

Civic Life

Description

Introduction

After the end of the American Civil War, participation in women's clubs, societies, and trade unions spread across the country. One would be mistaken to assume these clubs flourished solely as instruments of social entertainment. Women's civic lives reached their heyday during the Progressive Era, 1890-1920. Women's groups formed for varied reasons across the United States of America. These organizations were the driving force behind many social and industrial reforms and assistance programs throughout the country. A good number of these groups were concerned with the care and upkeep of their home cities. One such group was prominent in the bluff city of Memphis, Tennessee. The Memphis City Beautiful Commission started as a way to beautify the Bluff City and to edify the people who called it home.

The Rise of Women's Civic Organizations

The Women's Club Movement did not start out as the force for social justice and equality it eventually became. The increased growth of this movement can be traced back to 1867 when the men only New York City Press Club hosted a dinner with the popular author Charles Dickens. Ladies from local women's literary groups were not permitted to attend. The women who were refused admittance to the dinner later met and formed the Sorosis Club of New York City. Soon many other such clubs formed throughout the Atlantic states, and it was not long before women's clubs began sprouting up across America. The Sorosis Club of New York City's twenty-first anniversary was in 1889. It celebrated the organization and invited representatives from all the women's clubs in the country to join them for a conference in New York City. This conference gave birth to the General Federation of Women's Clubs, which had a combined federated and non-federated membership of six million women spread across the country.

In the early days, these groups were interested in self improvement and philanthropy, but changed as the nation evolved. The brunt of the growth and expansion of women's civic lives through organizations took place during the America's Progressive Era. This era last from 1890 to 1920, and it was a time of great social reform which changed the part government played in American life. The liberal factions in the country realized reforms and regulations enacted and enforced by the federal government were needed to protect the working poor from the rampant greed and brutality caused by unbridled industrial capitalism. Women's organizations became a driving force in the social and industrial reforms that came from this era. This due, in part, to the fact more and more women needed to work to help support their families, and middle and upper class women felt it was their civic duty to help these wage earning women as much as possible. The evolution of women's civic lives flowed with the changes America underwent as it became a more industrialized nation.

Women's Groups Become Instruments of Reform

Many women's clubs during the Progressive Era were driven by middle and upper class women, and by what some historians now refer to as maternalism. Maternalism is a two part concept. First, all reforms and programs enacted for the benefit of women were passed to keep women's reproductive ability safe, and permitted wage earning women time to properly care for their children. Second, for the women who create and organized these clubs, the reforms and programs were a public extension of their own maternal nature. The reforms and programs backed by these women's clubs most often dealt with bettering work conditions for women and children, and improving their own communities through various programs and projects. This became known as Municipal, or Public, Housekeeping. It was an ideology that was explored by Mary Beard in her 1915 book, *Woman's Work in Municipalities*. Many public housekeeping programs were often backed by clubs that already existed such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the General Federation of Women's Clubs. These organizations and others like them strove to improve the lives of poor wage earners, and to elevate their own local communities. They did this by backing a varied range of reform movements: from taking actions to ensure all children were educated; to creating public libraries and playgrounds; and to helping to get the Pure Food Bill passed through Congress. However, some of these organizations dealt almost exclusively with workplace reform.

The National Consumer League (NCL), founded in 1899 by Florence Kelley, was one such group. This club soon spread throughout the country. Kelley's organization concerned itself with improving conditions for women and children wage earners. In 1908, the NCL helped to establish a maximum on the number of hours that women earners were required to work each day. They achieved this by arguing that due to women's inherently weaker natures, their maternal capabilities would be harmed if women were worked too long and too hard. Even though these groups were the mothers of many reforms, they by no means had equal opportunity membership; they were mostly whites only organizations and had no desire to change that status.

African American women underwent their own Women's Club Movement and, like that of white women, it was backed by the middle class. Four hundred African American women's clubs united to form the National Association of Colored Women. Many of the programs they started were like those started by white women's clubs e.g. kindergartens and old folks homes. However, many of their concerns were unique to African American communities. The anti-lynching movements are good examples of the inherent differences of the club movements. Like their white counterparts, African American middle and upper class women felt they had a civic duty to help and protect the most unfortunate of their communities.

Municipal Housekeeping in Memphis, Tennessee

As stated before, many of these women's clubs concerned themselves with the betterment of their hometowns. The Memphis City Beautiful Commission was one of these organizations. The idea for the Commission was conceived by a three time mayor of Memphis, the Honorable E.H. Crump, in the winter of 1929. It came about because he asked himself to imagine what the train passengers passing through thought as they looked out at the city. What would they tell others about how Memphis looked? What Crump imagined was not a pretty sight: Weed choked river banks and washouts dotted with dingy decrepit hovels as the copious litter danced down the streets with each wind gust. Mayor Crump then envisioned Memphis as he dreamed it could be.

It came to Crump's mind that those who would be tasked with overseeing the city wide housecleaning should be people who knew how best to organize and clean a household. He decided an organization of dedicated civic minded women would be the best choice to clean up the city. Mrs. E.G. Willingham became the first chairperson of the Commission shortly after it was established in July of 1930, and a small office space was set aside for them at the 19th Century Club's, a woman's club, headquarters. Over time, the Memphis City Beautiful Commission managed to get the city into shape and keep it that way by incorporating the yearly Spring Clean Up, Paint Up, and Fix Up Campaign. Due to the diligence of the Commission and the citizens of the city, Memphis, Tennessee won Nation's Cleanest City award at least three times, and its plan became the model for cities across the country. The organization held annual Christmas light competitions to help beautify the city for the holidays and give some enjoyment to the inhabitants. The Commission also got young children involved by holding an annual Anti Litter Campaign Contest for the children in grades first through sixth to come up with a character and a slogan for the campaign. The Good Habit Rabbit, with slogan *Litter-ly speaking, I'm dutiful, Keeping Memphis Beautiful*, created by then seven year old Steven Hessler was one of the winners of the yearly campaign. The steps that were taken by the ladies of the Memphis City Beautiful Commission are great examples of the ideology of Municipal Housekeeping. Though the changes wrought by the Commission are all but gone in some parts of the city, its core beliefs can be found today in new organizations such as MEMFix. This gives hope to this and future generations that Memphis, Tennessee can and will be rejuvenated to its former glory.

Conclusion

The start of the Women's Club Movement was humble, indeed. It went on to become an agent of change and hope for the working poor throughout America. These women looked at what unchecked industrial capitalism was doing to the workers of this country and they said, "No more!" Their efforts brought about change for working women and children, and encouraged women to reach out to better their own communities as well. Here in our home state of Tennessee, Memphian women were compelled to be Municipal Housekeepers. They went to great lengths to improve how their city looked thereby improving the lives of their fellow Memphians. One must wonder what the state of our country would be had these courageous and dedicated women not come forward to make changes to the quality of American life.

Further Reading

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