMillan of Michigan asks for more information on the gift-buying strike.

tionable as ever," but there was a "newly added attraction of domestic scandals riddling the whole big business/big government relationship."⁵³ The oil embargo launched the previous month in the Middle East caused the price of oil in the United States to quadruple by 1974. Suddenly the world's supply of energy was a personal concern of virtually all Americans, not just the more altruistic few. As the war in Vietnam drew to a close, the focus of Women for a Peaceful Christmas shifted increasingly to environmental issues. Mindful of worldwide food and energy shortages and of pollution and economic uncertainty, its members campaigned especially against waste, including the purchase by the middle class of unnecessary clothing and non-biodegradable plastics, and the use of energy inefficient appliances.⁵⁴ When asked during the group's fourth year of operation if its goal was to undermine "The American Way of Life," Cheney responded, "I hope so. We have to rethink the way we live. I can't believe we're so dependent on [useless,



Carol Lampe, a sixteen-year-old girl from Fairfield, Connecticut, expressed her support for the women in this colorful letter. She also promised to enlist the aid of her friends.

manufactured] 'things' that we can't learn to make useful things, instead of [buying] what Madison Avenue tells us we want." She also noted that retail sales had been up by \$700 million in November and December of the previous year, "and that in the name of one who had nowhere to lay his head."⁵⁵ WPC denounced traditionally commercial Christmas celebrations as "wasteful of the earth's energy and resources, and encourag[ing of] a thing-centered, rather than a people-centered way of life."⁵⁶ Simplified, environmentally friendly alternatives allowed individuals "to decide what's really important in life and what just gets in the way."⁵⁷

Legacy and the Continuation of a Movement

On April 23, 1975, President Gerald Ford declared an end to the Vietnam War, WPC's goal of peace was achieved and the group disbanded. Its members did not, however, retire from social activism. They and other women came to dominate a variety of community efforts designed to promote peace and protect the environment. (Women took on so many roles of political leadership in Dane County that it was nicknamed "Dame County.")⁵⁸ Former WPC members joined a variety of established agencies and organizations and found additional ways through which to pursue their goals. Upon joining WPC, Dorothy Lagerroos recalls, "My life finally came together," and she credits the group with launching her into her life's work. When Lagerroos was still a child in suburban Long Island, a friend of her mother's had spread the environmental alarm throughout the neighborhood after reading *Silent Spring*. For Lagerroos, a self-described "bored young housewife," it was both burgeoning feminism and the writing of Ewell Gibbons, who emphasized the unique merits of naturally grown foods, that inspired her to join Women for a Peaceful Christmas.⁵⁹ The combination of feminism, social justice, nature,

and food had "opened her eyes" and she contacted WPC to "get into the action." As her friend Nan Cheney noted fondly thirty-five years later, Lagerroos has been "into the action" ever since, becoming first an environmental lawyer and then a professor at Northland College, an institution with a distinctive environmental liberal arts curriculum.⁶⁰ Lagerroos wrote two pamphlets, *Your Role in the Act: A Citizens Guide to WEPA* (Wisconsin Environmental Protection Act) (1977), and *Citizens Advisory Committees: How to Make Them Work* (1982), and

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recently co-authored the book *The New Science of Sustainability: Building a Foundation for Great Change* (2008).⁶¹

Nan Cheney also carried forward the precepts of WPC. In 2004, the Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice (WNPJ) presented her with a Lifetime Achievement award for her decades of effort in promoting social justice in Wisconsin. Cheney's long activist history included co-founding the Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua and the Social Justice Center and serving as president of the Wisconsin Community Fund Board. She strove to implement fair housing legislation in Madison and in the state, worked as a naturalist and docent, and became a member of Madison branch of the

Raging Grannies, an international organization of senior women who perform at various protests, rallies, and political events, including the annual Fighting Bob Fest in Baraboo, Wisconsin.⁶² Her dedication to peace remains unwavering. In receiving the award she said, "WNPJ has always focused on the issues of peace, which are at the core of who we are as Americans. We can't just do it a little here or a little there. We must work for it always."⁶³

Additional aspects of the crusade launched by Women for a Peaceful Christmas have been carried into the new millennium. Many feminists urge women to recognize and resist the oppression brought on by media insistence that women find power, joy, and fulfillment while bonding with each other in an endless round of spending sprees on non-essential, environmentally-damaging goods. Adbusters Media Foundation annually organizes International Buy Nothing Day, a series of events and boycotts in sixty-five nations world wide at the beginning of the major shopping season. This campaign, like that of its predecessor, offers a variety of alternatives to rampant materialism, promoting a "shopping-frenzy-free" holiday season.⁶⁴ It urges consideration of the major ecological and economical repercussions of consumption that is "most fevered" during the winter holiday season, including the perpetuation of sweatshop labor and waste of natural resources around the globe.

As the founders of Wisconsin's Women for a Peaceful Christmas anticipated, they did not make "much of a dent in an economy that encourages over-consumption." They nevertheless demonstrated that a small group of wives and homemakers, aided by the new wave of feminist and environmental thought, could wield meaningful power and influence. Their message reached thousands of people across the country, and contributed to the growing national environmental consciousness. ■



This photograph from 1982 shows long lines at a department store in the days after the holiday. While Women for a Peaceful Christmas did not make much of a dent in the over-consuming economy, they demonstrated that "powerless" people could wield meaningful power and influence.

Small business owners were not always friendly to the women who called for boycotts. This letter went so far as to claim that anti-war activists were "stupid" and "failed human beings."

To Whom It May Concern;

Your recent article in Woman's Day about your gift-buying strike has prompted me to write this letter. Without a doubt there are no small business owners in your organization. Otherwise they wouldn't go along with your stupid idea.

We, the small business owners of America, who have nothing whatsoever to do with the war, look forward to Christmas sales to make up for the stolen and damaged goods throughout the year. Stolen for the most part by peace-nicks. We do not raise prices at this time, but make up in volume sales.

I simply can't imagine what gets into people like your group. Is it repressed anxiety because you have failed at being human beings? You can never be satisfied; even if the war was over, you'd still find something to complain about. Wouldn't you?

May I remind you that about 37% of the small business owners are struggling against great odds just to feed and clothe their families..... and yet YOU want to deny them the right of making extra sales during the holidays so their families may have a life like others. The large discount stores are able to sell the same merchandise as the smaller stores at much lower prices because they buy in volumes. That hurts us also, but not as much as your group's campaigning nationally to boycott stores.

At the case, you'd not have

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Notes

1. Press Release, 1974, "Women for a Peaceful Christmas," Folder 8, Women for a Peaceful Christmas, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. Hereafter referred to as WPC, WHS.
2. Nan Cheney, Randall Davidson, Susan Goodier, Gail Lamberty, Dorothy Lagerroos, Mary Wisner, and Don Whitebread made valuable contributions to this article. A brief introduction to Women for a Peaceful Christmas appears in Nancy C. Unger, "Gendered Approaches to Environmental Justice: An Historical Sampling," in Sylvia Hood Washington, Paul C. Rosier, and Heather Goodall, eds., *Echoes From the Poisoned Well: Global Memories of Environmental Injustice* (Landham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 17–34.
3. Whitney Gold, "Women for Peaceful Christmas Shun Opulence," *Capital Times*, November 14, 1972, p. 7, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.



PHOTO BY DAN OGDON

In 2004, the Wisconsin Network for Peace and Justice presented Nan Cheney with a Lifetime Achievement award for her decades of effort promoting social justice in Wisconsin. Here she joined the famous "Raging Granny" demonstrations that followed the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

4. WPC Press Release, November 1973, p. 2, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
5. Nancy Woloch, *Women in the American Experience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 299.
6. Carolyn Merchant, "Women of the Progressive Conservation Movement: 1900–1916," *Environmental Review* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 65.
7. Unsigned by Genevieve Branstad to District Conservation Chairmen, circa 1937, p. 2, Box 2, Folder C, Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs, WHS.
8. See Nancy C. Unger, "The We Say What We Think Club," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 90, no. 1 (Autumn 2006): 16–27.
9. Mrs. Albert Toepler, "Conservation of Natural Resources: Glimpses Ahead," May 25, 1949, Box 2, Folder C, Wisconsin Federation of Women's Clubs, WHS. [Emphasis in original]
10. Unsigned by Genevieve Branstad to District Conservation Chairmen, p. 2.
11. See Amy Swerdlow, *Women Strike for Peace: Traditional Motherhood and Radical Politics in the 1960s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
12. The original broadcast in October was followed up by a program dedicated to reviews of the book. The readings were rebroadcast in the 7:00 p.m. slot in December, Randall Davidson to author, email, January 29, 2009.
13. Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 259–60.
14. See Stewart Udall, "How Wilderness was Won," *American Heritage* 51, no. 1 (February–March 2000): 98–103, and Vera Norwood, "Rachel Carson," in Mari Jo Buhle, ed., *The American Radical* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 313–15.
15. Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*, 423.

16. Adam Rome, "Give Earth a Chance: The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," *Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (September 2003): 536–37.
17. Ibid., 536–37.
18. "June 21 Sample Coverage," collage of clippings, Folder 8, WPC, WHS. See also "Women Plan Boycott for Peace on June 21," *Des Moines Register*, June 3, 1971, p. 11, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
19. See "Local Stores Feel Some Effect of Women's Boycott," *Santa Barbara News Press* in "June 21 Sample Coverage," collage of clippings, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
20. Dorothy Link, "Christmas can be Saved for Future Generations," *Catholic Herald Citizen*, November 20, 1971, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
21. Virginia Zwickey, "Madison Women Wage War on War," *Bugle-American*, July 1–14, 1971, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
22. Link, "Future Generations."
23. William S. Becker, "Women Push for Peaceful Christmas," Clipping from unidentified Canton, Illinois, newspaper, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
24. Link, "Future Generations."
25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.
27. William S. Becker, "Money Talks: Women Say: Boycott Shopping in War, Waste Production," *Capital Times*, November 22, 1971, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
28. News Release, Women for a Peaceful Christmas, November 1973, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
29. Gold, "Shun Opulence."
30. Nan Cheney to Rosalie Corson, October 30, 1971, Folder 6, WPC, WHS.
31. Telephone interview with Dorothy Lagerroos, January 24, 2008.
32. WPC Press Release, November 1973, p. 2, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
33. Ibid., 1–2.
34. Gold, "Shun Opulence."
35. Nancy Lambrecht, "Women Promote Peaceful Presents," *Daily Cardinal*, December 4, 1974, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
36. Gold, "Shun Opulence;" Lambrecht, "Peaceful Presents."
37. Cheney to Corson, October 30, 1971, Folder 6, WPC, WHS.
38. Becker, "Money Talks."
39. Ibid.
40. Link, "Christmas Can be Saved."
41. Becker, "Women Push for Peaceful Christmas."
42. Gold, "Shun Opulence."
43. Lambrecht, "Peaceful Presents."
44. Link, "Christmas can be Saved."
45. "Children Display 'Recycling' Talent in Wrapping Christmas Packages," *Capital Times*, December 16, 1971, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
46. Carol Kramer to NAACP Members and Friends, undated, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
47. Link, "Christmas can be Saved."
48. "Here are Women for a Peaceful Christmas," *Church Woman*, November 1971, p. 25, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
49. Link, "Christmas can be Saved."
50. Ibid.
51. Becker, "Women Push for Peaceful Christmas."
52. Cheney to Corson, October 30, 1971.
53. Press Release, November 1973, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
54. Lambrecht, "Peaceful Presents," WPC Press Release, 1974, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
55. "Fair Displays Ideas for Non-Commercial Holiday," *Capital Times*, November 27, 1974, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
56. Press Release, undated, Folder 8, WPC, WHS.
57. "Fair Displays Ideas."
58. Telephone interview with Dorothy Lagerroos, January 24, 2009.
59. Ibid.
60. Nan Cheney to author, email, January 23, 2009.
61. Dorothy Lagerroos, *Your Role in the Act: A Citizens Guide to WEPA* (Wisconsin Environmental Protection Act), (Madison, WI: Office of State Planning and Energy, 1977); *Citizens Advisory Committees: How to Make Them Work* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Extension, 1982); co-authored with Sally Goerner and Robert Dyck, *The New Science of Sustainability: Building a Foundation for Great Change* (Chapel Hill, NC: Triangle Center for Complex Systems, 2008).
62. "Fighting Bob Fest is an annual Chautauqua featuring progressive speakers, networking opportunities, and entertainment. Fighting Bob Fest carries on the tradition of Robert 'Fighting Bob' La Follette by providing a forum for progressive ideas on issues facing Wisconsin and the nation." "What is Bob Fest?" *Fighting Bob Fest*, <http://www.fightingbobfest.org/>.
63. Wisconsin Community Fund, "WNPJ Honors Nan Cheney," *Madison Times News* at a Glance, November 2004, http://www.madtimes.com/archives/nov2004_4/glance3.htm.
64. Lisa Jervis, "The Bitch Holiday Gift Guide," *Bitch*, (Fall 2003): 94. See "Buy Nothing Day," *Adbusters*, <http://www.adbusters.org/campaigns/bnd>.

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