Why Women's Clubs

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The study of the history of Washington State's women's organizations provides a useful vehicle for understanding women's contributions to our past. Women who settled in the Pacific Northwest were quick to establish voluntary associations for self-improvement, charitable work, and civic reform, especially from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1930s. These societies and clubs, like those which existed in the east, sought to put members in touch with each other to discuss cultural topics and current issues and problems, devise strategies for social change, and execute plans that created institutions, laws and programs for the benefit of the members of their communities. Those who adhered to the belief that women's responsibilities should be limited to home and family were displeased at women's great impact on the public world. Nevertheless, multitudes of club members defied the convention that "woman's place is in the home" by uniting to sharpen their ideas, voice opinions and engage in reform of the public world outside their households.

Women's organizations were particularly plentiful in western cities and towns, which offered state and local branches of national organizations of every type. The interests of Northwest women's club activity included benevolence (such as Red Cross, P.E.O., Florence Crittenton Homes for Fallen Women), religion (missions, ladies aid societies, Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Society, National Council of Catholic Women, Protestant denominations like Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Episcopal women's groups), youth (Parent-Teachers Association, Young Women's Christian Association, Girl Scouts, Four-H, Camp Fire Girls, Junior League), patriotism (Daughters of the American Revolution, national Society of Colonial Dames of America), community improvement (General Federation of Women's Clubs, National Association of Colored women's Clubs), work (National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Altrusa, Soroptomist, Women's Card and Label League, unions), education (American Association of University Women, sororities, alumnae associations), arts (reading groups, quilting societies, National Federation of Music Clubs, Garden Clubs of America), politics (League of Women Voters, National Woman's Party, Women's Legislative Council, women's committees of the major political parties) women's auxiliaries to men's fraternal orders and mutual aid associations (Rebekahs for Odd Fellows, Job's Daughters and Order of Eastern Star for Masons), and specific interest groups (National American Woman Suffrage association for the vote and Women's Christian Temperance Union for Prohibition).

Rural women, facing the special obstacle of geographical isolation, had fewer opportunities to meet in association but, nevertheless, they have formed many of the aforementioned groups and also became active in a network for farmers, the Grange. In contrast with women in other parts of the United States, western women created organizations which recognized and celebrated their pioneer ancestors on the frontier, including the Daughters of the Pioneers of Washington.

It is worth noting that women have also played an important role in organizations dominated by male membership. For example, Nettie Asberry of Tacoma, Washington, founded one of the earliest branches of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Women formed the bulk of the membership in the local circles or centers of the Drama League of America, although they were under-represented in the leadership. As the backbone of the Parent-Teachers Association and Garden Clubs, women predominated in shaping the agendas of those organizations.

Among the earliest clubs that Northwest women founded were those devoted to traditional concerns of women. In 1838, six wives of frontier missionaries created the Columbia Maternal Association, near present-day Walla Walla, Washington. They did so for the purpose of considering modern methods of child-raising. During the Civil War, there were west coast women who formed Sanitary Commissions to raise money for supplies for Union soldiers. Charitable efforts were promoted by the Colored Ladies' Society and Dorcas Charity Club, both founded by African American women. The forerunners of our contemporary book discussion groups quickly arose as literary societies, providing opportunities for members to read and discuss modern plays, poetry, essays, novels and classic works of fiction and history. Sometimes the debates led to action by the membership, including investigation of social problems and programs to effect change. Early examples of Washington's literary organizations include the Woman's Club of Olympia (founded in 1883), Women's Century Club of Seattle (1891), Spokane Sorosis (1891), Aloha Club in Tacoma (1892), Cultus Club of Spokane (1892), Everett Book Club (1894), Society of Literary Explorers in Port Angeles (1894), Women's Reading Club of
Walla Walla (1894), Women’s Literary Club of Hoquiam (1894), St. Helena Club of Chehelis (1894), Woman’s Club of Snohomish (1896), and Women’s Industrial Club of Seattle (1895). Early musical enthusiasms were generated by such societies as the Ladies Musical Club of Seattle (1890) while devotees of art met in Spokane’s Art League (1892).

At the dawn of the twentieth century, women launched impressive campaigns for municipal reform through their organizations. They succeeded at lobbying for a wide range of state and local legislation, including conservation measures, civil service requirements for government employees, public health programs, and educational improvements. The clubs allied with the Washington State Federation of Women’s Clubs, for example, lobbied for the registration of nurses and protection of forests.

Northwest women expressed early support for political activity, particularly for women’s rights, and they enjoyed considerable success, winning the vote long before their eastern counterparts did. Thanks in no small measure to the efforts of western women’s suffrage organizations, Wyoming women voted in 1869, Utah in 1870, Colorado in 1893, Idaho in 1896 and then, fourteen years later, Washington State in 1910. The latter affirmation ended the fourteen-year “doldrums” for suffrage advocates and inspired victory in California in 1911, Oregon in 1912. Not until 1920, however, did the federal amendment assure the vote for women across the nation.

By the 1920s, Northwest women enjoyed more opportunities for public activity than their Victorian grandmothers had. While club members were disappointed that their new enfranchisement did not grant them a greater voice in the American political system, they continued to initiate and maintain social welfare programs and lobby government to do the same. Women who won elective office, like Seattle’s first woman mayor, Bertha Landes (1926-28) saw victory with the support of women’s clubs. By the mid-twentieth century, Mayors and Governors routinely recognized club influence by appointing club leaders to boards that directed the educational, social welfare, and arts agencies of Washington. While varied venues for women’s talents in the twentieth century have lured many women away from club participation, voluntary organizations have continued to tap women’s skills to reform the life of Washingtonians.

Today, evidence abounds for women’s enduring contributions to social change through organizations. Among the buildings in Washington State that still stand to remind us of women’s organizational accomplishments are the Children’s Home Society in Seattle, an orphanage founded in 1886 in Seattle and supported by women’s guilds, now located on 65th Street at 33rd Avenue. Children’s Hospital, formerly Children’s Orthopedic Hospital in Seattle, likewise maintained by women’s guilds, was founded in 1907 and moved to Laurelhurst in the 1950s. On Capital Hill stands the headquarters of the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Women’s Century Club, founded in 1891 by Carrie Chapman Catt, who would become the successor to Susan B. Anthony as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. Downtown Seattle boasts the Woman’s University Club, Sunset Club, and YWCA. The University of Washington campus offers Cunningham Hall, a structure created as the Woman’s Building to celebrate the achievement of women’s organizations for the 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition. In Spokane, the Hutton Settlement for orphans housed girl’s clubs like Camp Fire. In Yakima, the Woman’s Century Club still stands. Until recently, Ellensburg housed a Ladies Lounge, established in the 1940s by the Rural Federation of Women’s Clubs to serve rural women as a haven for those who came to town for a long day of errands. The watchful traveler will observe a wide variety of contributions by women’s clubs, from town clocks, drinking fountains, and flagpoles to parks, playgrounds, clinics and shelters. If women’s clubs are no longer as populated as they once were, their legacy continues to enrich our region.

Those who wish to investigate further the history of women’s organizations can look to many published studies as well as archival materials housed in the region’s libraries and historical societies. Increasingly, as club documents are donated to public venues, we will learn more and more about the contributions that women in their clubs have made to our society.