The Vision Continues
THE FIRST 25 YEARS
First Provisional Board of Directors (1977)

Back Row (L-R): Wayne McLeod, Don McKay, Terry Gunnlagson, Clare Coburn, Audrey Silvius, Keith Smith, Bob Horton and Pearl Gervais.

Front Row (L-R): Henry Carroll, Wayne Kines, Ian Bobiak and Jane Daniels

First Elected Board of Directors (1977-78)


Front Row (L-R): Shehla Siddiqui, Leo Boivin, Clare Coburn (President), Audrey Silvius and Marie Kotyk

Current Board of Directors (2002)

Back Row (L-R): Brian Martineau, Scott Gervin, Carol Midwinter, Don Bernhardt, Susan Brechmann, Barry Delmage, Chris Haywood

Front Row (L-R): Gail Janz, Dave Hughes, Lorne Boguski, Mary Woychuk
It is a certainty that not one of the founders of Westman Media Cooperative Ltd was informed on the daunting challenges ahead of them.

They would have to win a broadcast licence from Ottawa in a vigorous competition with well-financed opponents. They would have to raise millions of dollars to meet the start-up costs. This done, they then needed tens of thousands of clients in order to meet operating expenses. Every sign-up represented another home that must be connected to the cable system.

All of these hurdles were surmounted in slightly less than two years. What was labeled as the Grand Opening was held September 14, 1978, before a blue-ribbon audience at the Western Manitoba Centennial Auditorium.

A telecommunications company is not just another business. It is an entity delicately balanced on three pedestals: technology, marketing, and regulation. A lack of harmony in any one of these areas can threaten the entire enterprise. This is not a venture for the faint of heart.

It was a combination of dedication and enthusiasm that enabled these volunteers, and the many who followed, to create and operate a successful cable company. With this as a base it was possible to expand the business interests into related fields, all of them based on technology: internet services, advertising, computer networks, even radio signals.

As happens in any human endeavor, there were stresses, strains, and major challenges along the way. All were faced and conquered. In the process what has evolved is Westman Communications Group. Awards were won for excellence, and more than once the company was designated as one of Manitoba’s fastest-growing firms.

This is the story of Westman Communications Group’s first 25 years. It is dedicated to those visionaries and volunteers who concluded that by working together they could supply the residents of western Manitoba with a vital service.

David Hughes
Chairman

David Baxter
President and CEO
CHAPTER ONE

When the switch was turned, two large TV sets were illuminated, one on either side of the stage. At the sight of those glowing images on the screens, members of the large and enthusiastic audience broke into prolonged applause: cable television had come to western Manitoba.

The guest of honour for this historic event was Hon. E.R. McGill, communications minister for the Government of Manitoba. This was the Grand Opening of Westman Media Co-operative’s service for 19 communities on the west side of the province.

That original cablecast was delivered to 3,951 homes in Brandon, and 143 in Carberry. At that time, construction crews were busy making more installations in the other communities.

That long-established radio-TV phrase, “on the air,” simply is not appropriate for the service provided by Westman Media. For this reason we must say that on the evening of September 19, 1978, the Westman signal went “down the cables.”

For those supporters who filled the hall, there was a concert along with those formalities; it was truly representative of the diverse population the new company was pledged to serve: there were Aboriginal, French-Canadian, Scottish and Ukrainian dancers; a variety of vocal offerings, youth bands, and a mini-drama presented by a troop of Boy Scouts.

In the audience were members of the first board of directors, under the chairmanship of Brandon businessman Clare Coburn. While they were understandably pleased with the event, those board members were muted in their enthusiasm; they knew that sending their signals to those first two communities was only the barest introduction to a multitude of problems that had to be resolved—immediately.

No childhood

In fact, in getting to the point of that Grand Opening, Westman Media violated most of the standard procedures for start-up firms. It was a generally accepted corporate custom that new entrants to the world of commerce, like any other infants, began as tiny entities, from which point they evolved, if successful, into something of larger size.

To the contrary, Westman Media had leaped forth as a fully-fledged adult, never having been exposed to any of the usual formative, instructive growing-up experience in which a commercial culture can be formed, and working relationships can be established.

This fact was not lost on the editorial staff of the Brandon Sun which was conducting a concerted watching brief on this young co-operative that had burst so dramatically onto the local scene.

One journalist described the new board as a “polyglot,” referring to a colourful aspect of this company’s official presentation of its application for a licence from the Canadian Radio, Television, and Telecommunications Commission; it was made in three languages: Ukrainian, English, and French.

Another Sun journalist, in an attempt to put a political label on the co-op enthusiasts, found himself unable to do so; while some of them were clearly identified with a political party, others were not. He could do no better than to call them “professionals,” which he went on to describe as having the ability to manage resources.

Another opinion stated in The Sun was generally laudatory. “These were people with the ability to take a concept, build on it, and finally follow it through. The fact that they were successful in their bid says as much about the quality and nature of the opposition they were facing as it does about them. To some extent, the Westman Media Co-op had good luck, good timing, and lots of help from government, in winning its bid.”

While the writer of this comment disparages Westman’s opposition for the federal licence, no evidence is provided for this opinion. In fact, Westman worked unbelievably hard to score that victory. What this small but dedicated body accomplished in two years is clearly newsworthy.

The challenge

It was Wayne Kines, a young Manitoban from Roblin, who took the initiative and called the exploratory meeting. Kines was an enthusiastic administrator who had learned his communication and people skills by working for persons in public life, as executive assistant to a federal MP, and then in a similar position for Oak Lake native Maurice Strong, who held senior positions with the UN. From these career steps Kines went on to a development assignment in Kenya.

In one aspect of his career, Kines had had a close
introduction to Manitoba towns. He had been a member of the crew that produced a weekly show for CBC radio. This show, “Manitoba Mirror,” reflected life in those smaller communities.

On his return to Canada following his experience in Kenya, he recognized that his home territory, western Manitoba, was ready for cable service, and he could see that such a service, if located in Brandon, could serve the entire west side of the province, from the 49th parallel as far north as the Shield. In this long, narrow area there were close to 40 towns large enough to support a cable installation.

This was the vision Kines took to the exploratory meeting, where it met with promises of enthusiastic support. That first gathering, conducted on 13 December, 1976, drew only 15 individuals, but their combined talents far exceeded that number.

Regular observers said the Westman application and presentation ranked with the best they had ever seen.

A second meeting, held a bare eight days later, drew a larger crowd, and that early enthusiasm was made manifest in some on-the-spot decisions: an eight-member Steering Committee was formed, and volunteers were appointed to seven sub-committees.

The founders were: Wayne Kines, Wayne McLeod, Clare Coburn, Audrey Silvius, Keith Smith, Henry Carroll, Arnie Christmann, and Rob Horton. Within days this group was augmented by the addition of Jane Daniel and Don McKay.

The titles of those seven sub-committees provide an accurate reflection of the problems—all major and all urgent—facing these leaders: Organization and Membership, Finance and Feasibility, Publicity and Public Relations, Co-operative Registration, CRTC Application, Programming, and Technical.

It is axiomatic in military lore that no general will ever consider waging war on more than one front at one time. This was a theory apparently unknown to the Steering Committee. The fact that they had no small problems, only those of major dimension, did not deter them.

While much progress was made, it was soon obvious that some staff assistance was required; it had been decreed by the CRTC that a Feasibility Study was required, and the due date was March 31, 1977. Terry Gunnlaugson was contracted to work with members of the Steering Committee to meet this deadline.

Before this happened, administrative changes were made that turned temporary arrangements into those of a more permanent nature. Westman Media Co-operative was registered with the Registrar of Societies. The Steering Committee, with a few changes, was elevated to the formal rank of board of directors, and several additions were made: these included Ian Bobiak, Marie Kotyk, and Pearl Gervais.

Wayne Kines initially accepted the presidency, but stepped down shortly afterward for tactical reasons, and Ian Bobiak, president of the Brandon Chamber of Commerce, replaced him.

Sales push

This was the body of individuals who now concentrated their efforts on the writing of the formal application for the licence; and a concerted outreach to the public. They felt it was necessary to promote the idea that this was a co-operative venture, and that memberships were required (at a cost of $5) for those who wanted the cable service.

One of the original board members has a crystal-clear memory of selling those shares. Audrey Silvius, who was a public-health nurse at the time, says “I coaxed friends, associates, and members of my extended family to arrange mini-meetings for me. They were held in homes, offices, and church basements. Two of us from the board would attend and make our pitch and usually come away with eight or ten more names on the list of shareholders.”

Competition

For the new co-operative to win that coveted licence, it had to present a stronger application than its competition; Stuart Craig, proprietor of Brandon radio and TV stations (Transman); and a newcomer, Grand Valley Cablevision.

The immediate goal was outlined to the Brandon Sun in some detail in the first week of March, when the application was in its final stages of completion.

“We’re asking to be allowed to provide cable to the entire Westman area, including smaller communities such as Swan River, Dauphin, Roblin, Melita,
Boissevain, Souris, and Killarney… if the licence is granted to an existing television station, there would be a monopoly of the media, and no competition to encourage improvement of the programming; if granted to a private company, their long-term goal would be to make a profit for their shareholders, which would limit the amount they spent on programming…"

“These were people with the ability to take a concept, build on it, and finally follow it through.”

The application
The licence application, a 550-page heavyweight, was hand-delivered to CRTC headquarters in Ottawa on the day before the due date of March 31st. It proposed a multi-phase plan for service installation.

Cable television services would be delivered in Brandon, Carberry, Minnedosa, and Neepawa by the autumn of 1978, with the addition of the other 14 towns in the next 12-month period. This latter group all had a population in excess of 1,000, this being the requisite number for a microwave cost-sharing arrangement.

The content
The original application included nine channels: PBS, ABC, and NBC, from the United States; from Canada, CKY, and CBC (English, and French when available); a local channel controlled within each community; and two regional networks, one for information and entertainment; and the other for continuing education. There would also be five FM stereo radio signals.

The support
Between the date the licence application was delivered to CRTC, and June 7 1977, the date on which the commission conducted its public hearing in Winnipeg, there was a continuing, non-stop flow of mail to Ottawa from the west side of Manitoba.

This flow consisted of letters of support for the Westman licence. Members of the board had done a masterful job of contacting individuals and organizations soliciting letters of support. Along with letters from a broad mix of sources, were those of the many co-operative bodies that were underwriting the new company with share purchases.

The hearings
When the CRTC conducts a public hearing, there is a sizeable body of individuals certain to be in the hall. These are professional media-watchers, either associated with the media press, or with one or more electronic outlets.

It was agreed by these hardened observers that the Westman application and presentation ranked with the best they had ever seen. Not only was the plan of action creative, and socially useful in every respect, but also the extent of the public support was extraordinary.

Aboriginal Tribal Councils were there, along with representatives of Brandon University, church groups, urban and rural municipal councils, youth groups, community colleges, and many more.

Highly regarded
Seasoned observers declared they had never seen anything like it. At one point during the deliberations, someone from the Brandon contingent put a large roll of paper on the floor and kicked it towards the dais. It unrolled like paper towel. This was still more support, letters of encouragement and business cards, all of them collected by volunteers.

When the provisional directors of Westman Media Co-op Ltd., as it was called at the time, made their presentation to the CRTC, they set new levels of excellence.

Amateur vs professional
There was a Horatio-Alger aspect to this licence contest. In this corner we had a group of volunteers noteworthy for enthusiasm, cohesion, and a stated lack of money. In the other corner was Western Manitoba Broadcasters with a 50-year record of successful media experience behind it.

The foundation
As a foundation to the presentation was the document itself; 550 pages, a mixture of both fact and opinion. Along with the required information about the applicant’s corporate structure, financing, and transmission technicalities, there were hundreds of letters of support from towns, villages, Aboriginal bands, church groups, and private individuals.
Jane Daniel, one of the early staff members, had done much of the work on the application. Daniel had an unusual background. She was a British-trained nurse and midwife who changed her career course into advertising and public relations.

Like Wayne Kines, she had worked for the UN in Nairobi, Kenya, and she accompanied Kines on his return to Canada. With Kines she launched a communications company in Brandon called Devcom Communications.

In order to assure the members of the CRTC that the proposed media co-op would truly represent western Manitoba in all its ethnic diversity, she worked tirelessly to win the support of the communities it was designed to serve.

It was Jane Daniel who did much of the organizational work on what was called the “D-Day Dinner.” This was a large and spirited gathering of Westman Co-op supporters who dined in a Winnipeg hotel the evening before the critical CRTC hearing.

The licence presentation was made in three languages: Ukrainian, English, and French.

Colourful presentation
That presentation was a startling variation from the norm. The founding president, Ian Bobiak, made part of the presentation in the Ukrainian language. Two Roman Catholic nuns who spoke in French followed him. Then came individual members of the first board: agriculturists, industrialists, homemakers, educators, and leaders of area co-operatives.

That victory was the culmination of a campaign notable for the contention it produced. One of the competing applicants, Stuart Craig of CKX, was spreading the word that the co-operative amateurs had no professional broadcast experience. In an unusual move, some of Craig’s employees were opposing his application on the grounds his radio and TV services were not being operated for the benefit of the area they served.

The Brandon Sun estimated that Craig spent $100,000 on his application, mainly on legal and promotional services. Wayne Kines told the newspaper the co-op’s total costs were $14,000.

The application was a regular topic in the council chambers of Brandon city hall when the mayor insisted he was neutral, but his correspondence with the CRTC, when released, revealed he was backing the Transman application.

The award
It was an excited journalist, Bill Turner, from the CKLQ newsroom, who made a number of telephone calls at noon hour on August 8th, 1977; the announcement had just been made in Ottawa that Westman Media was being granted a broadcast licence.

The barriers
That much-desired permission to proceed by no means guaranteed that the path would be smooth and the wind favourable. Electronic communications is an administrative nightmare of interlocking, and occasionally confrontational patchwork of arrangements between various jurisdictions: federal, provincial, and sometimes municipal.

From a timing point of view, Westman’s start-up was clearly unfortunate. The federal authorities were in the midst of promulgating a new Canada-Manitoba Agreement, under which the province would be given the rights for the provincially owned telephone system to own the hardware for cablecasting, except for the final “drop-wire.” New rules meant new uncertainties for the clearly over-worked Westman directors.

Nor was this all. Westman had to join forces with other new cable licencees to sort out some of their common problems with the federal authorities. There also was a need for co-operation closer to home; it was necessary to forge a bond between all Manitoba cable companies that would solve their common problem of importing signals from the US. On top of this was the need to negotiate with Manitoba Telephones an arrangement to get signals to Brandon from Winnipeg.

First annual meeting
On September 30, 1977, at the first annual meeting, Clare Coburn succeeded Ian Bobiak as president, and began a tour of duty that was to continue for five years. The matter of management was resolved with the appointment of Devcom Management Services to a two-year contract, which saw Wayne Kines installed as CEO.
While there still were major problems to be solved, technical and bureaucratic among them, the immediate thrust for the new administration was the formation of CMCs, as the Community Media Committees soon became known.

In close co-operation with Westman staff members, the CMCs had to work through a myriad of details: the location of the local studio, additional sites for offices and equipment, the plan for local membership sales, the recruitment of volunteers for a variety of tasks. Local autonomy was a firm policy, and once the facilities had been established, and the patrons were receiving the signals, each community would have full control over local services.

Westman Media had leaped forth as a fully-fledged adult.

**Passing the buck**

During this period in which everything was going out, and nothing was coming in, Westman Media directors could never put money out of mind. It was a gift of $25,000 from Westoba Credit Union that provided the original seed money; it was a consortium of co-operatives that had provided an interest-free loan of $2 million, but there were major operating expenses mounting up and still there were no paying patrons.

Following some gentle nudges from CRTC about its heavy debt load, Westman went to the public for financing. It did so through the sale of shares, Class A common shares for all subscribers, and Class B shares which, at some future date, could receive a dividend from the operating surplus.

Showing clearly that they were prepared to put their money where their hearts were, it was the members of the first board of directors who lined up to become the first shareholders.

Share #1 was issued to Arnie Christmann, and following this in sequence were those of: Robert Horton, Audrey Silvius, Henry Carroll, Don McKay, Clare Coburn, Keith Smith. These were the founding fathers and mothers.

In less than two years these individuals, working as volunteers, had overcome hundreds of barriers to get the Media Co-op into business.

CHAPTER TWO

Clare Coburn says two dates are indelibly inscribed in his memory: “December 13, 1976, and September 19, 1978.”

“That first date was the exploratory meeting at which we heard, for the first time, the potential of cable television for the west side of the province. The second date is when we had the Grand Opening.”

A quarter-century after that Grand Opening, Clare Coburn still marvels at what a group of dedicated volunteers was able to accomplish when they shared a vision.

“In those intervening 21 months I saw volunteers make accomplishments that I would not have thought possible. Just for example, let me tell you the story of the CMCs, those community media committees.

“Our motivation for those bodies, one in each of the towns we were going to serve, was powerful in the extreme: they were the avenue which led to subscribers, and subscribers meant money coming in. At this point we had around 3,000 signed-up customers, probably one-tenth of our potential.”

**The bomb**

When he left the auditorium following that Grand Opening, Coburn was cautiously optimistic about the immediate future. Yes, the dream had been realized and yes, the co-operative was now functional and its signals were serving the homes of early shareholders and subscribers.

But, in the back of his mind, was a reminder that of all the remaining problems, one of them had the potential to drive Westman right into the unfriendly arms of the bailiff.

When the hopeful founders of the young co-operative made their presentation to the CRTC, it was explained that the co-operative’s budget was based upon a subsidy it would receive from the cable firms in Winnipeg.

When the CRTC granted the licence to the Brandon co-op, it was specific about a number of items but distressingly vague about others.

For example, the federal authority demanded that there be a cost-sharing formula developed between the Winnipeg cable operators and the rural operators, the goal being rate equalization across the province.
As a result of some hasty arithmetic, the Brandon board members calculated that Winnipeg firms would pay Westman 56 cents for each Winnipeg subscriber. As these subscribers were numbered in the hundreds of thousands, there was a substantial amount involved.

**In those intervening 21 months I saw volunteers make accomplishments that I would not have thought possible.**

As it turned out, however, due to the Canada-Manitoba Agreement that had just been announced, the CRTC could not order the Winnipeg cable companies to pay this subsidy. The federal agency could go no further than to recommend negotiation.

This was easier to say than to accomplish. The Winnipegers had no inclination to share their revenues if this could be avoided. They were under no compulsion to co-operate; after all, the supreme authority had not issued a firm order to comply.

They set up a concerted resistance. Negotiations led nowhere but to equal parts of tension and frustration.

When some of the signals arriving from Winnipeg were scrambled, the Brandon directors took a bold stroke: they used their own cable system to give viewers their side of this argument, along with names and telephone numbers of those individuals in Winnipeg who were preventing viewers on the west of the province from receiving the quality pictures for which they were paying.

This measure was not only extreme, but also effective. Years later Clare Coburn recalled that “when the Winnipeg cable operators came to Brandon for a meeting, we caught hell for what we had done, but we never regretted it, not for a second.”

**Change of management**

The subsidy negotiations were still unresolved when the board of directors faced another troubling hurdle. Relations between Devcom and the board were clearly troublesome. There were sharp differences respecting hiring practices and budgetary controls.

There could not have been a worse time for this source of tension. It was imperative that there be harmony at the top level as the directors of the new co-op swung into the daunting task of selling more memberships in the towns at the same time they helped the rural residents form their Community Media Committees.

**Koeppel joins Westman**

Clippings from the *Brandon Sun* in this period refer to acute stress and locked doors in what some observers called “The Revolution.” The end result was that Devcom was separated from its management function and the position of general manager went vacant.

For a number of months, President Coburn doubled in brass. Early every morning he reported for duty as president of Atom-Jet, his metals-fabricating plant, where he lined up the day’s work for the machinists, and then he hurried to the Westman office where he fulfilled the duties of acting general manager of the co-op.

It was during this period that an administrator of the Manitoba Department of Co-operative Development came to Brandon with an answer to the management problem. He suggested that one of his associates, Jack Koeppel, would advertise for a general manager and also would appraise the applicants.

Jack Koeppel has a clear recollection of what followed from this point. “I was perhaps half finished that assignment when Clare Coburn told me to call it off; he said he and the other directors had come to know me and that I was the person they wanted to hire. The department gave me a two-year leave so I could move to Brandon.”

What Koeppel found when he reported for full-time duty was a company sorely in need of a firm hand at the tiller. He has since described it as in debt, over-staffed, and seriously in need of a development plan.

For the fledgling firm, this was an appointment of great
significance. Jack Koeppel had the benefit of advanced business training, and had been successful in helping some proprietors bring their companies back from the brink. At this point in the late 1970s he was a senior staff member of the Manitoba Department of Co-operative Development. His experience at strolling down those corridors of power in the Legislative Buildings was a solid-gold blessing for Westman’s beleaguered board, locked in battle with the Winnipeg cable operators.

When he was fully apprised of the background, Koeppel drove to Winnipeg and told the Brandon story to the premier and some of the cabinet ministers. Within weeks there was a resolution and Westman began receiving a subsidy of 25 cents per Winnipeg cable subscriber.

Relative harmony
While the relations were improved between Westman and the Winnipeg cable operators, this was by no means the end of Westman’s need for non-stop negotiations.

Cable television being a latecomer in electronic communication, there was an apparently endless list of regulations that had to be considered; there were old ones that no longer applied; there were new ones in need of fine-tuning. In the course of two years, Westman was engaged in discussions with: CRTC, federal Department of Communications, Communications Minister Jeanne Sauve, communications advisors to the prime minister, Winnipeg cable operators, along with other cable licencees.

Slim victory
This troublesome, bureaucratic procedure was costing the Westman director’s valuable hours at the most critical time in their corporate lives. Just when they should be out promoting the service, and adding more names to their list of subscribers, they were regularly tied up in meetings at which they discussed ongoing or pending negotiations. One factor, which encouraged them to press on with formal hearings in the most cheerful manner, was their decision to appear buoyant and cheerful even if they didn’t feel this way; they had just learned that when the CRTC granted them their licence this decision was attained by a majority of only one vote.

Local actions, national story
As it was expected that cable television would eventually be offered to every Canadian home, this matter of divided jurisdiction—part federal, part provincial became a national story. When they considered the enigma faced by Westman’s board of directors, the editors of the Financial Post made the following comment: “Now, though CRTC claims jurisdiction over what is programmed on the service, there are a number of awkward shades of grey between programming and non-programming (proposals for leased channels where only advertising would appear, for example). Whether the province, CRTC or the federal Department of Communications regulates the new technology has not been settled.” This was the legislative minefield through which the Westman board members picked their way with caution.

In a class by itself was the relationship between Westman and Manitoba Telephone System. MTS was the agency that would own the cable that delivered to Brandon the signals from the East, and from the U.S.

Change of management
In 1980, Jack Koeppel asked to be relieved of his duties as general manager because he had been offered a senior position with Credit Union Central. He said if his wish were granted, he would be on call to Westman as an unpaid advisor. Koeppel’s request was approved, and Terry Gunnlaugson was appointed acting manager. Jack Koeppel’s period of management had been marked by strict adherence to a rigid program of cost reduction; revenues at that time were not nearly sufficient to match expenses.

Change of management, again
The appointment of Terry Gunnlaugson was due recognition for one of Brandon’s cable pioneers. Revenue Canada had employed Terry Gunnlaugson, a certified general accountant, before he returned to Brandon to enter the restaurant business. It was one of his regular customers, a chartered accountant, who told him of the cable co-op, and how beneficial it would be for the territory. He suggested Gunnlaugson become involved.

Recollections
“I came on board when Westman was little more than an idea. I did the accounting for the application to the CRTC. I was at the fund-raising dinner sponsored by Wayne McLeod, and at the CRTC hearings.”

“Once the licence was issued, and installations were being made, I interested myself in the activities of the
community media committees.”

“We had a good, workable process. In the early days, while there was cable in many of the towns, there were no cable links between the towns themselves. We needed a satellite dish in each town, except for a few in the Brandon-Winnipeg orbit. This dish captured the signals for local distribution. We also captured any others that were in the air from places like Yorkton. This meant we had slightly different services from one town to the next.”

“Once a local service was active, it was time for the volunteers to move in. We had to explain cable. We had to assure them that control of the local access signal would be their responsibility and under the control of local residents. We had to find space for a studio.”

“I can remember coming home late from a CMC meeting somewhere in the territory, and then being in the restaurant at seven the next morning for a board meeting. In those days they held early-morning meetings in a corner of the Chicken Delight.”

Current status

One of Terry Gunnlaugson’s first duties was to brief the board on the status quo.

Neepawa had 33 per cent of potential households signed up; Minnedosa was at 41 per cent, and Rivers was at 28 per cent.

Several important milestones had been passed that summer: there were 8,000 subscribers; a ‘significant’ surplus for the second year in a row had wiped out the deficit and Westman was now in a surplus position.

The report also outlined some causes for concern: the cost-sharing proposal with the Winnipeg operators was nowhere in sight, and might not become effective for years; an unlicensed ‘pirate’ was operating in Swan River, offering three channels at a rate that matched that of Westman; the capital requirements for Dauphin and Swan River were forecast at $100,000 each.

Steady expansion

This was the period in which construction crews were busy in every town on the west side of Manitoba; they were installing cable connections in homes and offices.

Dauphin, Minnedosa, Neepawa and Rivers were added to the system in 1980.

There was a burst of activity in 1981-1982 when cable service was offered to the following towns: Boissevain, Gladstone, Souris, Virden, Killarney, Swan River, Gilbert Plains, Grandview, Birtle, Deloraine, Melita, Roblin, Russell and Ste. Rose du Lac.

Community media committees

The minutes of the board of directors in 1980 – 81 make frequent references to a topic that was always treated with special care. Board members were mindful of the assistance towns in their territory had provided when the broadcast licence application to the CRTC was being made. As a consequence, early boards of directors had reinforced this relationship by regularly passing bylaws reinforcing the need for continuing support to the towns.

This was an undertaking that called for delicacy. After all, the Community Media Committees were autonomous creatures, very much in charge of their own affairs. On the other hand, they needed the support that head office could provide, and their needs varied widely from one town to the next.

Maintaining contact with the CMCs was a non-stop function, and in the early years, this was accomplished through the use of volunteers, or small teams hired on a contract basis.

As the demands for liaison work with the committees was certain to increase as more towns came on line, Terry Gunnlaugson attempted to be ready for this increased demand.

Community liaison

In a memo to the board, he offered a proposal he felt would meet the requirements for the next three years. He recommended expenditures of $165,000 for capital purposes, and $120,000 for staff costs. This proposal was accepted, and the board approved a new position, that of a programming coordinator.

Curious incident

This proposed appointment of a programming coordinator eventually led to a string of unfortunate circumstances.

In a period in which Terry Gunnlaugson was on vacation, the board approved a Winnipeg consulting firm be contracted to do a review of board policies and personnel practices. This contract carried with it an immediate freeze on hiring.

When Gunnlaugson and the other senior members of
management were at a cable conference in Calgary, a seriously distraught staff member informed them that representatives of the consulting firm had taken over the company management.

Gunnlaugson hurried home to learn that in the opinion of the consultant, he was to be suspended from duty for two weeks with pay, and Leo Boivin, director of operations, and Paul Neustaedter, comptroller, were to be suspended with pay for one month. Representatives of the consulting firm assumed all the duties of management. Neustaedter, being on probation, took his suspension as a vote of non-confidence and returned to Winnipeg. Gunnlaugson resigned. In the aftermath it came to light this unusual action was based upon a long-simmering dispute over planning for Westman’s future directions.

The requirements
The towns needed a committee of persons of prominence who would recruit volunteers for a variety of duties, several of which might stretch ahead for many years. There was a need for accommodation: there was valuable equipment to be stored; suitable space for a studio had to be located in some central area; if this space was not large enough to accommodate an office, then this became a third requirement.

Early call
Ivan Traill remembers this preliminary research. “I’m certain my fellow residents of Neepawa had never heard of a community-access channel at that time. The subject was introduced to me by Wayne Kines, and a student from Brandon University, Jim Ritchie.

When that Kines-Ritchie duo made contact with Ivan Traill this proved to be a vital connection. He went on to become a member of the board of directors, and eventually board chairman, and after 25 years is still the moving force behind the Neepawa CMC.

CHAPTER THREE

“T the town that has a community-access channel, or CMC as they are known has the potential to become a stronger social unit. A CMC is one of the elastic bands that binds a community more closely together.”

This is the opinion of Dr. Robert Annis, a psychologist and professor of rural development at Brandon University.

Now that Westman Communications Group, as it is now known, is about to celebrate its quarter-century anniversary, it is appropriate to look at the accomplishments of those many volunteers who donate spare hours to community access.

Advance work
Many months before Westman received its precious broadcast licence, residents of rural Manitoba towns were talking about community media committees.

This discussion was the result of exploratory work being done by members of the provisional board of directors and a number of volunteers whom they recruited.

It was imperative for those early board members to learn if there was widespread support for their proposed cable service. The way to determine this was to visit with key representatives of the original nineteen towns covered by their licence.

Virden CMC
The launching of the Community Media Committee in Virden was an exercise in mobility. Before it settled into a permanent location, the three elements: equipment, office, and studio, were located temporarily in: a building directly beneath the water tower, on the second floor of the town hall, the collegiate, private homes, and Carscadden’s Funeral Home.

The location may have been uncertain for a while but the results were positive. In its early months, volunteers with cameras had captured the official reopening of the Aud Theatre, all the games of the Western Canadian Senior Baseball Championships, and sundry other local events.

This was by no means unusual. After the number of towns being served by cable had expanded, all 35 of them wanted to become active players in the cablevision game, but not one of them had surplus space that could be devoted immediately to this purpose.

Deloraine CMC
It was cablevision volunteers in this town who proved that practice indeed makes perfect. After a lengthy series of workshops and practice sessions they won the President’s Trophy for excellence in the Award Night
competitions, plus separate plaques for the quality of their coverage of sports and religion.

Among the many young persons who have been introduced to media training at the Neepawa CMC are at least two who turned it into a career. Christine Crowther is now a TV journalist working in the Middle East; Ted Deller is an on-air personality with CBC radio in Regina.

Gladstone CMC
At Gladstone, the potential for local cablevision became a topic of local discussion when it was introduced at a public meeting by two Westman staff members, Stuart Harvey and Georgina Nimmo, who were accompanied by that busy volunteer, Ivan Traill. The report of that meeting states the residents were given a “wealth of information.”

A later report from the Gladstone CMC, now on file in the Westman archives, waxes enthusiastic on the benefits to be derived from homegrown cable coverage.

Video wisdom
This report has a recommendation. It says “Make your biggest mistake during your first video-taping, and you will never make that mistake again.” There was a reason for this sharing of film wisdom: Gladstone volunteers did a splendid job of taping the Ice Costume Carnival, but, alas, someone forgot to turn on the audio.

Non-stop training
Once each CMC had the equipment housed, even if in a temporary location, there was an urgent need for a full-time trainer to serve the towns and their committees. This assignment fell to Monica Truffyn of Roblin, recently returned from the Lakehead where she graduated from Confederation College in film and camera work.

She recalls, “I was often out visiting towns as many as three or four days a week. If a longer trip was involved, say to Dauphin or Swan River, I would schedule a weekend workshop.”

“I visited each town many times. First I went with a single camera, and later with two cameras and a switcher. I distinctly remember that most of the students were adults. It wasn’t until later that the high-school students became interested, although I was a frequent visitor to the schools.”

Neepawa accomplishments
This is a model to be emulated. Ivan Traill is still in charge and he and his volunteers offer viewers a constant flow of local footage.

“We broadcast over 400 hours of local footage every year. Included in this are 50 hockey games, all the baseball games, and a church service once a week. We have a three-way rotation: Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, and the ministerial association which includes United-Baptist-Anglican.”

Is the work of the CMC appreciated? Ivan Traill says yes, “We know the public appreciates it, especially the seniors. I know for a certainty that they watch every Sunday-morning church service. When the service is over, they’ll call to complain if I turn the cameras off too quickly; they want to know who was there and what they were wearing.”

Media training
Among the many young persons who have been introduced to media training at the Neepawa CMC, there are at least two who turned it into a career. Christine Crowther is now a TV journalist working in the Middle East; Ted Deller is an on-air personality with CBC radio in Regina.

No objectors
Even when the first board was working overtime in the development of the CMCs, it was a project virtually free of objectors. The towns wanted their local cable coverage up and working, a feeling that was echoed by Westman’s board of directors. Active community participation was an article of faith with the original Steering Committee; and it was re-emphasized each year by the succeeding boards of directors that Westman towns were going to enjoy vigorous member participation and local autonomy.

In the aftermath of the Grand Opening, its members kept this guiding principle in the front of their minds, and
it took positive form with a motion at a board meeting in December of 1978: it was moved and seconded that someone, either a director or a volunteer, would visit each of the towns “before Christmas” with a view to making lists of community leaders qualified to assume positions of leadership in what were soon being called “CMCs”.

It was after a few CMCs had been established when the directors realized that no protocol had been established that would guide CMC-Westman relations. After due deliberation, it was agreed that it would not be proper for the board or management to write the rules. This called for another board decision that the CMC volunteers themselves should draw up the covering bylaw and this resulted in another delay of a year’s duration.

We have a few grumblers who believe that we do not get the recognition we deserve; after all, it was community support that helped the co-op get that coveted broadcast licence.

Official reluctance

This was not the first time co-op board members were reluctant to take action which would appear to have them interfering with the local autonomy of the CMCs.

It is further proof of their interest in maintaining an arm’s-length association that moved them to create the first RAC - the Regional Access Committee. This committee is staffed exclusively by CMC members and is the official liaison link between the CMCs and the administration. In the year of the 25th birthday, the RAC chairman was Herb Henson, of Ste. Rose du Lac. It is understandable that this man, a long-service schoolteacher, can take the long view when he talks about the cable co-op; he was invited to help form the first Regional Access Committee, and 24 years later, he’s still in harness.

He establishes the background with a remarkable economy of words. “Every CMC is represented on the RAC board. We meet four times a year, always in Brandon. Attendance is mandatory, or the CMC must pay a small penalty.”

“We are the distribution agency for CMC income. We are a buffer between the CMCs and the administration, which saves the administration from a lot of calls. This arms-length relationship also helps the CMCs maintain their autonomy.”

“We talk about local services, and shared broadcast material, and we talk about money, of which there is never enough. There was a sharp cut in our incomes five years ago, and we would like to catch up. Our bulk income is based upon a fraction of the co-op’s net.”

“What is the benefit of an active CMC? It helps the residents learn a great deal more about themselves. It also can be a magnet for those persons who do not live in town. I regularly hear stories about persons from out-of-town who come to our concerts and other local attractions because we promoted them.”

“We have a few grumblers who believe that we do not get the recognition we deserve; after all, it was community support that helped the co-op get that coveted broadcast licence.

Valuable assistance

James Ritchie had an unusual association with the cable co-op. In that first year in which he was making community calls with Wayne Kines, he was a student at Brandon University. Following his graduation, he became a member of the staff for two years.

When Ritchie was a student, his professor of rural development assigned him the task of studying the relationship between the co-op administration and the CMCs, and offering opinions on possible improvements. Ritchie’s report is both lengthy and comprehensive. He rated every town’s state of readiness to operate a successful, autonomous CMC. He designed a five-phase program for introducing the CMC concept in towns that had no residents suitably trained to provide support. He believed this program could be completed in three years.

The five stages that Ritchie recommends are: exploration; direct program stimulation; shared program responsibility; support to local leaders; and finally, technical assistance as required. It was his opinion that CMC’s could be operating successfully in all communities. In the budget figures, he estimated that the cost of this program of “community liaison” would be $165,000 in capital expenditures, and $120,000 for staff. These are the identical figures the co-op administration was using a year later when it was having a troubling time establishing a community-programming committee.

Westman Communications Group

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Gold or dross

As CMCs continue doing what they do best, recording local events and occurrences and cablecasting them to their viewers, they accumulate film archives to a remarkable extent. A few of them offer their viewers 200-300 hours of fresh material per year, which comprises a unique library of local social history.

Which begs the question: is this archival material gold or dross? Those who say gold insist that each collection is unique in the finest meaning of that word: precious, irreplaceable, and that if destined to the landfill would represent a major cultural loss to prairie history.

Those who say dross feel just as keenly on the other hand. One person who is well informed on the preservation of cultural material is Prof. Tom Mitchell, archivist of Brandon University. It is his opinion that the subject is worthy of serious study and discussion by persons of diverse interest.

“I cannot tell you why I would want to see footage of exhibition parades at Carberry or Swan River 25 years from now, but this might be important to someone researching prairie history.”

“It is possible for me to say that I have a limited interest in seeing footage of bingo games, but then I reflect on what bingo has meant to the Prairies in the past century: it built many of our churches and most of our recreation facilities. Will some future scholars want to see bingo footage: I do not know, but this is the type of question the local volunteers should be attempting to answer.”

CHAPTER 4

The Middle Years

Gary Cooper had a connection with Westman many months before it was officially in business.

He was approached by Wayne Kines and Jane Daniel to see if he would join a committee they were organizing. Its function was to encourage the Canadian Radio and Telecommunications Commission to issue a broadcast licence to the co-op they were interested in forming.

At the time, Cooper was located in Dauphin where he was General Manager of the Parkland Regional Development Corporation.

As he later explained to a researcher, “It was a natural that I should become interested when visitors have an idea that will bring modern technology to the region for which I was working.” He became an active member of that Dauphin committee.

Intervention duties

Three years later it was another call from Wayne Kines that caused Cooper to intervene with the Westman board of directors on a matter of serious contention.

A company owned by Kines, Devcom, had been awarded a contract for managerial duties for the new co-op. A sharp difference of opinion between Devcom and the board resulted in Devcom’s separation from its duties.

Gary Cooper was asked to become chairman of a small group of shareholders who wanted to look into the conditions surrounding this separation.

He later said, “We had several meetings with the board of directors, and our final conclusion was that the termination of the Devcom contract was justified, although we had several doubts about the manner in which this was accomplished.”

In 1983, Cooper was appointed general manager of what was then called Westman Media Co-operative. He succeeded Terry Gunnlaugson, whose termination a few months earlier had been a matter of some controversy.

As the new corporate leader, Cooper stepped into a difficult assignment. He certainly didn’t have to look far to find work.

Frank admission

Five years following his appointment, as Cooper was planning new horizons for the young company, he wrote a revealing letter to his then directors In part it read:

“When I became general manager in August of 1983, WMCL was in trouble financially, it was operating out-
side its licenced authority, factions within the membership were waging public warfare against the board of directors, the staff and management were demoralized, internal systems had no control, and the co-op’s image was held in low regard by the industry, government regulatory bodies, and the public."

**Substantial progress**

Despite all these troubles, Westman was making progress. The previous autumn, in a burst of activity, Grandview, Roblin, and Gilbert Plains were brought on line, while headend sites were still being investigated at Birtle, Russell, and Ste. Rose du Lac. The plans were being written for the introduction of pay-TV.

All of these topics had to be kept in the front of his mind at the same time that Cooper strove to bring harmony into a troubled company that was wracked by schisms.

There was nothing original about the differences of opinion: mainly they were based on money. While resources were limited, there were a few spending enthusiasts who believed that some expenditures should be markedly increased, especially those involving the CMCs.

**Budget woes**

When interim management drafted the ’83-’84 budget, it did so based upon projected increases in both revenues and subscribers that failed to materialize. The result was an error of some dimension. Controller Fred Thorsteinson gave the bad news to management and the directors, and the latter made an immediate decision: all non-committed expenses were frozen; expansion into new communities was postponed; and staff was reduced in operations. These actions reduced to $130,000 a shortfall that at one time was forecast at $400,000.

**Patronage dividends**

At the AGM in 1983, the shareholders had failed to ratify a proposal regarding patronage refunds, which resulted in a tax liability of $160,000. The consequences were inevitable; Westman must apply for its first rate increase since formation.

**Paper work**

It is one thing for the directors to approve a rate increase; it is quite something else indeed for this to occur. CRTC regulations being what they are, controller Fred Thorsteinson had to write two briefs, each 100 pages in length. The first dealt only with pass-through costs; the second with a growing number of cost increases in the co-op’s first ten years. Both applications were successful with the new subscription rate now standing at $13.

And, while he had all these active files on his desk, Cooper had to worry about the customer list. Westman was slowly acquiring new clients and new shareholders, but still the percentage of penetration in the average town was only in the middle twenties. There was much promotion work to be done, but only within severe budget limitations.

**Non-stop negotiations**

When he wasn’t occupied by his myriad of in-house topics, all demanding his attention, Cooper had a never-ending series of calls on his time for negotiations.

There were equalization-rate discussions to be continued with the Winnipeg cable owners. At the same time, he had to work in concert with those owners to solve the problem of what to do about CANCOM. In the company of other rural cable-company representatives he had to attend meetings in the regional offices of CRTC for a discussion of common problems.

**Troublesome CANCOM**

CANCOM buys the rights to U.S. television shows and re-sells them to Canadian television outlets. It is a common carrier, like pipelines and telephone companies, and as such is heavily regulated. It is favoured by CRTC as a means of maintaining a balance between Canadian content and that originating in the U.S.

Between the regulations of the CRTC, and those under which CANCOM operates, it was difficult to find agreement on rates. Over the years they ranged from 15 cents per signal per subscriber per month, to $1 per signal per subscriber per month, with little assurance that the contract rate would be maintained.

**Change of status**

The board of directors made a decision that had far-reaching effects on the statistics: it was recommended to the general membership that, as of August 1, 1988, all non-member shareholders of WMCL become members. In the future, all new subscribers would become members of the co-op.

Original second office at 909-24th Street.

Original Dauphin office, which was torn down for a new office which was never built.

The Swan River head-end, known as the “Chicken Coop”. It had been a hatchery.

The Vision Continues: The First 25 Years
1978: Clare Coburn (left) selling a saving certificate to member Walter Dinsdale.

Clare Coburn (right) selling Cec White of Rivers his very own saving certificate.

1980: Installing the Brandon dish. Single channel cost $25,000; received the House of Commons. The dish is still in use today.

Assembling the dish on the roof of a hotel in Dauphin. The job could not be finished and eventually a crane was used to set the dish on the ground, where it still sits today.

1984: Building the Gladstone head-end, the site of Westman’s Communications Group’s tallest tower at 100’.
Early CMC volunteer with black & white camera.

Terry Gunnlaugson and Emery White with black & white equipment.

Randy, one of Westman’s creative programming staff.

Programming Department technician working in the 24th Street shop after the studio was closed and moved to 10th Street.

The original programming mobile, dubbed “The Party Wagon.” The Dauphin CMC used it to transfer the football team to the pub.
1906 Park Avenue by night — the current home of Westman Communications Group.

2002: The WCGtv Modile Television Production Unit

Unveiling the new name and corporate logo.
Relocation
Over a period of several months the members of management had been striving to solve a real estate problem; they were growing out of their 24th Street premises.

In this period, a larger building came on the market. This had been the business place of Powell Equipment, heavy-implement dealership. Gary Cooper was authorized to arrange an option on the property until research could be conducted. In November of 1988 this property at 1906 Park Avenue was purchased for $480,000.

Planning helped us realize that we were vulnerable to competition. For example, if a competitor had taken 40 per cent of our subscribers, we would have had a problem of sustainability.

New horizons
In March, 1988, Cooper wrote to the board to report that the time of crisis management was past, and now it was timely to get on with a serious study of the co-op's future.

The letter went on to say that there still was one gap that must be filled: missing was a Corporate Plan which clearly set out a pattern of growth.

The first move that would lead to this goal was a two-day planning seminar held that April. Several weeks later, the directors approved the preparatory work for a Strategic Plan, and made arrangements for a representative of the Federal Business Development Bank to lead a board discussion on this topic. What came out of this was a lengthy series of board-management conferences, which eventually produced a series of recommendations.

The specifics of the new approach were listed in the following categories: corporate growth, subscriber relations, corporate promotion, and a continuing search for diversification opportunities.

Offer to buy
The positive results, which ensued from the immersion of directors and staff members into the planning process, obviously attracted attention in other parts of the province.

This became manifest in October of 1988 when Interlake Cable offered to buy Westman Media. The suggested price was roughly $5 million, based upon the exact size of the subscription list.

Serious study
Interlake’s offer led to lengthy discussions regarding the need to inform the members, but the eventual decision was that it, the proposed sale, “is not in the best interests of the co-op.”

MTS and cable
When Gary Cooper made his general manager’s report to the board in December of 1988, he provided information from another province.

Cooper had initiated meetings with cable owners in Saskatchewan, who had purchased cable systems from the telephone companies. They had saved money, but also they no longer had to wait for the telephone construction crews to maintain or extend their cables.

Cooper had estimated that Westman could save $489,000 a year if it purchased the cable system from MTS.

Official confusion
It had become evident to CEO Cooper and his fellow executives that Westman was drifting from one crisis to another. Clearly, it was time to establish—in writing—the corporate goals and objectives. For this purpose a contract was issued to Coopers, Currie and Lybrand for the development of a policy manual.

CMC protocol
In February of 1985, the board approved and released the “Guidelines for Relationship Between Westman Media Co-operative Limited and Community Media Committees.”

This document spelled out the regulations concerning programming, premises, equipment, recruitment, administration, and support in the form of training, finances, and equipment. As an indication of the board’s interest in improved relations, the programming department was renamed the Community Access Department. In a companion move the board of directors reinforced the bylaw covering the Regional Access Council by asserting that RAC, like all of the CMCs, falls under the control of the Co-operative and its board of directors.
Immediately following the Awards Night in November, 1989, Gary Cooper told the board that those persons who view CMCs as a “nuisance” should plan on attending the next one so they could see rural spirit on display.

CRTC vagaries

The researcher delving deep into Westman’s archives soon learns the special interest of the board of directors: budgets. Directors take their duties seriously; they want frequent reassurance that the corporate ship is on an even keel, financially speaking.

Only occasionally do they dig into the information and entertainment that flows into subscribers’ homes through Westman cables. They made an exception when it came to The Sports Network.

This specialty channel was to come to Western Manitoba free of charge, however CRTC policy excepted Brandon due to population size. Here it was finally approved, but on a premium basis.

CMC spirit

At the board meeting following the 1989 Awards Night, Cooper wrote in his report to the board that “it was such a success that those persons who view CMCs as a ‘nuisance’ should visit the next one and see the spirit of Westman on display.”

Critical update

In March of 1991 Gary Cooper wrote to the directors with a serious complaint of inaction in the decision department.

At the outset he provided them with a number of reminders: he reminded them that in 1988 he had told them of the need for some long-range planning. He reminded them of the money spent, and hours spent, in fruitless pursuit of a plan that never seemed to materialize.

Here is the nub of his argument: “The board has clearly defined its commitment to growth, expansion, diversification, and acquisition but we have not succeeded in planning or structuring for it.” His letter concluded with the news that he had hired Les Johnson, a consultant who earlier had been a member of the Coopers-Lybrand team, to review the needs for implementation of the Strategic Plan.

First acquisition

At the same time that Gary Cooper was congratulating staff and board for their obvious commitment to growth and diversification, he was about to announce growth via acquisition: Westman Media purchased the cable system at St. Lazare. Leo Boivin led a small team to that community to oversee the upgrading of the installation to Westman standards.

Brandon CMC

In the early part of the ’90s sharp differences of opinion surfaced between board, management, and the committee in charge of Brandon’s CMC.

After protracted negotiations resulted in what the CEO described as a ‘destructive stalemate,’ it was determined by the board that the Brandon CMC be placed in immediate suspension.

Cooper gave an undertaking to the directors that he would study the history of this difference of opinion with a view to developing an alternate form of organization.

HITS introduced

The shape of things to come was contained in the CEO’s report to the board in January of 1994. At an association meeting in Winnipeg, senior executives of Shaw Cable introduced the subject of ‘HITS.’ This is the acronym for “Headend-in-the-sky” that would distribute 20 movie channels using digital video compression to cable headends and private dishes across Canada. At that time only two of Westman’s communities were equipped to take advantage of this service extension.

System purchase concluded

September 9, 1994, is a red-letter day in the history of the cable co-operative: the documents were signed through which Westman purchased the cable system from Manitoba Telephones. Both the CEO and the board were lavish with the thanks they extended to “Leo,
Neil, and Fred” for bringing extended negotiations to a successful conclusion.

Chief financial officer hired

The announcement was made in October of 1995 that the search for a new chief financial officer had been successful. The new member of the executive staff was David Baxter, CA. His previous employment was as the senior financial and planning executive with SaskEnergy, a large transporter of natural gas.

Planning payoff

All those hours spent in planning conferences had positive benefits early in 1997 when news reports spoke of the imminence of still more direct competition. It would soon develop that there was more video and television competition in Brandon than in any other Canadian city.

With spirited competition on the local scene, it was time to trim the sails. The budget was trimmed by $250,000. As for the need for alternate sources of income, board members and management turned their attention to interactive services, such as high-speed Internet. There was a strengthening of the signal package and Brenda Andrew briefed both board and staff on new alignments of 160 channels in 33 communities. Only Brandon and Dauphin were excepted from this major change. There was agreement that a high quality of service must be maintained. In the annual report of the Cable Television Standards Commission, not a single complaint had been registered against Westman. More good news revealed that Westman was now included in the list of Manitoba’s fastest-growing corporations. It has been on this list every year since.

Hydro fibres

Over a period of several months Westman executives, notably Leo Boivin and David Baxter, had held meetings with representatives of Manitoba Hydro concerning another acquisition. These discussions resulted in the purchase of a fibre link from Winnipeg to Brandon in 1999. This was another acquisition which gave Westman freedom of movement, and also freedom from additional costs and potential delays caused by dependence on the telephone company who would become a competitor. The launch of high-speed internet services would not have been feasible without this fibre link.

Anniversary announcement

At the outset of Westman’s 20th year, there were significant announcements: David Baxter had been installed as the new CEO; Gary Cooper had retired with the grateful thanks of management and directors. In a public statement, Westman chairperson Lesley Moffitt thanked her fellow directors for their co-operation during her six years as a director, and also extended personal thanks to the shareholders for their continuing support of the co-operative.

Cooper’s farewell

The departing CEO said, “I want to thank one individual for his continuing assistance. I never worried about things like money-in-money-out when Fred Thorsteinson was in charge of that department.”

“I want to thank all the directors with whom I had the pleasure of working. They were not merely supportive, but they also brought an uncommon amount of horse sense to our many problems and their guidance was invaluable.”

Cooper viewed the purchase of the cable from MTS and the Brandon fibre upgrade as the two most significant developments during his administration.

CHAPTER FIVE

The numbers are highly significant: 28,000 shareholders own an investment that handles annual revenues of $16 million. Yet only 45 of them show up for an annual meeting that is completed in 27 minutes.

A flash of blue cards approved every statutory report; the yeas carried the day and there were no nays. There were no questions from the floor. Replacement board members were acclaimed. This is an extreme case of shareholder contentment.

Board chairman David Hughes was not surprised that the 24th annual meeting of Westman Communications Group was a peaceful affair. In the remarks he made in opening this event he stated his advocacy of a current trend in business reporting: the annual meeting is a time for more than the release of financial statistics.

Hughes, the general manager of Crocus Credit Union,
believes that reports to shareholders should be based upon what he calls the ‘balanced scorecard.’ Along with the balance sheet there should be comments on customers, internal business processes, and the specific reasons for growth.

At Westman, these reasons were given in the following quotation. “Westman has succeeded because it has put the members in the forefront; has brought in goods and services to meet our members’ needs; and has sought to train and educate our employees, keeping them in touch with the demands of ever-changing technology, and has kept its finances in order to ensure that our company stayed stable in today’s competitive environment.”

Chairman Hughes reminded the audience that Westman is still listed as one of Manitoba’s “top 50” companies.

**Vigorous Change**

The fact that no heat was generated at the annual meeting does not mean that all is placid or static in the media co-op. The major changes were outlined in the report of President and CEO David Baxter.

Westman was the smallest stand-alone cable company in Canada to have access to digital cable. This service has been extended to Dauphin, the company’s second-largest market.

Westman was one of only three Canadian cable companies engaged in research on a new digital cable service and is now delivering this service in six communities.

During the past year, two new divisions were added to the corporate structure. Westman Business is now selling Internet networking and high-speed data transport. There are also on-line training programs for individuals as well as business settings.

Westman Advertising now offers an advertising service on its “OnCable” listings in 10 of the markets the company serves. There has been steady growth in the use of this service during its first year.

These new offerings support the WCG mission statement which states, in part, “…achieving growth by providing products and services which leverage the strength of our people, our knowledge, and our infrastructure.”

**New board**

Co-ops have laws. One of them demands a meeting of the board of directors within 10 days of the Annual General Meeting.

That meeting was held in mid-December. There were 18 faces around the table in the corporate boardroom. 11 directors, CEO David Baxter and senior staff members. Activities began sharp at six with a catered dinner of chicken and pasta.

With four newly elected members on the board, this was a time for an introduction to the company, what the co-op text calls Orientation.

Westman’s board of directors are representative of prairie Canada’s community activists: they include: a secretary; a retailer; hotel manager; a medical technologist; a retiree who is mayor of his town; a computer network technician; and the general manager of a credit union.

**Back to the roots**

The 25-year history of this cable co-op and its affiliated services was set out in unusual detail in a slide presentation delivered by CEO Baxter. Nothing was left out, from formation to future plans.

Baxter has an easy style of delivery, and it soon becomes evident that he has a mastery of the cable business in Canada.

His deep-immersion introduction in his five-plus years of service with Westman has been augmented by exposure to the national scene; he has been elected to directorships on two national cable associations.

From these sources of information he enriches his presentation to the board by explaining which specific aspects of cable activity worked or didn’t work – in other Canadian jurisdictions.

**All in favour say aye**

The second half of the meeting was dedicated to the corporate routine: committee reports; details of on-going projects; speculative peeks into future developments.

The start of the new administrative year means that meetings like this one will be conducted on the first Tuesday in every month.

Members of the board of directors of Westman Communications Group find their lives filled with meetings and correspondence files. Some of them use as many as a half-dozen separate brief cases, one for each major topic.

They have a statutory meeting once a month, perhaps two if the executive requires some guidance. Each member also has committee responsibilities. While they are
busy, there are no signs of grumbling; they can see the positive results of their activities as the co-op advances—successfully, with fresh initiatives. They labour under one important restriction—each of them signs a declaration of non-disclosure for confidential information.

CHAPTER SIX

David Baxter

Crystal Ball

"There is one thing stronger than all the armies of the world; and that is an idea whose time has come."

David Baxter would tell you that Victor Hugo’s words have lost none of their vigour in the two centuries since they were written.

When it comes to ideas involving cable communications, he’s unlikely to suffer a shortage. He’s a director on the Boards of the two national cable associations, the Canadian Cable Television Association and the Canadian Cable Systems Alliance; he subscribes to an on-line news service that gives daily reports on current activities in the world of cable. Sources like these are vital to him, Baxter asserts, because in the communications industry changes can occur with the speed of light.

Ideas have power

David Baxter, the President and CEO of Westman Communications Group, has firm opinions on ideas. He says: “I believe in the power of ideas, and there are lots of these in our industry. I have a special interest in translating ideas into implementation. Identifying the good ones and developing them into business opportunities for Westman is a large part of my focus.”

In his executive duties in the period before joining Westman as Chief Financial Officer, Baxter evolved from his professional training in chartered accountancy and became deeply involved in strategic planning.

In November of 1995, when he joined Westman, he assumed responsibility for planning. One of the conclusions that had been reached previously was that Westman, then known as Westman Media Co-operative, was vulnerable to competition which, at that time, was sweeping across the nation. Those staff members working on the original plan had determined that a competitor who lured away 40 per cent of Westman clients would threaten its sustainability. Board members and management soon agreed on the need to generate revenues from non-cable sources.

Competition indeed arrived in western Manitoba in 1997. The first competitor was CKX’s SkyCable, followed by Bell Express-VU, owned by BCE, one of the national media giants, and Star Choice, owned by another, Shaw Communications.

Shortly after competition arrived, David Baxter had been installed as President and CEO, and he was now working overtime—turning ideas into action.

“I believe in the power of ideas, and there are plenty of them in our industry”

The program

Westman’s young CEO made his first move by leveraging the Company’s recently upgraded network infrastructure.

“One thing we had to do was become more competitive, and we began a program of cable system upgrading in 1997. The improvements we made on our technical side increased the number of channels available to 77 from 22, and were made bi-directional to prepare for the delivery of high-speed Internet services and other interactive type services.”

New services

“We dramatically increased the number of cable TV signals in our entertainment package and, in early 1998, we launched Wave.”

“Today, early in 2002, Wave customers are where we expected they would be in 2004.”

Surprising results

The Wave became a runaway best seller. “We largely launched high speed internet on a leap of faith because
we had introduced the service so early there were no
benchmarks anywhere yet on how successful high speed
internet might be.” Today, the Wave is now in over 20
per cent of the Westman homes where it is available, and
David Baxter says this compares well to the high-speed
Internet experience of other cable operators. “Wave cus-
tomers are where we forecast they would be in 2004;
we’re two years ahead of our plan.”

Flexible planning
A writer in the Financial Post once said, ‘There’s
nothing the matter with planning, but what counts is
flexibility.’ Baxter says, “Being quick to market is key in
our rapidly changing and competitive industry. It also
means a good idea today is often better than an excellent
idea tomorrow.”

“There was a time, in 1998,
when Brandon was the most
competitive cable market in
Canada.”

The pain of change
The Westman CEO is quick to admit that a fully-
implemented program of change brings with it a price, at
least in the short term.

“It’s certain that most residents of western Manitoba
are not aware of it, but there was a time, in 1998, when
Brandon was the most competitive cable community in
Canada. In order to protect our position, we had to apply
a great deal of energy to accelerated change. We could
not be successful if the rate of change in our industry
exceeded the rate of change inside our organization.”

“When we had to institute a new pace of activity
necessitated by needed change, some employees resisted
and left us. However, we emerged from a hectic 18
months as a stronger company in a position to do two
things: tackle the competition and at the same time prof-
itably diversify our businesses.”

“Two years later we continue to have strong competi-
tion from direct-to-home satellite competitors, although
it appears that SkyCable has largely abandoned the cable
TV business.”

There are positive results. “Over 80 percent of our
customers have access to 180 channels compared with
35 channels in 1997; our operating cash flow from non-
cable TV activities is now in excess of 30 per cent of total
corporate operating cash flow.”

Still more change.
“Our planning revealed to us that once we had
strengthened our cable infrastructure, and improved our
entertainment package, we could begin to introduce
complementary services, that is, new developments that
are not cable but fall under the more general area of
‘Communication and Information Technology.’ This type
of diversification was critical to achieve the economies of
scale Westman needed to prosper in the future.”

Conspicuous firsts
David Baxter says that with a workable plan, and a
talented, committed work force, there have been some
remarkable improvements. Westman, a relatively small
cable company, demonstrates industry leadership.
“Our entire team had an unwavering focus on increas-
ing the quantity and quality of our services in small
rural communities. This made it possible for us to be
the first cable company in Canada to launch a new dig-
tal technology called HITS (headend-in-the-sky) in
Brandon in the fall of 1999. This new technology
allowed Brandon to have digital cable service before it
was available in Toronto.”

In 2000, these advances using digital technology and
high speed internet resulted in Westman being recog-
nized by the Canadian Cable Systems Alliance as
Canadian Cable Operator of the Year.

Just one year later Westman was one of three cable
companies in Canada to run trials, and then launch
another new digital technology called HITS-QT, which
is now operating in six of its communities, with more
installations planned for later this year.

Industry-wide recognition
In the world of Canadian cable, Westman may not
be big, but it is significant. Harris Boyd, Senior Vice-
President, Industry Affairs for the Canadian Cable
Television Association, describes it as “one of the larg-
er of the small independent companies.” It ranks 11th
out of 200. However size is not relative in this respect,
for Westman is an industry-wide leader in technology.

In describing Westman’s leadership role, Harris Boyd
says “In many ways, Westman is an inspiration to other
small cable companies demonstrating that size may not be the most important factor in remaining competitive."

“Our entire team had an unwavering focus on increasing the quantity and quality of our services in small communities. This made it possible for us to be the first cable company in Canada to launch a new digital technology called HITS (headend-in-the-sky) in Brandon in the fall of 1999.”

Major acquisition
In early 1998, Westman acquired a significant ownership interest in Riding Mountain Broadcasting Ltd.

“We had a firm definition of the area into which we wanted to diversify. The technology base was a must. Pursuing growth prospects in the territory we serve was important.”

“Riding Mountain Broadcasting falls into this category. CKLQ has long demonstrated its dedication to the territory we serve.”

Reciprocity
While Westman executives were studying Riding Mountain Broadcasting, which owns radio station CKLQ, the president of the radio station was studying Westman. Don Kille, station president, says that he and his brother Ron, a co-owner, had been deeply engaged in long-range planning.

“We knew that to remain independent we needed a partner. We even defined the characteristics. This partner must be local, stable, have resources, and be in a position to help us with technical advice. We also wanted a partner who was deeply committed to Brandon and the area it serves. Westman qualified on all counts. It was a major plus that the cable company had tens of thousands of shareholders, and we felt they would be interested in owning a part of a successful radio station.”

Progress report
At a board meeting early in 1999, Baxter delivered a report on what he called “a pivotal year.”

“Upon completion of the fibre optic cable system rebuild in Brandon, we quickly introduced more cable TV services for our customers. In addition we launched high-speed Internet access service, our first-ever data networking service over this bi-directional system.”

“The initial market response has been very encouraging.” He added a postscript, which delivered the good news: Westman Communications Group had just completed its best year ever with a net income of $1.7 million.

Noteworthy outreach
While it is one thing to have all these modern technological devices, it is another to introduce them to citizens of all ages.

Westman invested $95,000 in capital costs to demonstrate its dedication to education by introducing a Canadian cable industry initiative called Cable in the Classroom in its communities. It provides copyright-free programming for teacher use.

One of Westman’s promotional plans was to offer the Wave to the schools in the Westman territory at a subsidized rate. Before long, the students in Brandon, Minnedosa, Neepawa, and Carberry schools were Wave users, reaching out to the world as they completed their classroom assignments. Westman Communications Group was making a payback to the communities it serves.

In the year following, a subsidized rate was also offered to the Brandon Public Library, Seniors for Seniors, the YMCA and Wheat Belt Community Futures.

More payback
Directors and management of Westman are serious about this matter of payback. Individual towns on the Westman network are financed by the annual budget allotment that supports their Community Access Committee. After all, it was spirited assistance from these smaller centres that gave practical support to the founding mothers and fathers in their drive to get a broadcast licence.

There is also a series of paybacks for residents of the entire Westman region. This is found in the co-op’s donations budget.

In an average year, this budget stands around the
$30,000 mark, although this is frequently exceeded for special occasions. One of these was a gift of computers valued at $10,000 to the Regional Health Authority for the new hospital. Another was a donation of $15,000 to Brandon University for its “Success in Mind” campaign.

Mindful of Canada’s need for trained technologists, Westman sponsors an annual scholarship program for graduating students from the 30 high schools in its home territory in the amount of $500 for each scholarship. At Brandon University and Assiniboine Community College there are annual scholarships.

These scholarships are applicable to the province’s education facilities so that Manitoba students can stay in Manitoba for their post-secondary education. One outstanding student from each school each year, who is going to pursue a career in technology in a Manitoba college or university, is awarded a scholarship of $1,500.

**Smart communities**

When the Government of Canada announced in early 2000 that it would finance a small number of “Smart Communities,” it was personnel from Westman who did extensive work necessary to develop a business plan and funding application.

That application was successful. It resulted in having Industry Canada contribute $5 million to the Brandon and area project over a three-year term. With matching funds from the Province of Manitoba and local stakeholders, there now is $10 million available for what is called the Manitoba Smart Network.

This new network will use advanced communication and information technology to enhance health, education and community services. It will also encourage the use of electronic commerce to improve the competitiveness of businesses in the Westman area.

The funding application prepared by Westman was one of 120 received for this program, and only 12 were approved.

A close observer of Westman’s role in the writing of that application was another Smart Communities proponent, Marlow Kirton, General Manager, Brandon Economic Development Board.

He says, “It would never have happened without the talents and leadership of Westman personnel. It was David Baxter who listed all the benefits that become available to a Smart Community. It was Neil Thomson who pulled together a mass of information and put it in readable form. Let me repeat: it wouldn’t have happened without them.”

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**At a board meeting in 2000, Baxter announced that Westman had just had its best year ever, with a net income of $1.7 million.**

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**Co-operators co-operate**

Technical employees of the Westman Communications Group perform a valuable public service by acting as extra ears and eyes for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

They are affiliates of the Operation Public Alert program, better known as PAL. As they travel from town to town, serving Westman subscribers, they are on the lookout for crimes or accidents of which the police should be aware. They are equipped with two-way radio and cellular telephones they use for this purpose.

**Westman’s family**

The Westman cable co-operative is a business with a difference; it encourages the use of volunteers in key positions. In most cases, volunteers are quick to respond because they are also shareholders.

The community media committees in the co-op’s 20 communities each year require over 300 active volunteers for the filming and associated duties involved with community access. Their aggregate hours of service are in excess of 6,000. In the average year they broadcast over 11,000 public-service announcements for charities and community projects.

They produce over 3,400 original hours of programming, more than all of the broadcasters in Manitoba combined. Total programming hours on the channels amounted to over 20,000 hours last year.

Keeping those 35 community access channels ‘on the air’ and supplied with the latest in digital equipment is full-time employment for three Westman staffers who also provide recruitment and training programs on a non-stop basis.

**Galaxy acquired**

When David Baxter and the Westman directors
applied their own criteria to Galaxy Computers, they agreed that it qualified.

Both management and the board had committed themselves to growth, but in specific terms; that growth must be based in the area ‘Communication and Information Technology’, in order to be compatible with a cable company.

In an analysis of Galaxy, the following aspects of the business were listed: it sells computers and their peripherals; it manufactures and sells computers for residential and commercial customers; it has a crew of eight technicians who make custom computers to meet the specific needs of clients; it had a fledgling networking service in direct competition with Westman. There was even a board discussion of the possibility that Galaxy might help Westman establish a presence in Winnipeg where there was untapped potential for sales of network services.

Following two months of additional research, the directors voted in favour of this acquisition.

When Galaxy joined the Westman family, this was a move of strategic significance. In more than 20 years of service, Westman had been engaged almost exclusively with householders, for cable is mainly a residential business. Galaxy was a breakthrough into providing service to business customers as Galaxy had a large business clientele.

**Subscriber satisfaction**

Based on the ancient retail belief that it is a wise merchant who knows his customers, the newly-named Westman Communications Group initiated a survey of its customers: the objective was to learn what they liked, and didn’t like, and how they rated the service.

The results were both informative and rewarding. The service, including the signal quality, and customer service, received high marks. The viewers wanted more entertainment choices. This decision reached the desks of management just as programming extensions were being planned.

In a survey by the Canadian Cable Standards Foundation, Westman’s level of client satisfaction was rated in successive quarters at 80 percent, 81 percent, and 84 percent. No written complaints were received. Part of the reason for these satisfactory ratings may be found in increased efficiency; service calls for installation or changes of services that once required two weeks, now were being completed on an average of four to seven days.

**Change, change, change**

In the minutes of the board meeting, as the millennium year approached, there was a major change, or acquisition, or service extension every month.

The benefit of improved infrastructure became obvious when pay-per-view was launched in June of 1999; it was the new digital service that made this possible. A fibre link was established to Neepawa, Minnedosa, and Carberry. Fibre services were extended through some of Brandon’s industrial area so commercial firms could be offered high-speed Internet. In a major promotional event, members of the business community were given a demonstration of how services like VPNs, (virtual-private networks), could increase their profits.

**Increased returns**

There were positive results from this burst of activity. By the end of 2001 there was an increase in gross revenues of close to $7 million dollars. The income from diversification exceeded $1 million. An analysis of the results revealed that the major contributors to this excellent showing were high speed internet, Galaxy and Riding Mountain Broadcasting.

**Industry spokesman**

The Westman CEO is increasingly involved as a spokesman on matters affecting smaller systems in the cable industry. Early in 2002 he was invited by the Canadian Cable Television Association to make a presentation to the Parliamentary Heritage Committee.

He said that to stay in business, operators of smaller cable systems had to diversify in order to offset the revenues they are losing to satellite operations. He spoke of the imbalance that exists when cable companies, which are heavily regulated, find themselves going head-to-head with satellite operations that are less regulated. Of utmost concern though were the illegal satellite services which are sold by dealers who do not pay for the programming at all.

In responding to a question asked by Winnipeg MP John Harvard, Baxter said he has been told that some smaller cable systems lose as much as $100,000 a year to illegal competition.

David Baxter holds strongly to the belief that it is a distinct blow to the resources of a community if a cable company fails. This represents a serious loss to the free flow of Canadian expression when a town loses its com-
munity access channel, which is its collective voice. Satellite competitors do not offer such a service.

The crystal ball

David Baxter chose not to consider a forecast of Westman’s path in the next five years; he said that in the communications business five years is close to eternity.

He would consider a three-year term however, and said that he, his management team, and board of directors, have done extensive planning on future directions. “Westman will be introducing new services including video-on-demand and other interactive services like internet-over-TV which both leverage our investment in digital technology. For business customers we will continue to expand our services to provide a broad range of communications and information technology related services.” There is agreement that Westman Communications must prepare for a major tactical move by the telephone companies. The ‘telcos.’, as they are called, are applying to CRTC for permission to enter the cable field. He is pleased to report that if this occurs, Westman is ready. Westman is also preparing to compete in the telephone field.

“Without our own fibre link to Winnipeg, Westman was literally an island, cut off from the rest of the electronic world.”

Rear-view mirror

When he looks back on four hectic years, David Baxter views several factors of special significance. “Without our own fibre link to Winnipeg, Westman was literally an island, cut off from the rest of the electronic world. While we had a state of the art upgraded fiber optic cable system in Brandon, it was like having a Mercedes and no highway on which to drive it. We couldn’t have launched Wave successfully without it.”

“Something else that can never be overlooked is the substantial customer goodwill that has been built over the last 25 years. Every new service launch has been made easier as a result. This goodwill is something we don’t take for granted. It has to be earned every day.”

About the future

Baxter says only one thing is certain about Westman’s future: any new developments will be based in the field of communications and information technology. “We have a substantial foundation in cable, and a trained dedicated work force, and the resources necessary to move quickly.”

Dave Hughes

The chairman of the board of Westman Communications Group revels in challenges; he even works in a challenging location.

As general manager of Crocus Credit Union, Dave Hughes is surrounded by heavy-duty competition. His immediate next-door neighbour is the Bank of Montreal. The Bank of Nova Scotia is right across the street. Toronto Dominion is half a block to the east, while the larger Westoba Credit Union is a block to the south.

Despite the number and size of these counting houses, Dave Hughes has watched Crocus Credit Union expand its assets from $500,000 to $35 million. He credits this growth to good service, and good relations with his clients.

This is the attitude he takes to Westman Communications Group (WCG), where he is in his seventh year as chairman.

Good client base

In his opinion, “Westman has a good client base of 28,000 customers, and we have active community media committees in the 19 largest communities. In the face of growing competition we have to work to keep those clients connected. This is why we are expanding our digital service at the same time we keep improving the programming.”

Dave Hughes was raised in Brandon and educated in the public schools. He studied electrical technology at Manitoba Vocational College, the predecessor to Assiniboine Community College, but never pursued this subject as a career.

He’s a member of lions international, as was Leo Boivin, Westman's Director of Operations. It was at Boivin’s suggestion that he stood for election to the board of directors in 1989, and was successful. He has
has been associated ever since except for one break occasioned by statutory demands.

**Well-informed members**

He views the Westman assignment as important but not onerous. “I receive the occasional telephone call during the week, and I have an evening board meeting once a month. Board members are well served by management so we do have a lot of paperwork for study. I have had considerable experience with other boards, and I say that members of the Westman board are informed.”

**Realistic co-operator**

Dave Hughes is a co-operator at heart, but he’s also a realist. “I’ve studied enough co-op history to know all the good points, but I also know that a co-op has to emulate the corporations in one important respect; it must make a profit or it won’t survive.”

**Knowledge is power**

He finds many satisfactions in his work with Westman. “There’s a major satisfaction in knowing that we are delivering a quality product to a large part of western Manitoba.

I like to reflect upon the fact that we brought modern communications to a large area. I know that it is a major benefit for a town to have an active community-access committee; this helps the residents learn more about themselves and each other. I was taught to believe that knowledge is based upon the transfer of information.”

**About the future**

Dave Hughes says “Just as we have added a number of services to our list of public offerings, and the search continues for more, I believe in competition and am pleased that Westman now has competition; this will serve to keep us on our toes.”

“Just mentioning competition makes me think of the future. Manitoba Telephone System is making plans to enter the video distribution field, and this causes me to believe that WCG some day will be adding telephony to our list of public services.”

“It is helpful in many different ways that we have had some recent years that were successful from a profit point of view. This firm financial footing means that we are in a position to consider new ventures when they become available.”

“With cable as a foundation, and Galaxy, and Riding Mountain Broadcasting we have an excellent foundation upon which to build. All are closely related to the general field of information technology. This is the field in which we have had success, and it is where we search for future developments.”

**CHAPTER SEVEN**

**Human Assets - The “Originals”**

Silent and unseen: two simple adjectives describe Westman assets that are valued in the tens of millions. These are the cables and junction boxes that comprise the co-op’s so-called “electronic hardware.”

Of vastly greater value is the human asset, those talented men and women who make the system work.

There are 80 employees in head office, on Park Avenue in Brandon. Seventy of them are regular full-time personnel, and there is almost always a small contingent of casuals who are brought in for special assignments, like the distribution of digital boxes.

This is a well-trained group. Many arrived with degrees and diplomas from institutions of higher learning; a notable number now are improving their academic standing by taking courses on their own time. The company assists those who are registered for approved courses.

Included in the current staff there are six who hold a special designation; they are “the Originals,” that is, they were members of the staff before Westman delivered its first signal to its members.

The Oxford dictionary has a definition for the word original that fits this situation with precision: “earliest; existing from the first.”

The Originals have seen it all. They can tell you of going to work in a second-storey walk-up office that previously was occupied by a family physician. They can tell you of troubled times when board members were uncertain about future directions.

**Leo Boivin**

If “The Originals” are a select group, then Leo Boivin’s category is super-select: he has served the co-op as volunteer, then board member, and then long-service director of operations.
Leo is a product of Gladstone. He went east for his training in electronic technology, and worked briefly for other cable companies before returning to Manitoba. He opened a radio-TV outlet in Souris.

It was while he was working in Souris that he learned of a group being formed to plan a cable co-operative. He recalls countless meetings as the founders went through the planning stages.

As one of the few individuals trained in cable operations at that time he played a critical role when the CRTC began issuing licences for cable installations. He shared his technical knowledge with other small cable companies at Portage la Prairie and in the Interlake, and remembers signing the purchase order for the initial start-up hardware for all of them.

The fact of Leo’s expert training was not lost on Westman’s first board of directors. They asked him, for the good of the co-op, if he would resign his board membership and join the staff.

It is due Leo Boivin’s training and enthusiastic attitude that Westman holds a position of leadership in Canada’s cable industry.

**Marion Tremblay**

Her first position was as a service representative when Westman’s office was located at Ninth and Rosser, in downtown Brandon.

She recalls every evolutionary step in the process covering customer accounts. “There was a time we made out monthly accounts by hand. Following this, for a year or more, we used the services of a computer company in Winnipeg.”

The next step was an in-house IBM computer, and Marion Tremblay was given a five-day course covering its operation.

Today, with the help of only one assistant, she oversees the computer records of 28,000 customers, their equity accounts as well as the details of their contracts. Her tiny, two-member division dispatches a third of a million pieces of mail per year.

**Brenda Andrew**

She joined Westman as a service representative when the co-op was in its second home at 24th Street and Park Avenue.

She was appointed assistant to the marketing manager, and when he resigned, she inherited some of his duties. Included was a supervisory position over the customer-sales- and-service representatives.

The CSSRs, as they are known, are the official greeters for visitors to the WCG office. They sit behind a large L-shaped desk just inside the front door. They sign up new members, arrange the details for changes of address, and amend service contracts. CSSRs wear headsets so they can serve customers on the telephone as well as at the counter. In a recent report to management, Brenda Andrew said the CSSRs were handling an average of 4,000 calls, or callers, per week.

Brenda Andrew says being a CSSR is demanding work, and for this reason she hires only applicants with established sales records. There is introductory training, following which the candidates are given a reduced workload as they learn on the job. This is rewarding work as is evidenced by the number of incumbents with 14 – 15 years of service, even more.

Her present position is manager, marketing services.

**Patricia Eastchuk**

This is another Westman staffer with vivid memories of life in pre-computer times.

“We spent hours, days—I could say weeks and months—making lists of clients on tapes. When we got our first computer my supervisor decided that I should learn all about its operation.”

Patricia Eastchuk spent several years as executive assistant to the general manager before being appointed administrator of personnel and payroll policies.

She is impressed with the statistics regarding the retention of Westman employees. She says vacancies are rare. In most cases employees who submit their resignations do so because their partner has been transferred to another city.

She likes the fact that the Westman directors encourage physical activity; there is an annual $200 credit for employees who register for agencies like the “Y.” This is a partner ‘perk’ for the policy under which employees have their tuition costs paid for approved self-improvement training. Up to 25 employees per year will be working towards advanced diplomas or degrees.

**Steve Derlago**

This is the supervisor of Westman’s information centre. With one assistant, he maintains a non-stop flow of news and instructions to both clients and staff members.
On a regular basis a staff member who has been working in, say, Virden, will have completed his assignments and be ready to leave for Hamiota. He will call Steve Derlago and from this source be given a list of Hamiota work orders.

There is literally no end to the reasons the public call Steve and his associate, although many of the calls have to do with the operation of remote controls.

Steve Derlago is an “outside” employee who now works “inside.” His first job was installing cable connections to the homes.

He is philosophic about the communications evolution he has witnessed. “It was analog that took us up to channel 60; now digital adds another 35 channels along with music and pay-per-view.”

Diane Robins

The sixth of the Originals began work as a sales-and-service representative, a division in which she became supervisor.

Diane Robins was forced to take early retirement due to health reasons, but now returns to duty on a fairly regular basis for special assignments.

When Westman put on a drive to promote digital boxes, she accepted a short-term contract to be the contact party. She receives the client orders on the telephone and makes out the work orders for the installers.

This re-introduction to the cable business reminds her of earlier times, in some of which she was the only staff member on duty when Westman was just getting off the ground.

She was occasionally exposed to the ire of clients who had ignored that series of cautionary notes telling them they were about to be cut off.

When one of them appeared in the office to vent his rage, he was accompanied by a mean-appearing Doberman.

Another left the office in an advanced state of outrage and backed his van into a hydro pole with such force that when he drove away, the imprint of the pole was clearly visible on the back of the van.

These cases were rarities, however, and Diane Robins says she has been impressed with the friendliness of those with whom she has worked, both the clients and her fellow staffers.

The vision becomes reality

Twenty-five years ago Westman Communications Group did not exist. Today it is a successful company, with an annual gross income approaching the $20 million mark, and a payroll of nearly $3 million.

All of this happened because the founding mothers and fathers had a vision and worked together to turn it into a reality. Today, 25 years later, their directors and employees are still being motivated by that vision.
<table>
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<th>Year</th>
<th>Directors</th>
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<tr>
<td>2000-2001</td>
<td>Dave Hughes, Lorne Boguski, Gail Janz, Scotterv, Susan Brechmann, Barry Delmage, Margaret Gibb, Brian Martineau, Brian Midwinter, Lorne Shewfelt, Mary Woychuk</td>
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<td>1999-2000</td>
<td>Cathie McFarlane, Don Clark, Carol Midwinter, Scotterv, Dave Hughes, Jennifer Lavoie, Lorne Shewfelt, Dean Esler, Margaret Gibb, Brian Martineau, Gail Janz</td>
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<td>1997-1998</td>
<td>Lesley Moffitt, Dave Mahoney, Cathie McFarlane, Bob Cooney, Dave Hughes, Don Clark, Lorne Shewfelt, Dwight Stewart, Mark Borgfjord, Bob Cooney</td>
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<td>1996-1997</td>
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<td>1995-1996</td>
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<td>1994-1995</td>
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<td>1993-1994</td>
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<td>1988-1989</td>
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<td>1987-1988</td>
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<td>1981-1982</td>
<td>Bill Burgess, Wayne Kines, Bill Cochrane, Fraser Hay, Doug Patterson, Harry Chornoboy, Don Clark, David Smith, Lyle McNichol, Donna Cooper, Peter Allen</td>
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<td>1978-1979</td>
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<td>1977-1978</td>
<td>Clare Coburn, Audrey Silvius, Robert Horton, Marie Kotyk, Keith Smith, Leo Boivin, Gary Brawn, Ian Bobiak, Ivan Donald, Sheila Siddiqui, John Klassen</td>
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Senior Management
(L-R): Neil Thomson, Director, Marketing & Sales; David Baxter, President & Chief Executive Officer; Leo Boivin, Director, Technical Operations

Galaxy Computer Systems Ltd.

Westman Communications Group

Westman Advertising

Westman Business