Capsule History of General Federation of Women's Clubs

The General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) -- the world's largest and oldest nonpartisan, nondemoninational volunteer service organization for women - was founded in 1890.

GFWC traces its roots back to Jane Cunningham Croly, an accomplished New York newspaperwoman, who wrote under the pen name Jennie June. Indignant that she and other women were denied admittance to a banquet honoring Charles Dickens in 1868 at the all-male New York Press Club simply because they were women, she determined to organize a club for women only. The name chosen for this club was Sorosis, a Greek word meaning "An aggregation, a sweet flavor of many fruits."

Although its founders originally thought they were starting a new movement, they became aware over the years of the existence of other women's clubs that had formed independently to meet the needs of women in the new and growing country. As Sorosis approached its 21st year, Mrs. Croly proposed a conference in New York of women's clubs, and a call went out. Delegates from 61 clubs attended that first organizational meeting.

On the last day of the conference, the women took action for forming a permanent organization. A committee to draft a constitution and plan of organization to be ratified the following year was chosen, with Sorosis President Ella Dietz Clymer as chairman. The constitution was adopted in 1890, and the General Federation of Women's Clubs was born. The Federation was chartered by Congress in 1901.

Ella Dietz Clymer gained a particular place of honor in Federation history as the author of the GFWC motto, "Unity in Diversity." Speaking to the delegates at the first conference, she said, "We look for unity, but unity in diversity. We hope that you will enrich us by your varied experiences..." The aptness of the motto is evident in the diverse interests and methods of GFWC members, who have implemented a broad range of programs and projects tailored to meet the needs of their communities. It set the tone for the flexibility that has allowed GFWC to grow and adapt to the changing and diverse life-styles and concerns of women throughout a century of volunteer work.

In 1922, the General Federation purchased a five-story brick and stone mansion in Washington, D.C., which became its headquarters. Located at 1734 N Street, NW, the building has an interesting history of its own.

It was built in 1875 by Rear Admiral William Radford upon his retirement from the U.S. Navy. By 1895, the neighborhood was well-developed and ready to welcome the colorful character of the next owner, General Nelson A. Miles, of Spanish and Indian Wars fame, and later Commanding General of the U.S. Army. Popular subscription raised funds for the purchase of the house as a gift to the distinguished soldier who made it his home until 1903. Later owners of the Nelson A. Miles Mansion, as it was known, were Mr. and Mrs. John Jay White. Mr. White was a great traveler and big-game hunter who frequently accompanied former President Theodore Roosevelt on expeditions. The house was then used as the Czechoslovakian Legation for 18 months following World War 1, until it was purchased by GFWC. Today the building provides office space for the professional staff that administers programs and services for the organization, and also is the residence of the GFWC International President during her two-year term. The building retains much of its original character and elegance. It is visited each year by club members from all over the United States and the world.

The mission of the General Federation is to bring into communication and to unite women's clubs for the purpose of mutual benefit and for the promotion of their common interest. GFWC areas of activity include the arts, conservation, education, home life, international affairs, and public affairs, as well as other special projects. The General Federation also has a distinguished record of activity on issues of historical importance, beginning with the establishment of a national model for juvenile courts and service. In the forefront of the conservation movement resulting in the establishment of the first Forest Reserve in 1899. In 1906, GFWC turned the tide for the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act. The General Federation supported legislation for the eight-hour workday and the first child labor law. And as early as 1944, GFWC endorsed a resolution supporting equal rights and responsibilities for women.
In 1984, the GFWC Women's History and Resource Center was opened as part of the Headquarters complex in Washington. The Resource Center is a special collection devoted to women's history with an emphasis on women in volunteerism. There are more than 1,000 volumes of contemporary and rare books in addition to periodicals, vertical files and manuscripts in the collection. Of particular interest are materials documenting the history of the women's club movement.

The Center provides access to materials for researchers, GFWC members and staff, students, scholars and the public, through bibliographic records, computerized databases, finding aids and assistance with research strategy.

In 1991, the main building was designated a national historic landmark by the National Park Service and Secretary of the Interior Manuel Lujan in recognition of its “national significance in commemorating the history of the United States of America.” A special campaign in 1993 raised funds for refurbishing the second floor rooms, which frequently are used for meetings and receptions.

The small banding together of existing clubs has grown into the largest organization of women volunteers in the world.

NOTES

Capsule histories appeared in The First 100 Years 1886-1996: A Condensed of Washington State Federation of Women's Clubs, and was compiled by WSFWC's The History Resource Committee. Members of the committee included Dorothy C. Coleman, WSFWC Historian, Chairman Irene Wentworth, Marth Smith, Juanita Paulson, Allene Kearns, and Bonnie Walden.