

African American Women's Clubs • Dorothy Houghton & Ruth Sayre • Social Change Agendas

Spring 2002 • \$6

Iowa Heritage

ILLUSTRATED



Front Porch

Dear Readers:

When my mom, Evelyn Arp Bein, was widowed at age 45, she joined the Walcott, Iowa, chapter—"Fern Camp"—of Royal Neighbors of America. What I remember about her early years in club work was that when she was selected to represent one of the virtues—unselfishness—for the group's ritual drill, I offered to help her memorize her short speech. She sat in the old wooden Adirondack chair in the front lawn, practicing the speech over and over, while I twirled in the tire swing under the ash tree, holding the book and prompting her when she faltered. To her dying day she could recite those words (and I still can too).

A lot has been accomplished by women's clubs in our history, probably a lot more than we give them credit for. This issue of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* traces the history of one very important women's organization—the Iowa Association of Colored Women's Clubs. Another article traces the rise of two women leaders who rose to considerable prominence from local club work—Dorothy Houghton and Ruth Sayre. In addition, a photo essay reminds us of the improvements clubwomen helped bring about—improvements that we now take for granted.

I never asked what service projects my mother's chapter of the Royal Neighbors took on every year. I'm sure there were some; most women's clubs devoted time and energy to doing good in the community. But for my mom, who at the time was running a farm and a family while mourning the loss of her husband, I think that belonging to a club did some good for her. What my mom got out of club work was a sense of belonging and a batch of new friends. And I think she was proud that despite her shy and quiet nature she was selected for an office and asked to speak as part of the ceremonies. At a time when grief could have isolated her even more than the farm did, she found friends and activity and probably some self-confidence. If life is a journey, my mom's joining Royal Neighbors may have reassured her that she wasn't traveling alone.

Speaking of journeys, community activist and historian Louise Rosenfield Noun died in August at age 94. I hope many of you had the opportunity to know her,

or to read her fine books on woman suffrage in Iowa and strong-minded women, including her autobiographical *Journey to Autonomy*. Louise was a wonderful model for me. Here are my two favorite memories of her. First, I was in the audience at a Des Moines event several years back when she was presented with one of her many public service awards. She came to the podium to accept the award, made a quick, modest statement of thanks, and then looked us all in the eye and said, "Now, I need your help. I'm starting another book and I'm looking for information about . . ."

I don't recall now what she was looking for, but I remember that the audience laughed because this was vintage Louise—dismissing praise and rolling up her sleeves for yet another project.

The other story took place a few years later. She and I were discussing a possible article idea for the magazine, and she told me what she'd already uncovered. "Oh, how did you locate that source?" I asked.

"Well, I just looked it up on the Internet," she said. "Somebody showed me how, and I did it."

There I was, half her age and I'd never even tried the Internet or e-mail, while Louise was researching on it! Well, that was all I needed—a nudge from one of Iowa's strong-minded women.

Readers, take note—as in this issue, Iowa women and the club movement was the subject of *The Annals of Iowa* (Winter/Spring 1997). The special double-issue provides surprising insights into women's organizations ranging from the Iowa Daughters of the American Revolution to the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom to a Shakespearean study club. Back issues of that *Annals* are still available, by phone (319-335-3916) or Web site (www.iowahistory.org, then click on "museum store"). Order a copy. I think it's one of the best.

—Ginalie Swaim

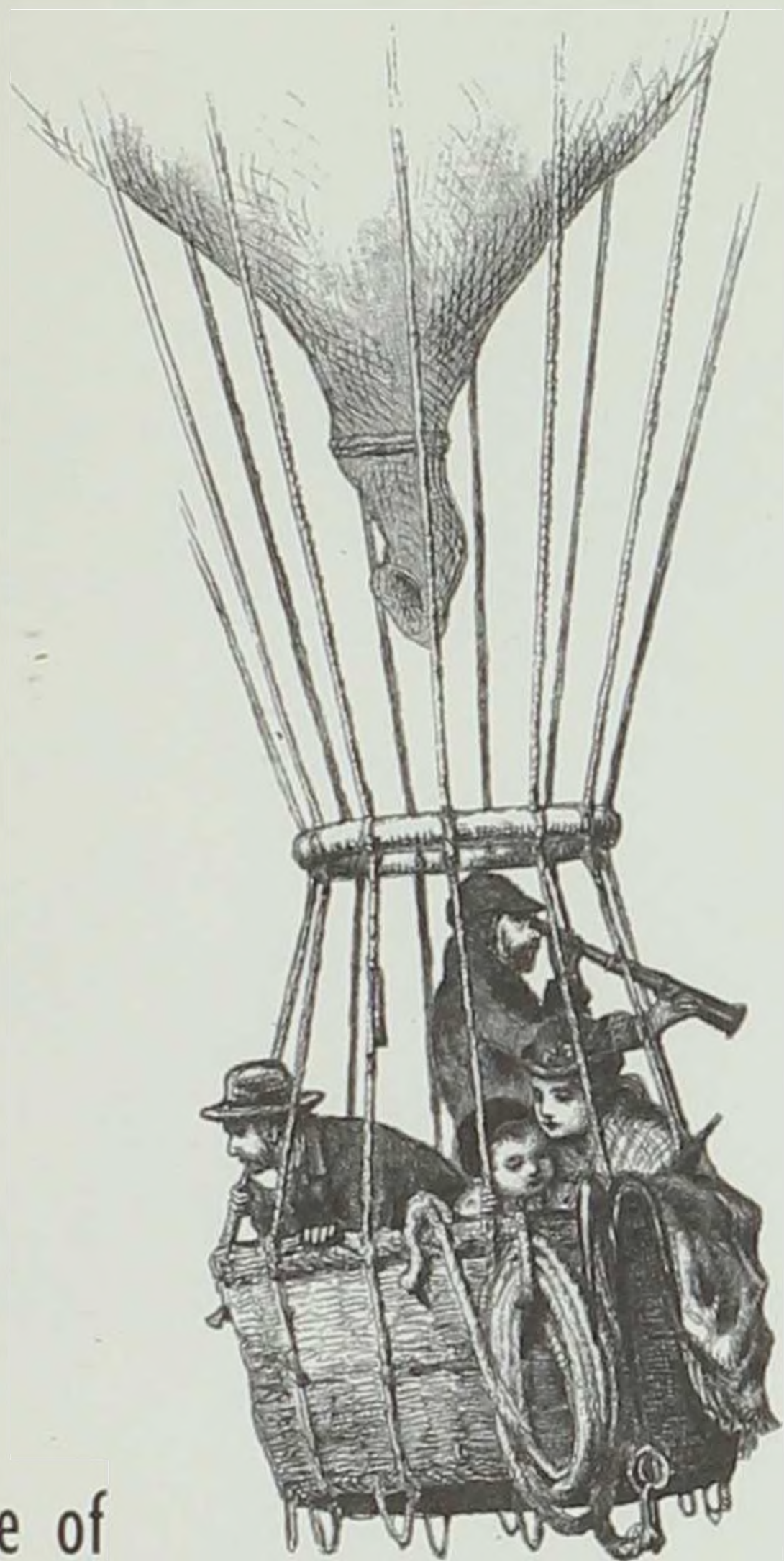
Share your thoughts with the editor and readers here on the Front Porch. Send letters to Ginalie Swaim, editor, *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*, State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, IA 52240. E-mail: ginalie-swaim@uiowa.edu. Letters may be edited for length and clarity.

Editor: Ginalie Swaim
Subscriptions: Deb Pedersen (319-335-3916)
Memberships: Britt Marolf (515-242-5217)
Web site: www.iowahistory.org

In 1920, the State Historical Society of Iowa founded one of the nation's first popular history magazines—*The Palimpsest*. The magazine was renamed *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* in 1996, Iowa's 150th year of statehood.

Iowa Heritage Illustrated (ISSN 1088-5943) is published quarterly by the State Historical Society of Iowa, a division of the Department of Cultural Affairs, State of Iowa. © 2002 State Historical Society of Iowa. **EDITORIAL AND SUBSCRIPTION OFFICES:** 402 Iowa Ave., Iowa City, IA 52240 (319-335-3916). Subscriptions: \$19.95 for 1 year; \$35.90 for 2 years. *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* is also available as a benefit to members of the State Historical Society of Iowa. **MEMBERSHIP OFFICE:** SHSI, 600 E. Locust, Des Moines, IA 50319 (515-242-5217). The State Historical Society of Iowa and the editor are not responsible for contributors' statements of opinion. Printed with soy-based ink on recycled paper. Second class postage paid at Iowa City, IA. Postmaster: send address changes to State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Ave., Iowa City, IA 52240-1806.

PERMISSIONS: To reprint articles or to make multiple copies for educational, promotional, or commercial use, contact the Publications Director, 319-335-3916, State Historical Society of Iowa, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240-1806.



Every issue of
Iowa Heritage
ILLUSTRATED

takes you on a trip
to the past.

And here's your ticket!

❖ Subscribe today at our special
multi-year rates!

❖ Add a gift subscription and bring
your friends along for the ride.

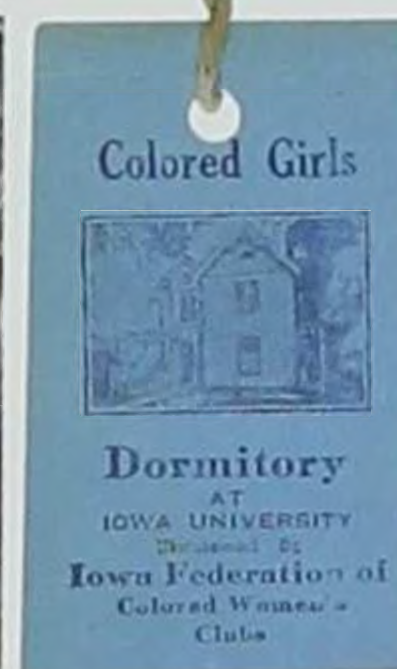
❖ Join the State Historical Society of
Iowa. Enjoy membership benefits while
helping to preserve Iowa's heritage.

Use the tear-out postcards at the
back of this issue. Sign on today!
Don't miss another voyage.

Stage

ATED

g 2002, Vol. 83, No. 1



-and Change: A History of the Iowa
men's Clubs 2

using: African American Students
20s-1950s 14

endas of many women's organizations. 16

orld Stage: Dorothy Houghton and Ruth Sayre 30

ff 47

politician. 48

ursery at Roadside
s, begins Story Hour for
h, circa 1930. Settlement
o the low-income neigh-
ted. They were one of
women's clubs and
issue.

Iowa Heritage

ILLUSTRATED

Formerly The Palimpsest

Spring 2002, Vol. 83, No. 1



Sowing Seeds of Kindness—and Change: A History of the Iowa Association of Colored Women's Clubs

2

by Anne Beiser Allen

Facing Hostility, Finding Housing: African American Students at the University of Iowa, 1920s–1950s

14

by Richard M. Breaux

Women's Work

16

Social change was high on the agendas of many women's organizations.

by Ginalie Swaim

Iowa Clubwomen Rise to World Stage: Dorothy Houghton and Ruth Sayre

30

by Peter Hoehnle

Cranking up and Flapping off

47

as told by Ruth Buxton Sayre

Reading the Past

48

Henry A. Wallace was no typical politician.

by Marvin Bergman



SHSI (DES MOINES)

On the Cover

Mother Allen, a matron in the nursery at Roadside Settlement House in Des Moines, begins Story Hour for eager listeners in this photograph, circa 1930. Settlement houses provided social services to the low-income neighborhoods in which they were located. They were one of the many causes championed by women's clubs and organizations—the focus of this issue.



SHSI (DES MOINES)

Sowing Seeds of Kindness—and Change

A history of the Iowa Association of Colored Women's Clubs

by Anne Beiser Allen

On May 27, 1902, a group of black women from five Iowa cities met in the First Baptist Church in Ottumwa. They sang songs, shared experiences, and listened to Josephine Silone Yates, president of the eight-year-old National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, speak about "A Single Standard is a Social Necessity." Then, led by Helena Downey, a strong-minded and articulate woman whose husband was a butcher at the local packing plant, they announced the formation of the Iowa State Federation of Afro-American Women's Clubs.

When the women met again the following year to draw up a constitution (*see photo, left*), the delegates represented clubs comprising some 200 black women from Davenport, Ottumwa, Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Muscatine, Keokuk, and Buxton. As an umbrella organization over individual clubs across the state, the Iowa State Federation of Afro-American Women's Clubs would unite black women and provide support, inspiration, direction, resources, and strength in numbers. Looking back over the last century reveals the changing issues championed by Iowa's black clubwomen, and how those changes reflected changes in American society itself.

These Iowa black women at the turn of the last century were drawing on the experiences and examples of black women and white women across the nation in preceding decades. The women's club movement in America had begun after the Civil War, as middle-class women of all races acquired more leisure time and more

Here posed outside Davenport's African Methodist Episcopal church, the leaders of Iowa's black clubwomen meet to draft a constitution at their second annual meeting in May 1903.



Sowing Seeds of Kindness—and Change

*A history of the
Iowa Association
of Colored Women's Clubs*

by Anne Beiser Allen

On May 27, 1902, a group of black women from five Iowa cities met in the first Baptist Church in Ottumwa. They sang songs, shared experiences, and listened to Josephine Silone Yates, president of the eight-year-old National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, speak about "A Single Standard is a Social Necessity." Then, led by Helena Downey, a strong-minded and articulate woman whose husband was a butcher at the local packing plant, they announced the formation of the Iowa State Federation of Afro-American Women's Clubs.

When the women met again the following year to draw up a constitution (*see photo, left*), the delegates represented clubs comprising some 200 black women from Davenport, Ottumwa, Des Moines, Cedar Rapids, Muscatine, Keokuk, and Buxton. As an umbrella organization over individual clubs across the state, the Iowa State Federation of Afro-American Women's Clubs would unite black women and provide support, inspiration, direction, resources, and strength in numbers. Looking back over the last century reveals the changing issues championed by Iowa's black clubwomen, and how those changes reflected changes in American society itself.

These Iowa black women at the turn of the last century were drawing on the experiences and examples of black women and white women across the nation in preceding decades. The women's club movement in America had begun after the Civil War, as middle-class women of all races acquired more leisure time and more



SHIRLEY KOWLES

education than their mothers had. At first, they offered their talents to their churches, raising money and carrying out charitable work. Sometimes these groups found themselves dominated by male preachers with different goals from those of their female members; when this happened, the women often formed new groups unaffiliated with the churches. Many women, wishing to continue their education in an informal setting, organized clubs focused on literature, art, or music. Others formed clubs to discuss timely issues or civic concerns. Expanding their focus and interest beyond home and family, these clubs often tackled local social problems, founding settlement houses, homes for the indigent and elderly, and orphanages. They campaigned for better treatment for the mentally ill, for a more humane approach to problems of poverty, and—though sometimes in a quiet way—for political issues such as woman suffrage and prohibition. Women discovered that participation in clubs provided an arena in which they could develop leadership skills.

The urge for social betterment and self-improvement motivated both white and black women, of course, but black women were spurred on by the need to disprove negative images of black women that were widely accepted in American white society. While white women functioned under the popular belief that they were pure, moral, and uniquely designed by nature to provide a civilizing influence on society, black women were often portrayed as the opposite of their white counterparts: immoral, unintelligent, and unable to rise above the so-called “primitive” culture from which their ancestors had been exported as slaves. As more black women acquired education and moved into the American middle classes, they sought to demonstrate that they themselves did not conform to this racist stereotype, and to help their less affluent sisters rise above it as well. Like their white counterparts, these women formed clubs and organizations and looked around for ways in which they could help their communities.

Likewise, in the final decades of the 19th century, Jim Crow attitudes and practices led to the founding of black schools and colleges, where, as W. E. B. Du Bois termed it, a “Talented Tenth” would be educated and equipped to uplift the entire race. Urban black communities banded together to found institutions for social services; many of these were funded—and at times administered—by African American women’s clubs.

The groundwork for a national organization of these women’s clubs was laid in the 1890s, in response to two particular acts of exclusion and racism. Black women were refused representation at the Columbian Exposition, to be held in Chicago in 1893; its organizers gave

the excuse that there existed no national organization of black women to provide such representation (the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, founded in New York City in 1890, represented only white women).

The second impetus was a racist letter written by James W. Jacks, president of the Missouri Press Association, to Florence Belgarnie, secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society in England, in which he described most black women as “wholly devoid of morality . . . prostitutes, thieves and liars.” When the contents of this letter became known, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, president of the New Era Club of Boston, sent out a call for a “National Conference of Colored Women” to be held in Boston in the spring of 1895. The conference attracted 104 women from 54 clubs, representing 14 states and the District of Columbia. From this, the National Federation of Afro-American Women was formed. A few months later the national federation sent representatives to the Colored Women’s Congress held in Atlanta in conjunction with the Cotton States and International Exposition.

Meanwhile, in Washington, D.C., the National League of Colored Women had also been formed. In 1896, the two groups agreed to merge, forming the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). For president they elected Mary Church Terrell—an Oberlin graduate who taught school in Washington, D.C., before becoming the first black woman on its school board. During her three years in office at the NACW, Terrell skillfully coordinated the differing agendas of clubs from all over the country, thereby harnessing the energy of the black women’s club movement into an effective national organization. With the goals to “elevate and dignify colored American womanhood” and to “foster moral, mental and material progress” among black women, the NACW chose for its motto “Lifting As We Climb.”

Iowa’s African American population was small—in 1900 there were only 12,693 black Iowans out of a total population of 2,232,000. The highest numbers lived in larger cities, like Des Moines, Keokuk, Davenport, and Ottumwa, and in the coal-mining town of Buxton, where African Americans composed more than half of the 5,000 residents. It was in these communities, among middle-class African Americans, that the black women’s club movement in Iowa began.

The earliest was the Harriet Beecher Stowe Reading Club, founded in Des Moines in 1890. In 1893, the Silver Autumn Leaf Club formed in Davenport to study domestic science, art, and issues of the day. In 1894, a group of women in Ottumwa formed the Ida B. Wells



Children and the home were considered the central focus for women, but through club work, they could apply their energies to social problems and civic concerns in their communities.

Reading Club (named for the outspoken black journalist who crusaded against lynching).

By May 1902, when the Iowa Federation of Afro-American Women's Clubs was founded, five more clubs had been organized: the Violet Reading Club (for intellectual improvement and Bible study) in Davenport in 1898; the Paul Dunbar Club (art and study) in Muscatine in 1900; the Toussaint L'Ouverture Club (art and needlework) in Davenport in 1901; the Benevolent Club (art and domestic science) in Ottumwa in 1901; and the Good Intent Club (literature and woman suffrage) in Ottumwa in 1902. The Josephine Silone Yates Club of Cedar Rapids and the Equal Standard Club of Davenport soon followed.

The 15 clubs represented at the May 1903 federation convention in Davenport recognized, as their new constitution spelled out, that "knowledge may be more readily acquired by a combination of efforts rather than by single ones," and acknowledged "the need of an organized and united effort for the betterment of the home and social life of the Afro-American people."

By uniting into a state federation, the clubs anticipated these benefits: "1) To secure harmony in action and co-operation among women in raising their home, moral and civic life to the highest standard; 2) To encourage the organization of clubs where they do not exist and where the aid of women's clubs are needed; 3) To aid the clubs in becoming more thoroughly acquainted with the different kinds of work that come within the scope of women's occupations." As its motto, the federation adopted the phrase "Sowing Seeds of Kindness."

At the annual state conventions, which spanned two or three days, the program usually included music, handicraft demonstrations, speeches, and reports. The early functions and focus of the new federation are revealed in the committees it formed: Reciprocity (for sharing information among member clubs), Arts and Crafts, Mothers' Clubs, Social Purity, Household Economics, and Education.

In 1905 and 1906, for example, the Social Purity Committee suggested discussion questions like these for local club meetings: Do the parents of your city guard against late hours for their children? Is there an equal standard of morality for boys and girls? Do the mothers of the community see that their children read good literature? Are the Negro Minstrels helpful to the race? Does public opinion control one's best actions? Do you approve of total abstinence or moderate use of liquor? Will a social game of cards lead to gambling? Does mental motherhood and fatherhood overcome heredity?

The study of arts and crafts also had social betterment implications. "We ought to become more intelligent as buyers and more appreciative of artistic craftsmanship," the Arts and Crafts Committee reported in 1905. "Therefore the difficult and intricate problem called Arts and Crafts movement is in analysis an economic and social problem." Clubs were surveyed as to the number of local dressmakers and designers, basket makers, milliners, lace makers, and decorators of china. The final survey question was pragmatic: "Can they sell their work?"

From the start, education, especially for girls, was a particularly high priority for the federation and its member clubs. "Today as never before education is the watch word of the hour for the Negro race," proclaimed the education committee in 1905. Although only a few members were college graduates, clubwomen tended to be better educated than the majority of black women in Iowa. Most of Iowa's black college graduates left the state to seek better employment opportunities. (Iowa's school districts, for example, did not hire black teachers until after World War II.) "Opportunities are pre-

sented every day to the educated girl," the Education Committee affirmed; "if not here, there are other places and we must qualify them."

The Iowa Federation of Afro-American Women's Clubs was also deeply concerned about the image of African Americans in society. Members felt a calling to reform and encourage the less fortunate members of their community, and they worked for safety and respect for their race. Reflecting these concerns, delegates passed these resolutions in 1905: "That inasmuch as the custom of permitting young girls to solicit men to buy tickets from them is damaging to modesty and a menace to morality, we do set the seal of our condemnation upon it and call upon the church people, especially, to help us abolish the custom; . . . That we voice our condemnation of lynching and mob violence, and redouble our efforts to arouse public sentiment to the demand that the majesty of the law prevail throughout this broad land of ours until every human being is guaranteed a fair trial by law for life and liberty; . . . That we do not use nicknames." These resolutions illustrate the federation's demand for respect in a racist society where young black women were regarded as sexual objects, summary justice was often executed on black males, and members of both sexes were commonly addressed by inappropriately familiar nicknames or as inferiors undeserving of polite conventions of speech.

As individual clubs enthusiastically took up a rich array of activities, the federation's conventions and reports kept everyone informed of ideas, projects, and successes. For instance, one learned through early reports from Davenport's Elizabeth Lindsay Davis Club that besides studying needlework and forestry, the women now had "a club song which we prize highly because the literature and music were composed by two of the members of the club," and the president had organized a club of "little folks who study the literature of colored writers." In 1907 the Fannie B. Williams Club of Buxton reported their accomplishments: "Made better wives and mothers, more systematic housekeeping, improved the selection of literature, more economic housekeeping and improvement in a social way and unity in action. . . . Bettered the homes, improvement intellectually, ennobled the women to overcome embarrassment, benefit morally, made steps to secure a building [for] club meetings and City Federations and other beneficial purposes."

In Des Moines, the Callahan Industrial Club had "worked earnestly for the benefit of the church . . . done a great deal of charity work where needed . . . did art,

and studied literature and now we are studying the Bible and the American magazine on the Color Line in the South." Davenport's Violet Reading Club had helped a blind man in their community, and Ottumwa's Good Intent Club assisted a local widow with six children by providing clothing, a Thanksgiving basket ("we say a basket but it came near being a wagon load" the report added), and Christmas gifts, "and then we got the open door mission to help them through the winter." The Ida B. Wells Club of Ottumwa furnished a room at the local hospital, paying \$20 a year for its upkeep. To the question of "What has your club accomplished in your own community?" the Frances Ellen Harper Club of Keokuk replied succinctly: "Raised the standard both intellectually and socially."

By 1910 the Iowa Federation of Colored Women's Clubs had grown large enough to qualify for membership in the national organization. (It had altered its name in 1905, changing "Afro-American" to "Colored" to conform more closely with the name of the National Association of Colored Women.) New clubs continued to emerge throughout the state. By 1913, when it was formally incorporated, the Iowa federation proudly claimed 35 member clubs in 13 cities, with a total membership of nearly 600.

Much of the federation's success in those early years was due to the high standards set by leaders whose energy, determination, and stamina guided its work. Audra Alexander, for example, served on many committees from the earliest days of the federation and remained active into the 1970s. Sophie Nichols, a Missouri native who worked as a clothes presser in a Des Moines department store, held offices in the federation for many years and presided over the Des Moines City Federation in 1922. Margaret Patten, a teacher, devoted many years to club work, including a stint as president in the 1920s (her husband, Des Moines printer Robert E. Patten, printed the federation's convention reports for many years). Jessie Ellen Walker of Marshalltown served on scholarship committees for some 50 years and was twice president, in 1910 and 1942.

Educated in teaching, music, and law, Gertrude E. Durden Rush was the first practicing black woman attorney in Iowa. With four other black Iowans, she co-founded the National Bar Association in Des Moines in 1925, in response to earlier mistreatment by the American Bar Association. Rush drew up the original articles of incorporation for the Iowa women's federation and later founded the Women's Law and Political Study Club to familiarize women with parliamentary procedure and the legal system.

Sue M. Wilson Brown founded the Intellectual Im-



Jessie Ellen Walker



Sue M. Brown



Audra Alexander



Margaret Patten



Gertrude E. Rush

provement Club in Des Moines in 1907 and quickly became active in the state, regional, and national federation of black women's clubs; in 1930, she represented the national federation at the International Congress of Women in Vienna. From 1909 to 1911, Brown edited *Iowa Colored Woman* magazine. In 1915, she instigated the commissioning of a portrait of Booker T. Washington for the Iowa Hall of History. Cofounder of the Des Moines League of Colored Women Voters, Brown was the first woman president of the Des Moines chapter of the NAACP. In 1910 she sued J. H. Bell Company under the Iowa Civil Rights Act, contending that because of her race she had been refused free coffee at Bell's booth at a Des Moines Retail Grocers' Association food show. (The court ruled that the booth and the free coffee were for advertising purposes and not covered by the act.)

Federation resolutions passed at the annual meetings attest to the range of obstacles and injustices faced daily by blacks in Iowa and the United States—and to the clubwomen's demands for improvements in education and working conditions and an end to racism. In the period before the First World War, for instance, federation resolutions included a vote of thanks to the Boyson Drug Company of Cedar Rapids for "giving employment to young colored women as waitresses in the Grill Room." A 1913 resolution praised attorneys S. Joe Brown and George Woodson's successful opposition to proposed state legislation banning interracial marriages. In 1915 and 1916, the clubwomen endorsed woman suffrage, prohibition, and establishment of social centers for young people. They denounced the use of "pictures which are objectionable to the Afro-Americans" and condemned "all vulgar and degrading post cards and posters" as well as racist movies like the highly popular *Birth of a Nation*. And they commended the white Detroit Federation of Women's Clubs for rejecting membership in the white

National Federation of Women's Clubs unless a black women's club in that city was allowed to affiliate with them. "We are grateful to them," said the Iowa federation, "and to all who have the courage to take such [a] stand and shall ever ask God's blessing on such true, broad-hearted persons."

Growing awareness of African American culture and heroes is also apparent in federation references to Crispus Attucks, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Paul Dunbar. In 1917, a report noted proudly that at six Girls' Social Centers newly established in Des Moines, Ottumwa, Albia, Marshalltown, Buxton, and Clarinda, the girls were encouraged to study "Negro literature in order that they receive not only instruction, but also inspiration from the noted men and women of their own race." That same year, the federation unveiled its commissioned portrait of Booker T. Washington by Henry Ossawa Tanner. In 1921, the federation contributed to the national federation's drive to purchase and renovate the Washington, D.C., home of Frederick Douglass.

The Iowa federation also focused on the high rate of tuberculosis among the nation's black population. "The Negro is not subject to tuberculosis any more than any other race," it stated in 1915, "but it is due to the unsanitary conditions under which he is forced to live. Therefore be it resolved that we endorse the national tuberculosis movement as set forth by Dr. Booker T. Washington."

Sanitation problems and crowded housing in American cities were exacerbated as the "Great Migration" brought hundreds of thousands of blacks to northern industrial cities between 1915 and 1940. Although cities like Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, and New York saw the greatest growth, Iowa's black population rose from 15,000 to 19,000 between 1910 and 1920. The most significant increase was in the Waterloo area in Black Hawk County, where the black population grew from 29 in 1910 to 856 in 1920. There, black labor was im-

ported to work in the railroad and agricultural implement industries, often as strikebreakers, or as replacements for white workers during World War I. The number of blacks more than tripled in Woodbury County; Sioux City, as well as Des Moines and Cedar Rapids, felt the impact of a large influx of African Americans.

"We are . . . pained to note," said federation president Sue M. Brown in 1917, "that the conditions confronting the black people of the southland at the present time are so perilous as to necessitate their migration . . . into this far off northern climate." A 1917 resolution read: "Whereas, the migration of the Negroes to the north has assumed unthought of proportions, between one hundred and fifty and three hundred thousand have migrated in the past year, be it resolved that we put forth every effort to help them in finding suitable homes and employment, and lending a helping hand in every way possible."

These newcomers, mostly from the deep South, caused considerable unease among the resident black population of Iowa, as in many northern states, especially among those who had achieved a sort of middle-class status. With meager resources and scant education, thick southern accents and unsophisticated manners, these in-migrants seemed destined to reinforce stereotypes that the local population had been working so long and hard to eliminate. Brown urged clubwomen to "bid these wanderers welcome and help to make them the kind of citizens we would have them be." The national federation's motto—"Lifting As We Climb"—took on a new relevance.

In many northern cities, the escalating need for social services strained the energies and resources of women's organizations already struggling to improve conditions for their people through self-help programs. Many of these groups now combined efforts with other organizations, such as the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. (A branch of the NAACP was chartered in Des Moines in 1915, and additional branches followed quickly in other Iowa cities.) In addition to youth programs and educational efforts to counteract stereotyping, the NAACP used legal action to further its goals—something clubwomen could not so easily do.

It was during this period, too, that the federal government made its first tentative moves away from its traditional laissez-faire approach to social policy and shifted towards national health campaigns, housing and urban development initiatives, and industrial education. Although these first steps were made on behalf of white citizens, African Americans began to insist that their communities be included as well.

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



The sky has grown gray, laughter is hushed, life to those we love has taken on a sense of danger," remarked the state federation president at the 1918 convention. "Our faces are turned toward those fields in France that are one vast Calvary."

Helena Downey paused in her annual address to look back before the start of World War I. "There was a time in the life of a club when we met, had a literary program, served an elaborate lunch. We felt we were doing our duty. It was pleasant. But lo, a change has come. As we groped on in the work, it began to dawn upon us that we could not live unto ourselves and that the aim and purpose of the club should not be self-improvement alone, but improving and benefitting the community in which they are located. The success of a club is measured only by the good that it can do."

Tapping into organizational and leadership skills learned through club work, Iowa's African American clubwomen did their part on the home front—selling war bonds, conserving food and fuel, volunteering for the Red Cross, and sending books "to our soldiers in France" as part of the "Negro Books for Negro Soldiers Movement." Solemn prayers and patriotic songs marked the 1918 federation convention in Des Moines, and photographs of African American soldiers appeared in the souvenir program.

The choice in 1917 of Fort Des Moines as the location of the nation's first training camp for black officers—and nearby Camp Dodge in 1918, as another training camp for black soldiers—brought new challenges to the local black community. The black-owned Des



Moines newspaper *The Bystander* noted in November 1917 that 7,000 black soldiers were then in Des Moines, "more than the total [black] population of Des Moines and Buxton combined." Local clubwomen volunteered at the military hospital at Fort Des Moines and sought to provide wholesome entertainment opportunities for the young soldiers. (Regarding "wholesome entertainment," some in the federation worried about America's growing fondness for dancing and ragtime music, which the clubwomen called "damaging to the morals of our young people.")

The 1919 federation program noted proudly that Camp Dodge and Fort Des Moines "are loud in their praise" of the federation's work. But the public hanging of three black Alabamian soldiers at Camp Dodge, found guilty in 1918 of assaulting a white female, was a chilling reminder of the precarious position African Americans occupied in American society—even in Iowa.

With the end of World War I, economic adjustments and job competition led to race riots in many northern cities. Although there was little racial violence in Iowa, labor unrest struck here as it did the rest of the country, and discrimination continued. In 1919 Iowa federation president Martha White called for "reconstruction for the colored American." She reminded the clubwomen that "our soldiers were Jim Crowed upon their return from battle, denied the rights of Pullman's, refused food at railroad restaurants and cafes, after sacrificing their all for democracy," and she urged members to support the NAACP in its efforts to end discrimination. While Iowa had passed a civil rights law in 1884, unwritten

The well-being of African American men at the Fort Des Moines training camp for black officers was one of the concerns of Iowa Federation members during World War I.

Jim Crow practices existed and the color line was clearly drawn in many communities.

By 1921, the Iowa federation had established a Legislative Department to educate women on government and new responsibilities at the voting polls. Its Public Health Committee provided information on health issues in their communities. The recurrent issue of lynching in the South also received attention, with a 1923 resolution to "lend our energies to secure the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in the next session of Congress."

On the second day of the federation's annual meeting in May 1919 in Marshalltown, a delegation of women students addressed the organization. One of the students, Mamie Diggs, described the difficult housing situation black women students like herself faced at the State University of Iowa in Iowa City. The university had completed its first dormitory in 1913, Currier Hall. By 1919, when university enrollment topped 4,000, Currier Hall housed fewer than 200 women—and none of them black. In the words of Philip G. Hubbard (a 1940 African American freshman at the university, and later a professor and dean there), black students at the University of Iowa in the first half of the 20th century were regarded as "visitors rather than full members of the general community." They rented rooms

ported to work in the railroad and agricultural implement industries, often as strikebreakers, or as replacements for white workers during World War I. The number of blacks more than tripled in Woodbury County, Sioux City, as well as Des Moines and Cedar Rapids, felt the impact of a large influx of African Americans.

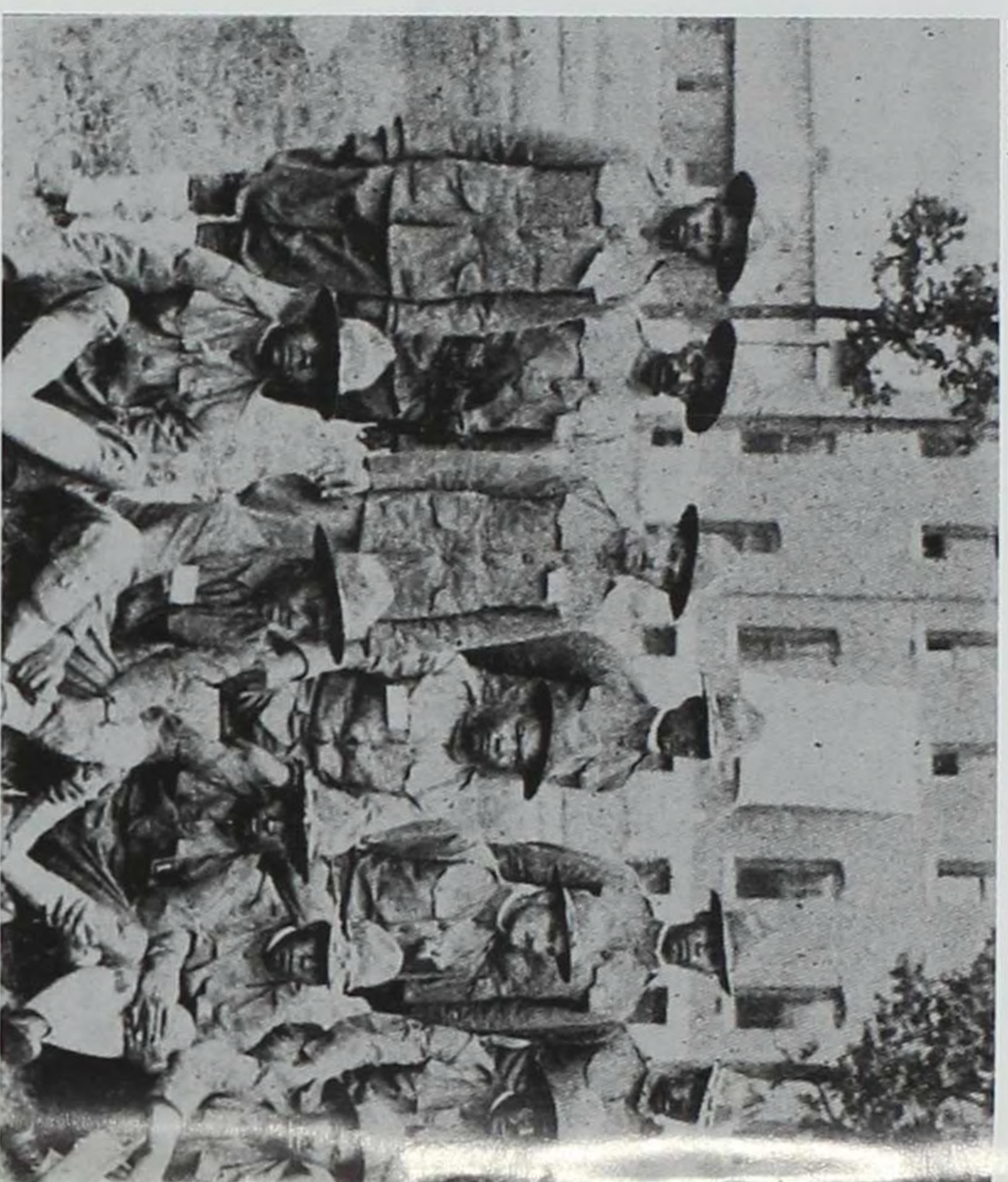
"We are . . . pained to note," said federation president Sue M. Brown in 1917, "that the conditions confronting the black people of the southland at the present time are so perilous as to necessitate their migration . . . into this far off northern climate." A 1917 resolution read: "Whereas, the migration of the Negroes to the north has assumed unthought of proportions, between one hundred and fifty and three hundred thousand have migrated in the past year, be it resolved that we put forth every effort to help them in finding suitable homes and employment, and lending a helping hand in every way possible."

These newcomers, mostly from the deep South, caused considerable unease among the resident black population of Iowa, as in many northern states, especially among those who had achieved a sort of middle-class status. With meager resources and scant education, thick southern accents and unsophisticated manners, these in-migrants seemed destined to reinforce stereotypes that the local population had been working so long and hard to eliminate. Brown urged clubwomen to "bid these wanderers welcome and help to make them the kind of citizens we would have them be." The national federation's motto—"Lifting As We Climb"—took on a new relevance.

In many northern cities, the escalating need for social services strained the energies and resources of women's organizations already struggling to improve conditions for their people through self-help programs. Many of these groups now combined efforts with other organizations, such as the National Urban League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. (A branch of the NAACP was chartered in Des Moines in 1915, and additional branches followed quickly in other Iowa cities.) In addition to youth programs and educational efforts to counteract stereotyping, the NAACP used legal action to further its goals—something clubwomen could not so easily do.

It was during this period, too, that the federal government made its first tentative moves away from its traditional laissez-faire approach to social policy and shifted towards national health campaigns, housing and urban development initiatives, and industrial education. Although these first steps were made on behalf of white citizens, African Americans began to insist that their communities be included as well.

SHS (IOWA CITY)



The sky has grown gray, laughter is hushed, life to those we love has taken on a sense of danger," remarked the state federation president at the 1918 convention. "Our faces are turned toward those fields in France that are one vast Calvary."

Helena Downey paused in her annual address to look back before the start of World War I. "There was a time in the life of a club when we met, had a literary program, served an elaborate lunch. We felt we were doing our duty. It was pleasant. But lo, a change has come. As we groped on in the work, it began to dawn upon us that we could not live unto ourselves and that the aim and purpose of the club should not be self-improvement alone, but improving and benefiting the community in which they are located. The success of a club is measured only by the good that it can do."

Tapping into organizational and leadership skills learned through club work, Iowa's African American clubwomen did their part on the home front—selling war bonds, conserving food and fuel, volunteering for the Red Cross, and sending books "to our soldiers in France" as part of the "Negro Books for Negro Soldiers Movement." Solemn prayers and patriotic songs marked the 1918 federation convention in Des Moines, and photographs of African American soldiers appeared in the souvenir program.

The choice in 1917 of Fort Des Moines as the location of the nation's first training camp for black officers—and nearby Camp Dodge in 1918, as another training camp for black soldiers—brought new challenges to the local black community. The black-owned Des

Moines newspaper *The Bystander* noted in November 1917 that 7,000 black soldiers were then in Des Moines, "more than the total [black] population of Des Moines and Buxton combined." Local clubwomen volunteered at the military hospital at Fort Des Moines and sought to provide wholesome entertainment opportunities for the young soldiers. (Regarding "wholesome entertainment," some in the federation worried about America's growing fondness for dancing and ragtime music, which the clubwomen called "damaging to the morals of our young people.")

The 1919 federation program noted proudly that Camp Dodge and Fort Des Moines "are loud in their praise" of the federation's work. But the public hanging of three black Alabaman soldiers at Camp Dodge, found guilty in 1918 of assaulting a white female, was a chilling reminder of the precarious position African Americans occupied in American society—even in Iowa.

With the end of World War I, economic adjustments and job competition led to race riots in many northern cities. Although there was little racial violence in Iowa, labor unrest struck here as it did the rest of the country, and discrimination continued. In 1919 Iowa federation president Martha White called for "reconstruction for the colored American." She reminded the clubwomen that "our soldiers were Jim Crowed upon their return from battle, denied the rights of Pullman's, refused food at railroad restaurants and cafes, after sacrificing their all for democracy," and she urged members to support the NAACP in its efforts to end discrimination. While Iowa had passed a civil rights law in 1884, unwritten

The well-being of African American men at the Fort Des Moines training camp for black officers was one of the concerns of Iowa Federation members during World War I.

Jim Crow practices existed and the color line was clearly drawn in many communities.

By 1921, the Iowa federation had established a Legislative Department to educate women on government and new responsibilities at the voting polls. Its Public Health Committee provided information on health issues in their communities. The recurrent issue of lynching in the South also received attention, with a 1923 resolution to "lend our energies to secure the passage of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill in the next session of Congress."

On the second day of the federation's annual meeting in May 1919 in Marshalltown, a delegation of women students addressed the organization. One of the students, Mamie Diggs, described the difficult housing situation black women students like herself faced at the State University of Iowa in Iowa City. The university had completed its first dormitory in 1913, Currier Hall. By 1919, when university enrollment topped 4,000, Currier Hall housed fewer than 200 women—and none of them black. In the words of Philip G. Hubbard (a 1940 African American freshman at the university, and later a professor and dean there), black students at the University of Iowa in the first half of the 20th century were regarded as "visitors rather than full members of the general community." They rented rooms



The front page of *The Bystander*, August 22, 1919, captioned this photo "A Group of State University Girls Looking for a Home." The newspaper remarked, "There should be a home arranged for these girls who are trying to make their way thru the university that they may be better prepared to enter into life's battles and those things that go to make up a better and higher citizenship not only for this generation but for generations yet unborn." Back row, left to right: Naomi Harper, Elizabeth Imogene Wilson, Harriette Alexander, Ruth Southall, Helen Lucas. Front row: Iva McClain, Minerva Graves, Ola Calhoun, Mamie Diggs, Helen Beshears, and Emily Elizabeth Gross. Below: An all-Iowa fundraising project sold these tags for a dime in July 1919.

from members of Iowa City's tiny black community or from professors who offered lodging in exchange for menial labor. The supply of rooms available—especially for young women—barely met the demand.

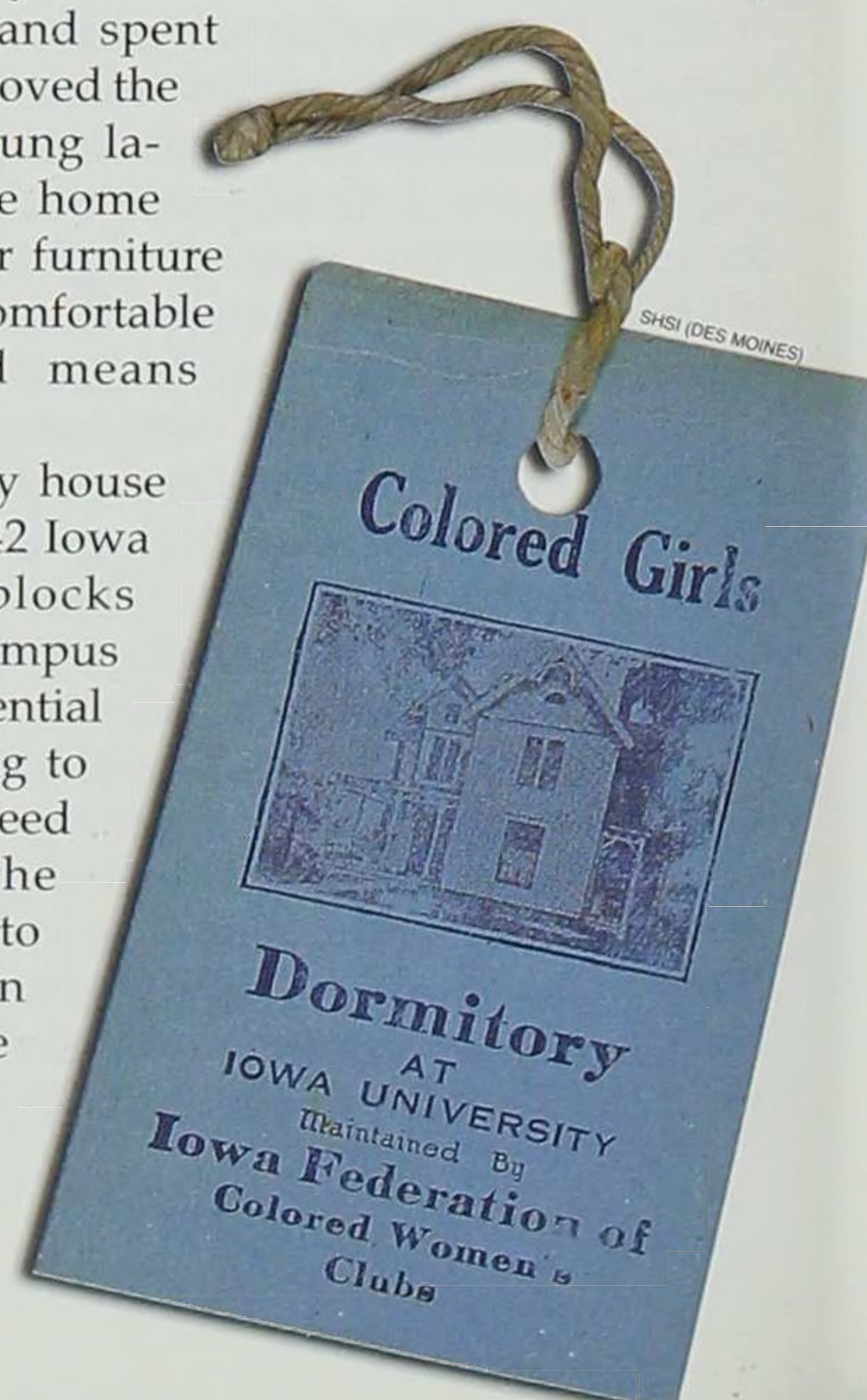
The women students asked the federation for help. Although they had formed a club and rented an Iowa City house in 1917, they needed a more permanent arrangement. They had approached women's clubs before, but this time the federation, deeply moved by the students' plea, realized that something had to be done. They discussed sending \$25 to the eight students (Iowa City's room and board averaged \$34 a month, and university tuition was \$40 a year). But delegate Susie Pugh of Cedar Rapids contended that this was not good enough. She insisted that the federation should do something of more lasting benefit to the students. A subcommittee led by Scholarship Chair Helena Downey would investigate possibilities.

By the next evening, the idea was in place: the federation would "make an effort to purchase a home at Iowa City for the colored girls of the State University." This was not the first time such an idea had appeared. As early as 1910, the organization had worked towards buying a home for young working women and elderly women in Des Moines, but financial problems and organizational details had stymied the project.

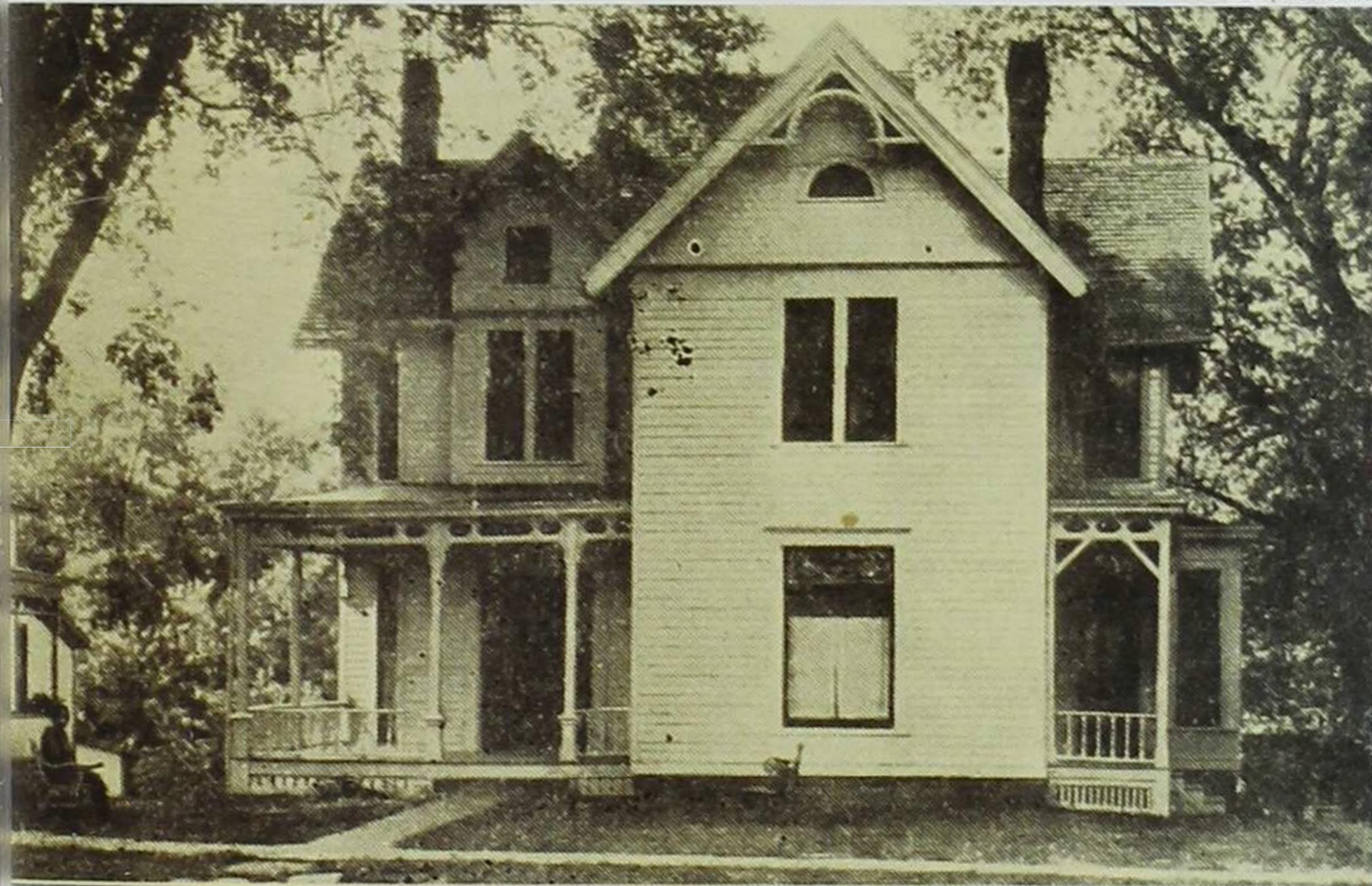
With the endorsement of university officials (but no real help), and through publicity from *The Bystander*, the

federation launched an ambitious statewide fundraising campaign. Within only three months, the women raised \$2,047, and by September the federation had purchased a house for \$5,300, paying \$1,000 down. "The place has nine large rooms, bath, hard wood floors, good attic, cellar, furnaces, etc.," the chair of the Scholarship Committee reported. "It had gas for illumination, but we installed electricity at a cost of \$25. Had the necessary plumbing done and spent two weeks and moved the furniture the young ladies had into the home and bought other furniture and made it as comfortable as our limited means would allow."

The two-story house was located at 942 Iowa Avenue, nine blocks from the main campus and on the residential boulevard leading to Old Capitol. "I need not tell you the struggle we had to secure a place in Iowa City," the committee chair



SHSI (DES MOINES)



For three decades, the Federation Home at 942 Iowa Avenue in Iowa City housed African American women students enrolled at the University of Iowa.

continued, "but I might say we grabbed this place as our last chance, an ideal place on the avenue." There had been some opposition from neighbors, who managed to force a reassessment of a small adjoining lot where a garage stood, but the committee arranged to pay the additional tax. A board of trustees was set up to oversee the Federation Home, as it was to be called. Sue M. Brown was deeply involved in the project and would chair its board until 1941. Her husband, prominent attorney S. Joe Brown, handled the legal work without charge. Archie Alexander, civil engineer and husband of Audra Alexander, directed renovations.

At the federation's 1924 convention in Iowa City, the board proudly announced that the home's mortgage had been paid off and invited members to tour the Federation Home. Many of its first residents were the founding members of the local chapter of Delta Sigma Theta, a black sorority begun in 1913 at Howard University. Throughout the twenties, the federation focused most of its energies on the house in Iowa City. In 1929, the house provided rooms for 17 women students, and a social center for eight others who roomed elsewhere.

Although the Great Depression brought hard times, education and young people remained federation priorities. By 1935, the Iowa Association of Colored Women (as it was renamed that year) took pride in its girls' clubs and newest board position, the Superintendent of Girls. Affiliated with the National Association of Colored Girls' Clubs, the nine girls' clubs in Iowa, comprising 110 members, sent delegates to the annual convention,

where they, too, learned leadership skills. Even though more black students were now graduating from high school, the old complaint that Iowa schools were not employing black teachers, regardless of their qualifications, surfaced again in a 1937 resolution. In 1938, the federation also reestablished its scholarship loan program. It also recommended that a committee work with administrators of the Girls' Industrial Home at Mitchellville to guarantee black residents the same level of educational opportunity as white residents.

Roosevelt's second New Deal, after his 1936 re-election, opened some doors for blacks, partly as a result of the efforts of black educator Mary McLeod Bethune, whom Roosevelt appointed as director of the Division of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration. But organizations like the NAACP con-

tinued to fight for civil rights laws. Many of Iowa's black clubwomen were active in the NAACP; Sue M. Brown, for example, presided over the Des Moines branch from 1925 to 1930.

During the Depression, fewer black women enrolled at the University of Iowa, and this jeopardized the financial status of the federation's house in Iowa City. Rooms were rented to male students to keep the operation viable until more women enrolled—which happened as the thirties ended. The Federation Home was renamed the Sue M. Brown Hall following her death in 1941.

After the war, the GI Bill brought thousands of veterans to the University of Iowa. The university dropped its unwritten policy against housing black students in the dormitories; in 1946 five black women integrated Currier Hall. In 1950, the house in Iowa City was closed. The federation sold the property and invested the proceeds in defense bonds.

As America's civil rights movement gained momentum, changes in the Iowa federation's name and structure reflected national trends. In 1956, it changed its name to the Iowa Association of Club Women, dropping the word "colored" to "set an example" in the field of race relations (though two years later it changed to the Iowa Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Inc., to again conform with the national federation). By 1958, federation departments focused



Renamed the Iowa Association of Colored Women, the organization took on new challenges in the second half of the century.

on human relations, women in industry, and international relations, as well as on education, young people, and family life, and phrases like "The Great Society" and "urban renewal" appeared in 1960s proceedings. In 1964, outgoing president Roberta Frazier urged members to help eliminate school dropouts, establish leadership training for women, and lobby Congress for the civil rights bill through a "letter a week" campaign.

With more scholarships now available from other sources, regardless of race or creed, the federation dissolved its scholarship program and shifted funds to a proposed state clubhouse in Des Moines. Nevertheless, it still supported involvement in the National Association of Colored Girls' Clubs through social events and philanthropic projects, although this initiative seems to have been most successful in the Des Moines area.

By 1967, the state federation counted only 15 clubs with 185 members. This was far below the federation's peak year, 1917, when President Sue M. Brown spoke of more than 40 Iowa clubs and nearly 800 members. This decline was happening across the nation. In 1950, membership in the National Association of Colored Women had dropped to 55,000—down from 100,000 in 1924. Much of the work previously done by African

American women's clubs—assisting the needy, promoting black culture, challenging the white community on civil rights and discrimination—had been taken over by more narrowly focused groups and by the government. Across the nation, black women were joining parent-teacher associations and the League of Women Voters in local communities, working alongside white women for social change.

These changes were part of a nationwide trend among women's clubs in general. As employment opportunities increased, and as the number of organizations devoted to specific political or social welfare projects mushroomed, American women had much wider choices about how and where to direct their energies. As organizations restricted to white males gradually dropped barriers based on race and sex, many women opted to join these groups. Society had changed to the extent that women no longer believed their voices would not be heard in a gathering of men.

In Iowa, too, black clubwomen had turned to more narrowly focused organizations. In the 1960s, for instance, many worked for civil rights through groups other than the Iowa Association of Club Women. Cecile Cooper, a businesswoman and founder of Davenport's

Semper Fidelis Club in 1958, devoted time to more than 30 secular and religious volunteer organizations, including the League of Women Voters, the NAACP, the Catholic Interracial Council, and both the Iowa and the Quad Cities Civil Rights Councils. She also helped organize Freedom Schools in the Mississippi Delta in 1964. Rose Johnson presided over the state NAACP, served on the Model Cities Board of Des Moines, and was vice-chair of the state Republican Party. Journalist Aldeen Davis founded the Muscatine Federated Women's Club in 1969 and organized "living room dialogues," where black and white citizens gathered to discuss civil rights issues. Beulah Webb, who organized the Sioux City Association of Colored Women, worked for improved housing and senior citizens' programs and directed the Downtown Senior Citizens' Center from 1971 to 1977. (Webb was admitted to the Iowa Women's Hall of Fame in 1997 at the age of 102.)

Women's energies were clearly not diminished, but the women's club movement was. By 1969 only eight clubs remained active in the Iowa Association of Colored Women. Some of the clubs that belonged to the state association had simply died out; others had disaffiliated but remained active locally. Although clubs continued to discuss topics such as international relations, civil rights, equal employment, and urban renewal, their main purpose had become more social.

Today, the Iowa Association of Colored Women comprises four clubs: the Criterion Club in Cedar Rapids, the Semper Fidelis Club in Davenport, and the Parliamentary Law and Culture Club and the Tawasi Club in Des Moines. In addition to social gatherings and trips, these member clubs support local charities. The state association raises money for scholarships and makes regular donations to the Center for Sickle Cell Anemia and child care organizations.

Like many Iowa women's clubs, the state association has reached its century milestone—"having started



Federation members present a \$5,000 donation to Simpson College for the George Washington Carver Hall in 1956.

out as they did in the year 1902 with a little handful of women who realized the power of organization and with a burning desire to share in the great movement of social betterment," as the president commented in 1917. Over the last century, Iowa's African American women's clubs and their state federation did far more than their motto, "Sowing Seeds of Kindness," first directed. They also sowed seeds of change—changes taken for granted today. They contributed significantly to the social emancipation of Iowa women. They provided a setting in which black women could be involved in arenas beyond their homes and churches. They taught their members skills in leadership, organization, and fundraising that could be applied in other areas. And they proclaimed to society at large that black women, like white women, were concerned about their communities and that they were willing and able to act upon those concerns. ♦

Anne Beiser Allen, a former Iowan now living in Rochester, Minnesota, is author of An Independent Woman: The Life of Lou Henry Hoover (Greenwood Press, 2000) and several earlier articles for this magazine and others.

NOTE ON SOURCES

The papers of the Iowa Association of Colored Women's Clubs, 1903-1970, are held by the State Historical Society of Iowa (Des Moines). Other organizational histories include Elizabeth L. Davis, *Lifting As They Climb* (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Colored Women, 1933; reprint, New York: G.K. Hall, 1996); Lenola Allen-Sommerville, *Iowa Association of Colored Women's Clubs, Inc.: A Historical Reflection* (Des Moines, 1998); and Charles Harris Wesley, *The History of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs: A Legacy of Service* (Washington, D.C.: National Assn. of Colored Women's Clubs, 1984). The author interviewed Aldeen Davis (Nov. 1999) and Linda C. Walker-Webster (Aug. 1999). The Iowa Women's Archives, Special Collections, University of Iowa, houses the papers of Cecile Cooper, Aldeen Davis, and Barbara James. Censuses, city directories, cemetery records, and newspapers, particularly *The Iowa Bystander* (1894-1976) were also useful. Richard M. Breaux provided names for the photo on page 10.

Secondary sources included Leola Nelson Bergmann, "The Negro In Iowa," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics* (Jan. 1948); Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1980); Gabriel Victor Coles, "The Negro in Typical Communities in Iowa" (master's thesis, University of Iowa, 1918); J. C. Croly, *The History of the Woman's Club Movement in America* (New York:

Henry G. Allen, 1898); Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *The Story of the Illinois Federation of Colored Women's Clubs*, and Sue M. Brown, *The History of the Order of the Eastern Star Among Colored People* (1921; Des Moines: Bystander Press, 1925; reprint, with introduction by Sheila Smith McKoy, New York: G.K. Hall, 1997). See also: Darlene Clark Hine et al., eds., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Philip G. Hubbard, *My Iowa Journey: The Life Story of the University of Iowa's First African American Professor* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999); Jack Lufkin, "Henry Tanner and Booker T. Washington: The Iowa Story Behind the Portrait," *Palimpsest* (Spring 1991); Darlene R. Roth, *Matronage: Patterns in Women's Organizations* (Atlanta: Carlson, 1994); Bill Silag, Susan Koch-Bridgford, and Hal Chase, eds., *Outside In: African-American History in Iowa, 1838-2000* (Des Moines: State Historical Society of Iowa, 2001); J. A. Swisher, "The Rise and Fall of Buxton," *Palimpsest* (June 1945); and Fannie Barrier Williams, "Club Movement Among Negro Women," in John W. Gibson, *Progress of a Race* (originally published as *The Colored American*, 1902; rev. and enl. by J.W. Gibson and W.H. Croghan, Miami: Mnemosyne Publishing, 1969).

Annotations to the original manuscript are held in Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files (SHSI-Iowa City).

Facing Hostility, Finding Housing

African American Students at the University of Iowa, 1920s–1950s

by Richard M. Breaux

In 1921, an African American law student in Iowa City wrote to James Weldon Johnson at the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People: "The conditions in this city are at present almost unlivable for a colored student. The attitude of hostility is felt most keenly in the matter of housing. No one will rent to colored fraternities and no one will sell in a livable locality."

The University of Iowa law student, William Edwin Taylor, related how a local property owner had broken a contract with Taylor's fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi, when members of the local Ku Klux Klan organized to outbid the black students. "I have been in this city long enough to note the crystallization of sentiment against us," Taylor concluded. "There is an organization of the Ku Klux Klan here, and I have not the least doubt but that they are financing the scheme to effect our ruin."

Some African American women students in Iowa City earned their room and board by working as live-in domestics in faculty homes. As the *Iowa Bystander* described it, these students "ran to school in the morning without a chance to glance in the glass, hurrying back at noon to help with the mid-day meal, then another run to school. When the evening work was done, they were [too] tired to study."

Being an African American college student in the 1920s was challenging enough. Race-based housing restrictions made it even more so. An unwritten University of Iowa policy, for instance, prohibited African American men and women from living in the two campus dormitories. Fed up with having their housing rest on the whim of property owners' racial views, several women students from the university traveled to Marshalltown in 1919 to request help at the annual meeting of the Iowa Federation of Colored

Women's Clubs. The result was the Federation Home in Iowa City—one of the very few women's dormitories in the nation owned and operated by a formal group of African American women. (See previous article.)

Like other African American women's clubs, the Iowa Federation engaged in what historian Anne Meis Knufer calls "other mothering." This is to say that club members probably filled the role of surrogate mother for the students in the Federation Home. Clubwomen expressed interest in students' study habits and working conditions, and the extent to which they represented African American womanhood. Federation leader Gertrude Rush articulated that ideal: "Strong prideful morality, strong in point of conduct prompted by sense of self-respect and honor. Future mothers can't be flappers and retain the respect of their girls."

For the students, appropriate behavior meant facing up to academic and social challenges on campus, addressing racism and discrimination, and maintaining high scholastic standards—with some partying on the side. Residents knew that their performance could determine the future of the Federation Home. Their achievements added weight to arguments for maintaining the Federation Home and helped African Americans across the state feel as if their financial donations had benefited the race.

The various women who lived in the Federation Home in the early years blazed many trails. Marie A. Brown and Gwendolyn Wilson were among the first African American women to enroll in the College of Pharmacy (Wilson became one of the earliest licensed African American women pharmacists in Iowa). Helen Lemme lived in the Federation Home in 1927–1928; she later became a community activist in politics and women's issues. In 1924, Beulah Wheeler, of

Marshalltown, became the first African American woman to graduate from the College of Law. As a student, Wheeler won the Women's Extemporaneous Speech Contest, speaking on "Uniform Marriage and Divorce Law." She had supplemented the cost of her education by selling handmade art, and she was a leading scorer on the senior basketball team and won honors in volleyball. (Some African American women used athletics as an arena to undermine popular ideals about the feebleness of women in general, and used open competition against white women to combat beliefs about the inherent inferiority of African Americans.)

Black students at the university also relied on other housing. Some found rooms in the homes of local black families like Estelle "Ma" Ferguson, Bettye and Junious Tate, and Helen and Allyn Lemme. Student Juanita Kidd, who became a Pennsylvania supreme court judge, walked "up and down the streets looking for a place to live" in Iowa City, until she "noticed a black baby in diapers on the front porch," according to a reporter's account. "So she went up to the door and asked if she could stay." Kidd took a room at the home of Helen Lemme.

Students faced difficulties finding places to eat and socialize. "They had persons standing at the doors of restaurants in Iowa City, and while I was never refused admission, the person at the door would simply tell the Negro students that they simply didn't serve Negroes," one student recalled. Other times, only light-skinned customers were served. In 1937 Vivian Trent (who had lived in the Federation Home while a student) decided enough was enough. She opened a restaurant called Vivian's Chicken Shack.

Elizabeth Catlett (later a recognized printmaker and sculptor) waited tables in exchange for meals at the Chicken Shack. Catlett lived in the Federation Home for a year, and for a short time, she lived with African American author Margaret Walker, who would later write the popular Civil War novel *Jubilee*. A graduate of Howard University, Catlett was on scholarship at Iowa; in 1940 she was among Iowa's first three graduates to receive the nation's first master of fine arts degrees.

By the time Catlett had arrived in Iowa City, African American students and alumni had collectively developed a referral service and a student welcoming system, which met newcomers at the train station and drove them around town in search of

housing. The University of Iowa had no official ruling on excluding African American students from the dormitories but reasoned that white students would object to black hall mates. Finally, in 1946, five African American students—Esther Walls, Virginia Harper, Nancy Henry, Gwen Davis, and Leanna Howard—desegregated Currier Hall, the women's dormitory. According to Harper, however, the first African American women to live in the dorms went unacknowledged because they were "light-skinned." Harper recalled that "African American women were reported if the proctor found them socializing with a white student." The university also operated several boardinghouses that later fed students into the dorms. Betty Jean Furgerson had to switch homes because one student's parents objected to desegregated living quarters. Furgerson remembered that "it did not seem as if the proctors wanted us [African American women] in the dorm." Martha Scales-Zachary recalls that university officials sent notices to white women's parents asking if they would allow their daughters to live in the same dorm as black women.

Even after Currier Hall opened to Iowa's black women students in 1946, the Federation Home continued to shelter students who appreciated the affordable rent, or black women from other states. By 1949, university regulations permitted all African American women to live in dorms regardless of their state of residency—and with this came the fall of the Federation Home. The degree to which African Americans mourned the loss of the home remains unclear. Club minutes offer no elaborate explanation of its closing. The *Iowa Bystander* and the university's *Daily Iowan* are void of any stories. Although the closing marked the end of gross spatial segregation, the university continued to segregate African American women by dorm room well into the 1950s.

Nevertheless, for many of the African American women studying at the University of Iowa earlier in the century, their personal pride, professional goals, and desire to "uplift the race" helped them to translate their experiences into lifelong lessons of survival. Much of this would have been impossible without the Federation Home. ♦

Richard M. Breaux is a doctoral candidate in educational policy and leadership studies at the University of Iowa and the author of "Maintaining a Home for Girls': The Iowa Federation of Colored Women's Clubs at the University of Iowa, 1919–1950," in the Spring 2002 issue of The Journal of African American History, from which this article was excerpted.



WOMEN'S WORK

They are hidden, anonymous, in this photograph, as their work so often was. Our clue that they are there, championing a cause, is the "VOTES FOR WOMEN" sign. Our evidence that their work paid off? The 19th Amendment.

This still photograph from a 1913 movie shot in Jefferson, Iowa, focuses on a group of women costumed as flowers. Eye-catching, certainly, and fanciful. But behind them, we glimpse a group of women in light-colored dresses. One of them must be carrying the sign.

We wish we knew more about those women in the light-colored dresses—who they were, the intensity of their beliefs, the words they spoke, the actions they chose. We are fortunate when women's clubs preserve their minutes and programs and scrapbooks. We leaf through them and see that such and such a motion was made, that this or that event was held, that these facts were reported, that these members paid dues. But seldom do we hear through these records the voices of the women. Nor can we sense the energy that they brought to causes they championed and work they accomplished.

Clubwomen's visions for social improvement were often based on their own middle-class ideals, and many members probably preferred social activities over service projects. Yet the following images, from the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa, remind us that many of the everyday improvements we now take for granted came about because women's clubs joined forces with other civic bodies and social reformers to bring about important change. Clubwomen's work is often anonymous, invisible, like the suffrage marchers above, but because of their collaborative efforts, we lead healthier and richer lives.

— Ginalie Swaim, editor



SHSI (DES MOINES): GEORGE SHANE COLLECTION

WOMEN'S WORK

They are hidden, anonymous, in this photograph, as their work so often was. Our clue that they are there, championing a cause, is the "VOTES FOR WOMEN" sign. Our evidence that their work paid off? The 19th Amendment.

This still photograph from a 1913 movie shot in Jefferson, Iowa, focuses on a group of women costumed as flowers. Eye-catching, certainly, and fanciful. But behind them, we glimpse a group of women in light-colored dresses. One of them must be carrying the sign.

We wish we knew more about those women in the light-colored dresses—who they were, the intensity of their beliefs, the words they spoke, the actions they chose. We are fortunate when women's clubs preserve their minutes and programs and scrapbooks. We leaf through them and see that such and such a motion was made, that this or that event was held, that these facts were reported, that these members paid dues. But seldom do we hear through these records the voices of the women. Nor can we sense the energy that they brought to causes they championed and work they accomplished.

Clubwomen's visions for social improvement were often based on their own middle-class ideals, and many members probably preferred social activities over service projects. Yet the following images, from the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa, remind us that many of the everyday improvements we now take for granted came about because women's clubs joined forces with other civic bodies and social reformers to bring about important change. Clubwomen's work is often anonymous, invisible, like the suffrage marchers above, but because of their collaborative efforts, we lead healthier and richer lives.

—Ginailie Swainn, editor



SHS (DES WOMEN) GEORGE SHANE COLLECTION



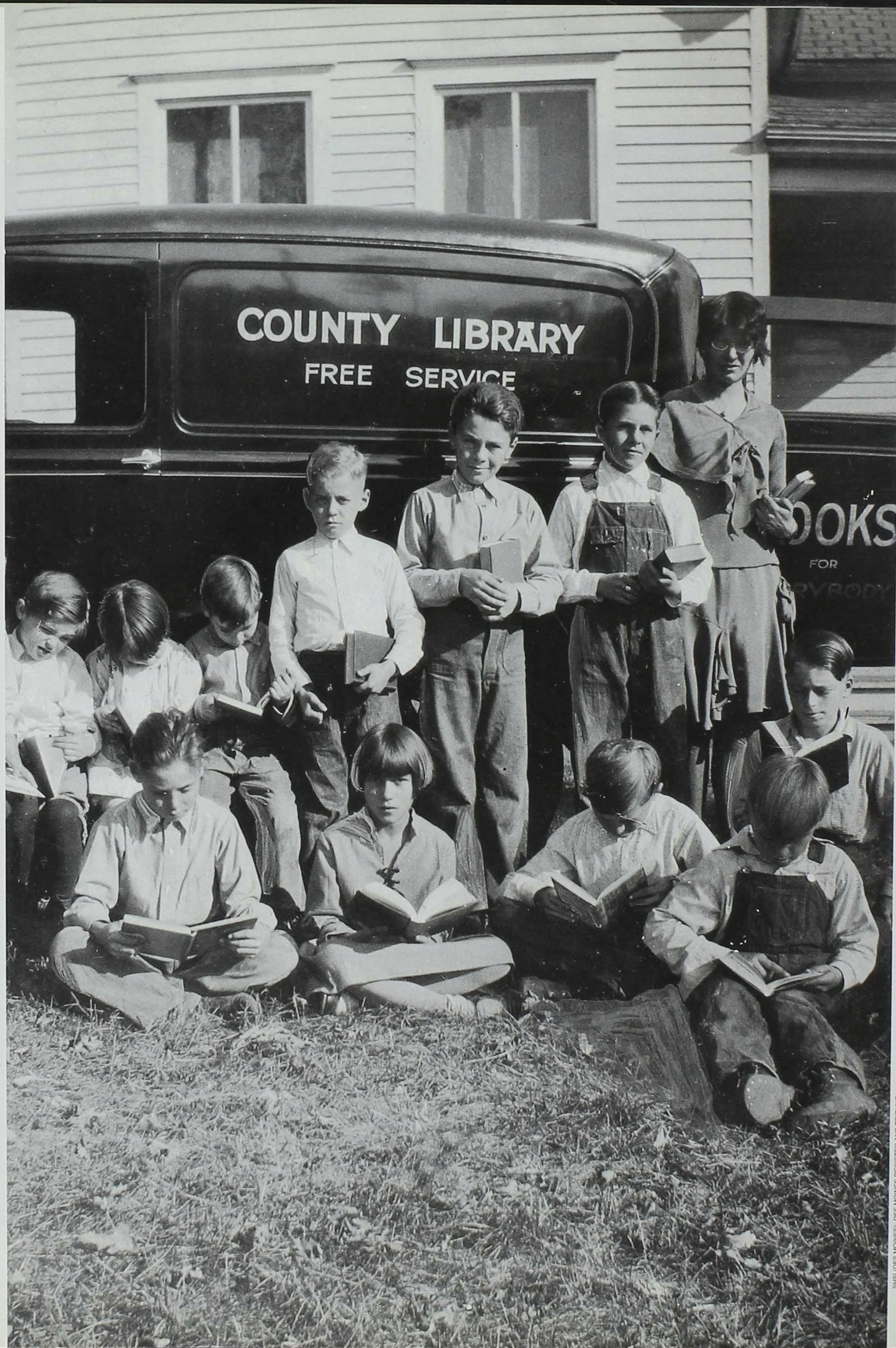
A public health nurse provides home demonstrations for women and children in 1924. Women's clubs clamored for improvements in public health service, including county and school nurses, as well as extension agents who educated women on child and infant care, household bacteriology, food preparation, and sanitation and hygiene. As with many issues, women saw public health as an extension of caring for their own families. Hence, their prescribed roles in the domestic sphere expanded into advocating for health reforms in the public sphere.



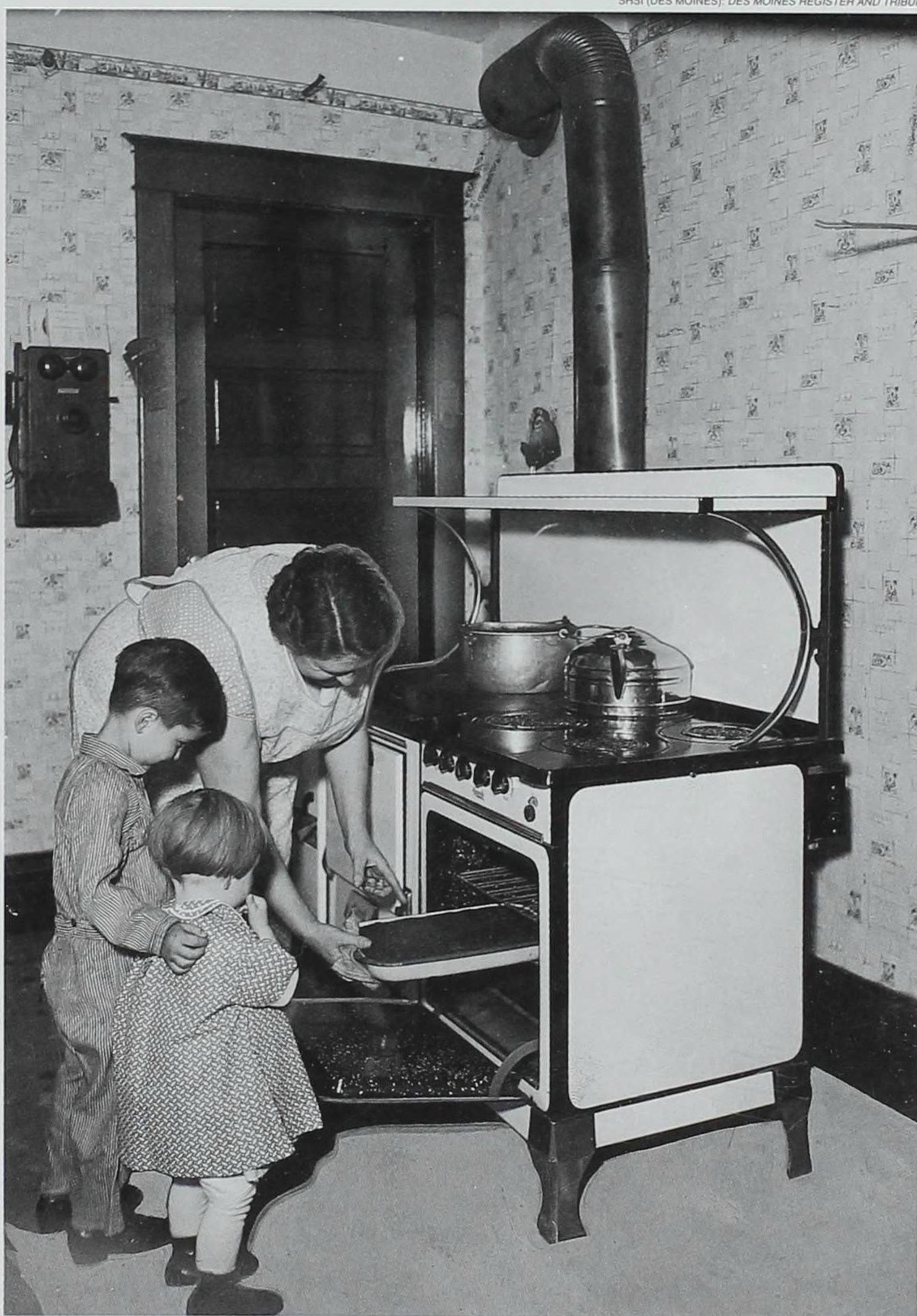
SHS (IOWA CITY)



A public health nurse provides home demonstrations for women and children in 1924. Women's clubs clamored for improvements in public health service, including county and school nurses, as well as extension agents who educated women on child and infant care, household bacteriology, food preparation, and sanitation and hygiene. As with many issues, women saw public health as an extension of caring for their own families. Hence, their prescribed roles in the domestic sphere expanded into advocating for health reforms in the public sphere.

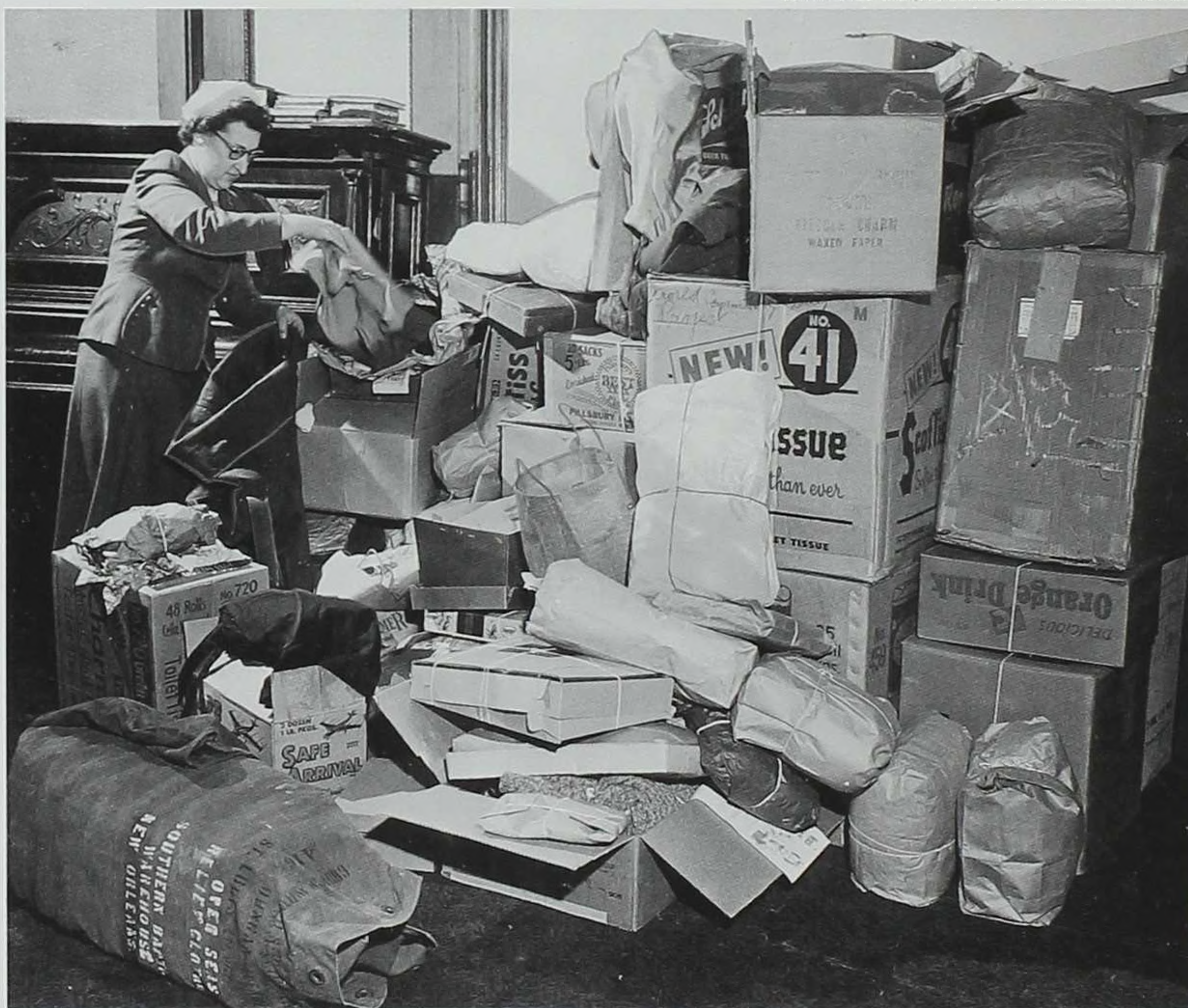


Public libraries figured high on the agendas of women's clubs, and their work bore fruit as their communities received library building funds from philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. With teacher Marguerite Biller, rural students in East Waterloo Township in Black Hawk County dive into books chosen from the county library truck, an experiment launched by the Iowa Library Association in the mid-1930s.



Women's organizations that pushed for rural electrification knew that electricity would help to even out the disparities between farm families and town families. Electricity brought better lighting for evening studying and handwork, eliminated chores like hauling firewood into the house and pumping water by hand, and cooled perishable foods like milk and fresh meat. The Helmke family, of Renwick, had enjoyed the benefits of electricity for a year when this photograph was taken in December 1937. Jerry and Janice watch as their mother checks a cake baked in her electric oven.

BOTH PHOTOS: SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



Gathering and donating materials to the needy, and raising funds for charitable projects, were mainstays for women's organizations, which generally comprised middle- and upper-class members. The Des Moines Council of Church Women sponsored World Community Day in November 1954 to collect clothing for needy children overseas. Above, chairperson Mrs. Karl E. Kottmeier fills sacks and boxes.

Immunizations and baby clinics were additional health reforms that women's clubs supported. Here, a concerned Edward Ronald King and his aunt, Ava Cassell, watch as he is immunized at the weekly baby clinic at Des Moines's Negro Community Center, April 1945.





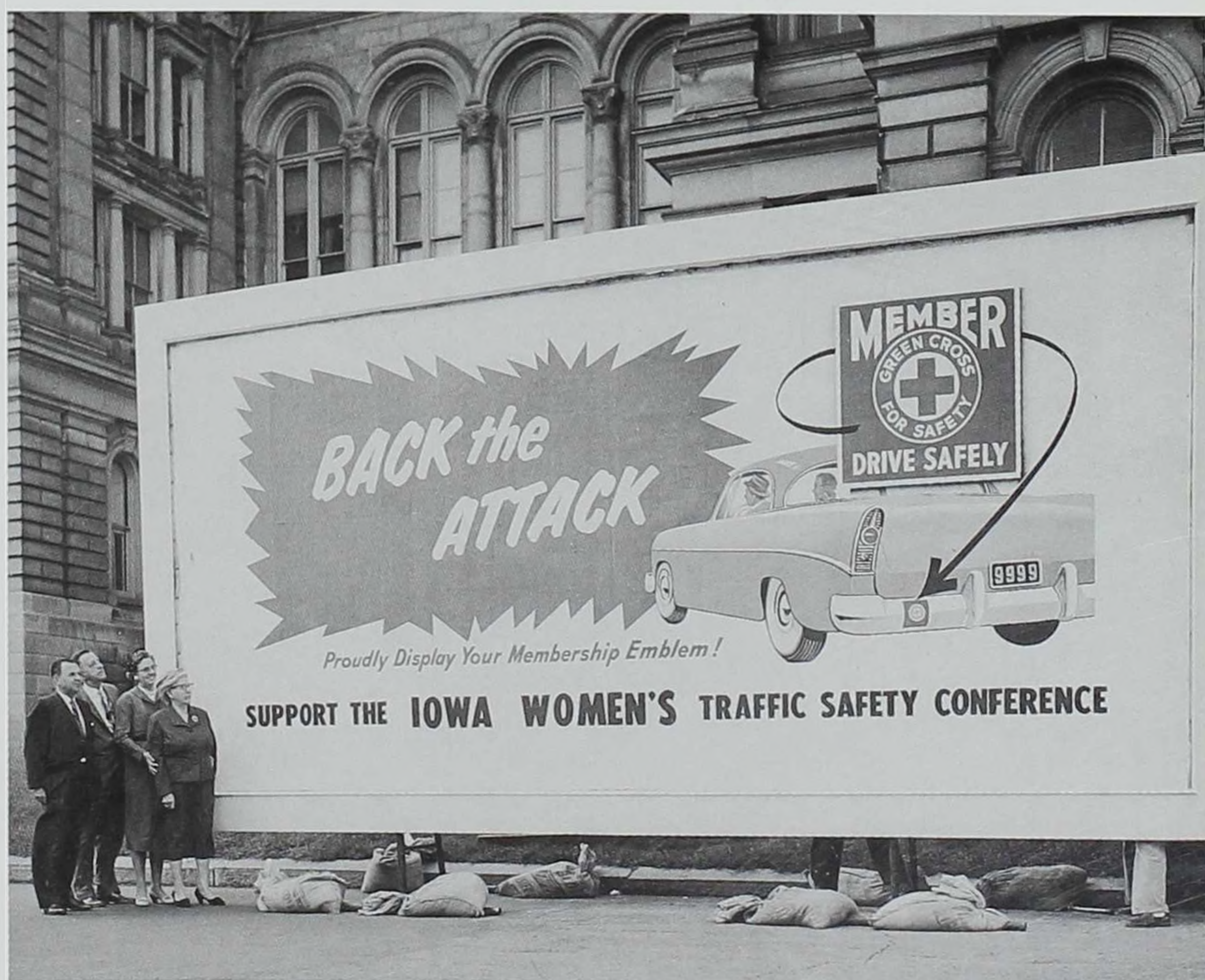
SHSI (DES MOINES): DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

As science identified and linked specific vitamins to disease prevention, women's organizations joined public health advocates campaigning for serving milk and hot lunches in schools and other child care settings. Here, teacher Lois Love serves cod liver oil pills and milk to her students at Nora Sullivan School in Knoxville, November 1950. (Not until 1920 did research reveal that vitamin A in cod liver oil prevented rickets.) The bulletin board reminds students about healthy eating habits.



SHSI (DES MOINES)

Women's clubs saw paved roads as one way to improve the quality of life for Iowans, particularly farm families who were isolated when mud or snow made roads impassable. As automobiles entered daily life, women added traffic safety to their goals. Above: Two women in a Spaulding roadster, about 1913, take on a dirt road. Far right: Iowa club leader Ruth Buxton Sayre and others admire a billboard announcing the Iowa Women's Traffic Safety Conference, a project in the late 1950s.



SHSI (IOWA CITY): RUTH BUXTON SAYRE COLLECTION



BOTH PHOTOS: SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE



Iowa clubwomen joined scientists, preservationists, and conservationists to bring about the 1917 State Park Act and Iowa's Board of Conservation. By 1925, Iowa ranked fourth in the nation in number of state parks. Preserving places of natural beauty, advocating for the City Beautiful movement, and establishing playgrounds and recreation programs were key issues for women, who connected nature with health as well as aesthetics. Left: Young women from Strawberry Point hike in Backbone State Park, April 1943. Above: Children line up to slide in a Des Moines playground, August 1939.



Temperance had been a battle cry for many women's organizations in the 19th and early 20th century because women had experienced firsthand the destruction of families by alcoholism. Still active at mid-century, the Washington County chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (above) takes time at a meeting in 1958 to write postcards protesting plans by the Iowa Liquor Control Commission to open a state liquor store in Washington.

Sanitary drinking fountains were yet another victory for health reformers, one to which women's clubs added their support. As awareness spread about bacteria in the human mouth, the common drinking cup that had always accompanied public fountains and wells was replaced with disposable cups or fountain heads that required no cup. Here, a thirsty youngster gets a boost from her friends in July 1956. ❖





BOTH PHOTOS: SHSI (IOWA CITY)

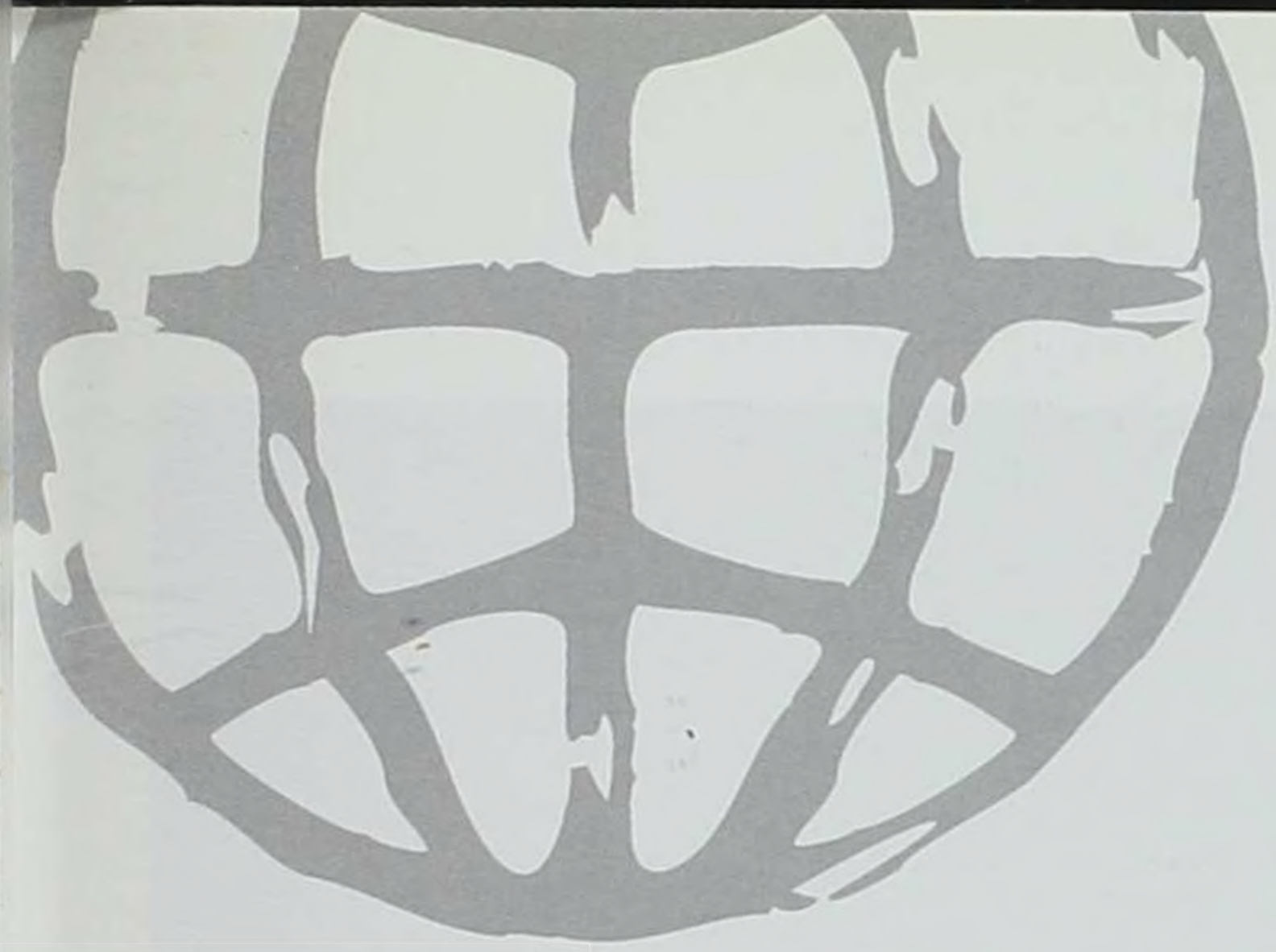
Iowa Clubwomen Rise to World Stage



Dorothy Houghton
&
Ruth Sayre

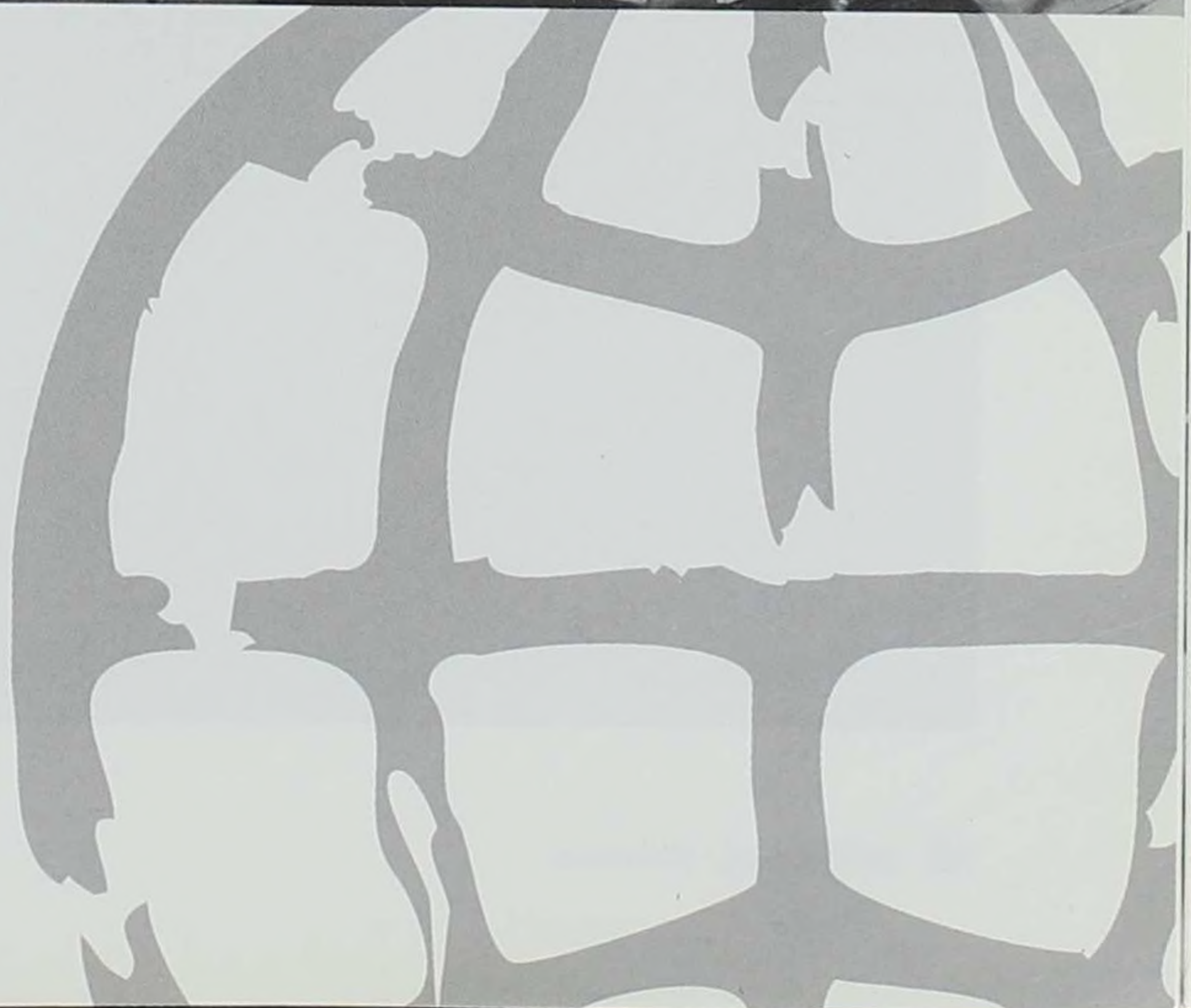
by Peter Hoehnle





Between the late 19th and mid-20th century, hundreds of thousands of American women joined clubs in their communities. These local organizations, created for socialization, intellectual improvement, and community activities, formed an important outlet for women who might otherwise have found themselves without a public role. Through club work, women learned how to conduct business meetings, speak in public, and act on the political stage as they lobbied for community improvement, social reform, and municipal "housecleaning." Though often ridiculed by the press and social critics, clubwomen made significant contributions to their communities that historians have only recently begun to appreciate.

Two Iowa women in particular, Dorothy Deemer Houghton (*right*) and Ruth Buxton Sayre (*left, in hat*), distinguished themselves as "clubwomen," one in the Iowa Federation





of Women's Clubs, and the other in the Iowa Farm Bureau. Both were emblematic of a rising generation of American women who entered public life and used local organizations as springboards to national prominence and appointive office.

Dorothy Deemer Houghton came from a family of activists and reformers. Her great-grandfather was an "agent" on the Underground Railroad. Her grandmother was a friend of woman suffragist Susan B. Anthony. Her father, Horace Emerson Deemer, was a noted Iowa jurist and supporter of progressive reforms.

Horace Deemer first came to the thriving southwestern Iowa county seat of Red Oak in 1879 to set up a law practice. The practice prospered, and he acquired a sound reputation in the community. In 1882 he married Red Oak native Jeanette Gibson, a former schoolteacher and a self-taught woman who was active in the social and cultural life of the community. By March 1890, when Dorothy was born, Horace Deemer had already been elected district court judge (in 1886), and was headed for a governor's appointment to the state supreme court (in 1894). In 1895, a second daughter, Jeanette, was born, and Deemer added the position of visiting lecturer at his alma mater, the State University of Iowa. As a measure of their continuing success and newfound prominence, the Deemers erected a substantial home on Red Oak's fashionable Boundary Street. Shortly before Christmas of 1896, baby Jeanette died. Now the only surviving child of grieving parents, Dorothy became the undisputed center of their lives, the child on whom all their ambitions would come to be placed.

Horace Deemer's position as an Iowa supreme court justice meant that his daughter enjoyed a different type of childhood than did other Red Oak children. For much of the winter, while court was in session, the Deemers lived in Des Moines. During the summer, and especially in election years, Dorothy traveled with her father as he made countless political speeches back home in Montgomery County.

Horace Deemer had become a sought-after speaker and civic leader. An officer of the Montgomery County

Fair, he founded and helped direct Red Oak's annual "Monty-Festo" celebration; he obtained funds from Andrew Carnegie to build a town library; and he supported the state library and the Iowa Historical Department, occasionally contributing articles to the *Annals of Iowa*. He taught his daughter to accept public service as a duty, intoning that "public service is the rent you pay for the space you occupy in the world." The large Deemer house was a center for community activities, a place for club meetings and local gatherings. When prominent lecturers came to Red Oak chautauquas, her father brought them back to the house to visit while they waited for their trains, exposing the young girl to such luminaries as Robert La Follette and William Jennings Bryan.

Dorothy was devoted to her father and shared a stronger bond with him than she did with her mother. In later years, she recalled how he had read to her, given her a good education, and influenced her life of service. Throughout her life, she tried to live up to her father's memory within the constraints imposed on her by society because of her gender.

In 1907, when Dorothy graduated from the Red Oak high school, her father insisted upon further education for his only child. He sent her to a finishing school in Illinois, and then to Wellesley College. Years later she would ruefully note, "Wellesley was my father's dream, but not mine."

At Wellesley, Dorothy felt like the proverbial outsider with her flat, midwestern accent and lack of sophistication. Nevertheless, she made friends, enjoyed social affairs, counseled younger students, took trains into Boston to attend the theater, and even briefly considered becoming an actress. In May 1912, she graduated from Wellesley and married Hiram Cole Houghton, the son of a leading Red Oak banker, and with whom she had carried on a correspondence while at school. The young couple set up residence in a small house in Red Oak. Almost exactly nine months later, their first son was born; they named him Horace Deemer Houghton, after her father. A second son, Cole, followed in 1916.

Sensitive to his wife's needs, Hiram Houghton hired a maid and suggested that Dorothy become involved in a women's club, as had her mother. Recalling derogatory stereotypes of clubwomen that she had seen in the press, she was hesitant to follow her husband's advice. But she joined the Red Oak Monday Club and found club work to her liking. She took to club work "as a

Raised in Red Oak, Iowa, Dorothy Deemer Houghton championed political involvement for women. Here photographed during the 1956 Eisenhower campaign, she shares the boxing ring at Madison Square Garden with its corporate president, General John Reed Kilpatrick, who autographed the photo, "To Dorothy, a grand battler!!"



Houghton networks in Germany, 1950. The photo is labeled: "Mrs. Houghton [left] listening to Mrs. Hathcock, Pres., German Amer. Fed., with Mrs. Fitzwilliam, Pres. Allied Women's Club of Frankfurt in background."

means of self expression," she later wrote, and almost immediately concluded that, valuable as the social contacts might be, clubwomen had "a higher function"—political and social action. "I believe that a woman's home and family should be the center of her life," she later reflected, "but not the circumference."

Like most women's groups of the time, the Red Oak Monday Club, founded in 1895, discussed current issues and shared presentations and papers. An early Red Oak booster credited the 75-member Monday Club with uniting local women of various church denominations in common civic activities. Red Oak already had many talented women who served as community leaders. Four women were doctors, a woman ran one of the local papers, and other women owned and managed businesses. One early Red Oak settler, Elizabeth Stennett, was a committed suffragist and friend of Susan B. Anthony (who once visited the Stennett home). Vassar graduate Rosa Shirk Clark was, at various times, assistant superintendent of Red Oak's Congregational Sunday school, founder and president of the Monday Club, treasurer of the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs, and secretary and treasurer for the national General Federation of Women's Clubs. In joining the Monday Club,

Dorothy Houghton was associating with a class of educated Red Oak women already mobilized for community action and intellectual advancement.

Freed from household duties by her maid, Houghton devoted considerable time to the Monday Club. This, coupled with her own natural abilities, soon earned her a leadership role. Houghton was in her element. A born leader and organizer, she helped direct club activities, winning support for conservation, paved streets, improved education, and the local library, an institution her father had helped establish and on whose board she served.

Horace Deemer did not live long enough to enjoy his daughter's entry into the public arena. Disturbed by the convoluted state elections of 1916, he suffered a nervous breakdown and died in February 1917. Dorothy Houghton and her family moved in with her widowed mother in the Deemer house; its great size easily accommodated the growing family, which soon included a third son, Hiram Clark ("Bud"), and a daughter, Joan. While her children were young, Houghton confined her club work to the local sphere, but beginning in 1927 she branched into statewide club activities. "There was a feeling of working for something worthwhile," she later recalled, "and I enjoyed the contacts." Championing Iowa libraries, public school kindergartens, and paved roads, Houghton and other clubwomen successfully lobbied the state legislature—"too regularly," she remarked, "for some of the legislators."

The Red Oak Monday Club, like many women's groups in Iowa, belonged to the statewide Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs, which in turn was attached to the General Federation of Women's Clubs, based in Washington, D.C. Early on, women's groups had realized that strength and power came through bonding together. While a town club might achieve local improvements, larger organizations could effectively lobby for larger initiatives. Houghton quickly climbed the ranks of the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs, finally becoming president in 1935. By 1938, her statewide reputation, combined with her club-based connections and lineage, led to talk of her running for Iowa Secretary of State or Congress. In 1939, she joined the State Board of Education (now the Iowa Board of Regents). During the war years, she served on more boards and committees and received the first of several honorary degrees and awards.

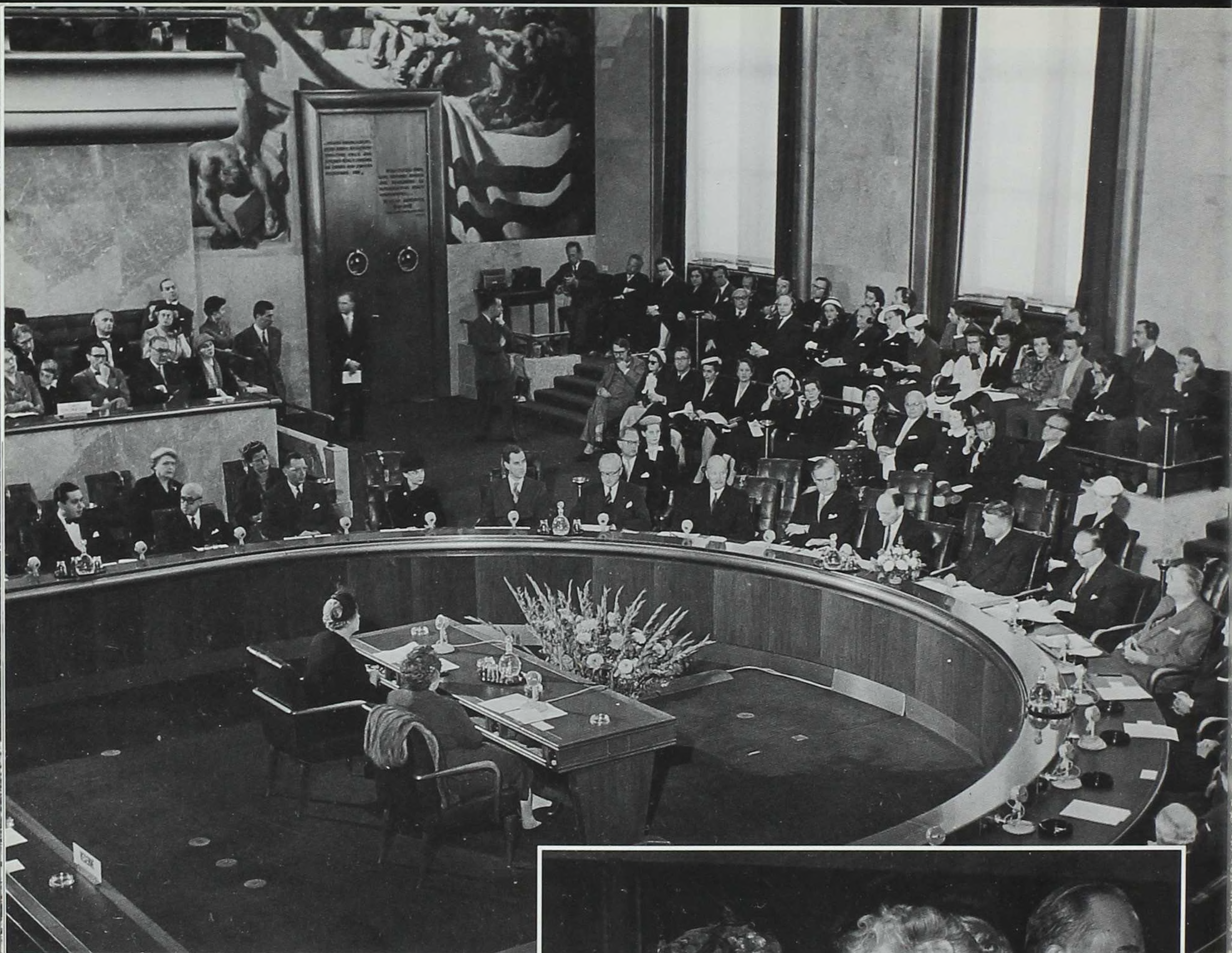
In 1950, Houghton was elected to the very pinnacle of club work—the presidency of the General Federa-



Houghton, in lace dress, smiles with other Eisenhower supporters. In the background, the final election tally on November 4, 1952, shows Eisenhower's sweeping victory over Adlai Stevenson.

Left: Houghton shares a moment with Eisenhower and wife Mamie in this undated photo.





Above: Seated (on right) before the United Nations, Houghton receives the Nansen Medal in September 1956 for her work with refugees. The event was at the Palace of Nations in Geneva, Switzerland.

Right: Eleanor Roosevelt, who had received the same honor the previous year, congratulates Houghton in Geneva.



tion of Women's Clubs, a national office. Red Oak held a celebration in her honor, proclaiming her "Queen Dorothy," a title well suited to the somewhat aristocratic Houghton. During her presidency, she championed an internationalist approach, urging clubwomen to join international exchange programs and to support the United Nations and the Marshall Plan, which she viewed as "simply an extension of Iowa farm philosophy... you always help your neighbor when he's down."

It was during her two-year administration that Houghton cemented her reputation as a human "dynamo," as *Des Moines Register* reporter Clark Mollenhoff described her, spending 16-hour days "on a merry-go-round of dictation, speeches, conferences, luncheons, dinners and political parleys." Three secretaries handled her correspondence, often taking dictation as she rested in bed in the morning.

As a prominent Republican woman and a strong Eisenhower supporter (she campaigned for him in eleven states), Houghton was now considered for a diplomatic post. The American Association of University Women had proposed her name, and dozens of telegrams and letters in her support, mostly from clubwomen and the Iowa congressional delegation, arrived at the State Department. Syndicated columnist Drew Pearson called her "an extremely able woman." Her supporters argued that appointing her ambassador to The Netherlands would be a boon to American women, that she had national recognition, and that she was ideally suited for such a post.

Although Eisenhower upheld a campaign pledge by appointing 38 women to policy-making posts by November of his first year of office, he did not appoint Houghton, owing in part to Dutch resistance to the appointment of a woman, particularly one without diplomatic experience. Instead, the president appointed her as Assistant Director for Mutual Security for Refugees and Migration. Generally, Houghton served as a goodwill ambassador, without portfolio, visiting and observing areas with refugee situations. The new job involved a good deal of travel, which pleased her.

Houghton took a personal, if impractical, approach to the refugee situation, seeking out educated refugees and placing them with U.S. families and communities, including Red Oak. Houghton took special interest in refugees from the Middle East, Vietnam, and Germany, and she assisted in migration programs that relocated people from overpopulated areas. Houghton insisted that the hungry, destitute, and homeless were easy tar-

gets for communist aggression and that U.S. participation in international refugee programs would help contain communism. "A good American," she implied, was "a good internationalist." This view was not new with Houghton. Since her days at the helm of the General Federation she had espoused her international perspective: "Realizing the significance of what is happening in far away countries is of the utmost importance to us in our living."

Following her resignation in 1956, Houghton received the United Nations' Nansen Medal, honoring her refugee work. The previous recipient, Eleanor Roosevelt, was present to congratulate her at the award ceremony in Geneva. That same year Houghton served as national co-chair of Citizens to Re-elect Eisenhower; she was also vice-president of the Electoral College. Houghton strongly believed in women's political participation, and her speeches urged women to exercise their right to vote. "From organizing to driving voters to the polls," she said, women "have a place in political life."

In 1957, less than two years after his wife had retired from her travels to Red Oak, Hiram Houghton died. For more than 40 years he had patiently backed her far-flung activities, defended her against sometimes critical neighbors, cared for their children and grandchildren when she was away, and otherwise provided her with the stable financial support she needed to continue her work. "When Hi died," she later reflected, "I was lost."

During the early 1960s, Houghton's public life was only slightly less active. She served on a number of boards, arranged an around-the-world trip with her daughter and six friends, and received more honorary degrees and recognition. Then, as her health failed, she sold the family home and moved to a small apartment near her son Clark in Iowa City. Here she attended University of Iowa cultural events, visited with her family, and received treatment for an arthritic knee. Finally she returned to Red Oak, where she died in a nursing home in 1972. President Nixon, whom she had known since her days on the 1952 Eisenhower-Nixon campaign, eulogized her as "a great woman and outstanding citizen" who had "earned the admiration and respect of countless fellow citizens."





ALL PHOTOS PAGES 38-44: RUTH BUXTON SAYRE COLLECTION, SHSI (IOWA CITY)

At the same time that Dorothy Deemer Houghton rose to leadership in the women's club movement, so did Ruth Buxton Sayre. Their similarities are striking. Like Dorothy, Ruth was a child of privilege. Born in 1894, she was the daughter of William Buxton Jr., a prominent Indianola banker, farm landlord, and sometime state legislator. Her grandfather, William Buxton, donated parkland to Indianola and \$50,000 worth of land to Simpson College.

Like Dorothy, Ruth Buxton suffered the death of a sibling when she was very young and in essence was an only child. Like Dorothy, she grew up in a stately home (a hired girl helped her mother with daily tasks). Her parents, like Dorothy's, were active in the local community, her father through banking and civic interests, her mother through clubs and organizations.

In Indianola, as in Red Oak, women had already assumed active roles in public life. For instance, as early as 1875 Elizabeth Cook had won election as county superintendent of schools. Indianola had its share of women's organizations, including the Indianola Business and Professional Women's Club, the Shakespeare Club, the Monday Club, the Garden Club, and the Eastern Star, as well as several church aid societies, in which Ruth's mother, Anna Buxton, took part. Like Red Oak, Indianola was a relatively young community and a county seat. Both towns were stops on lecture circuits for nationally known speakers like Booker T. Washington, Billy Sunday, and Carry Nation. As a college town, Indianola offered even more cultural advantages, such as collegiate athletic events and academic lectures.

Ruth Buxton was a rambunctious daughter who often ran afoul of her father (she once taught herself to drive the family car in his absence). Unlike Dorothy, who worshiped her father, Ruth drew inspiration from her mother. Anna Buxton spent hours reading to her daughter and in later life staunchly supported Ruth's public career.

Like Dorothy, Ruth had little say in the choice of schools. She desperately wanted to attend an eastern women's college, but her family had long supported Simpson College, so that is where she enrolled. While at Simpson, Ruth was influenced by English professor Aubrey Goodenough and his socialist outlook. Goodenough taught her to question everything and believed that an individual could, indeed, change the world. Determined to teach, she majored in German.

Raised in Indianola, Iowa, Ruth Buxton Sayre became a farm woman when she married, and an international leader of rural women as she rose steadily in women's organizations. Here, Sayre smiles from her farm near Ackworth, Iowa, in 1952.

Unfortunately, her timing could not have been worse; the United States entered World War I shortly after her graduation, and nativist sentiment made German instruction taboo. Instead, she taught English and history at Indianola High School.

Ruth never viewed teaching as her permanent profession, only as something to do until she married. In college a young man named Raymond Sayre had attracted her attention. Unlike her, Raymond Sayre had grown up on a farm near the tiny community of New Virginia, Iowa, and he intended to return to that farm once the war was over. Ruth Buxton, the child of wealthy parents and a "town girl" through and through, seems never to have doubted the wisdom of marrying a farmer. Ruth and Raymond married on October 4, 1918.

The couple set up housekeeping on Raymond's family farm in southwest Warren County. The house lacked electricity, running water, and other amenities. Unlike Dorothy Houghton, a woman born to privilege who maintained a privileged status throughout her life, Sayre now became intimate with the hard life of American farm women. She washed clothes with a hand-operated machine, heated heavy sadirons on a stove, cooked on a wood range, and helped her husband make hay, shock oats, and drive horses. She did everything, she later recalled, but milk cows. These experiences as a young farm woman later allowed her to identify with rural women in depressed conditions. Her experiences also led her to question why rural women could not share in the same benefits, labor-saving conveniences, and intellectual stimulation that town women enjoyed. She abhorred a complacent remark that her husband's aunt had made to her: "You can't have it any other way on the farm." Sayre, still infused with the idealism of Professor Goodenough, was determined to prove that she could.

In 1922, shortly after the birth of her second child, a daughter, Sayre was invited to a meeting of the local chapter of the Farm Bureau. The Farm Bureau was just then beginning to establish women's groups, and at her first meeting Sayre eagerly volunteered to organize such a group. For the next several months she drove across Warren County soliciting women to join in Farm Bureau activities. As she explained in a newspaper column, "The farm women of Warren county are working together that they may raise the standards of living in the home. They wish to obtain adequate living conditions comparable with those of the average city home, more equipment that life may be a little easier, more leisure, more time for books and flowers, more time for home and children and of course more of the wherewithal to pay the bills." Reminding women that these

goals required everyone's help, she added, "You are not going to sit in the car and let the rest of us push—come on, get out and help!"

Convincing them was not easy, as Sayre recalled; "I heard many excuses, but we succeeded even though some husbands insisted they wanted no part of it for their wives." Because of the efforts of women like Sayre, more than 1,100 Iowa townships had been organized by 1924 and, by the next year, Farm Bureau work reached more than 158,000 Iowa women.

As had Dorothy Houghton in the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs, Ruth Sayre rose swiftly through the ranks of Farm Bureau offices. She was county chair of the Women's Committee in 1925 and a district chair in 1930. As Sayre traveled throughout the countryside, she promoted the goals of Farm Bureau women—better schools, libraries, and rural health. She also organized new groups, gave home demonstrations, and helped establish a 4-H club. She worked for a homemaker edu-

cation program, started a parent-teacher association, and brought in a county nurse for Warren County. She firmly believed that farm women's lives would improve when the farming practices improved; to that end, she spoke in support of improved agricultural methods. Her goal, even at this early stage, was to combat farm women's complacency, resignation, and acceptance of the status quo. Look beyond your own farmsteads, she told them, and think in state, national, and international terms.

In 1929, Ruth, Raymond, and their children, Bill, Helen, Alice, and John, moved to a far more modern farm, which Ruth's father owned near the tiny village of Ackworth, just five miles from her hometown of Indianola. This house had electricity and other amenities. "I turned lights on all over the house that first night," she later recalled, "and I felt richer than I ever did before or since."

With the support of her husband and her mother, Sayre expanded her Farm Bureau role and reached



Sayre (in plaid dress) in Iraq, on a tour of the Middle East. Her 1959 travel notebook records these thoughts: "Build bridges between individuals strong enough to carry the load of our differences & seeing that our bridges remain intact as the weight of differences increase." "A more appropriate goal for international communication is accurate knowledge & realism in evaluating the goals, aspirations, needs & activities of persons abroad with whom we inevitably have to work in the world today."



From Sayre's travel notebook for 1950-1952:

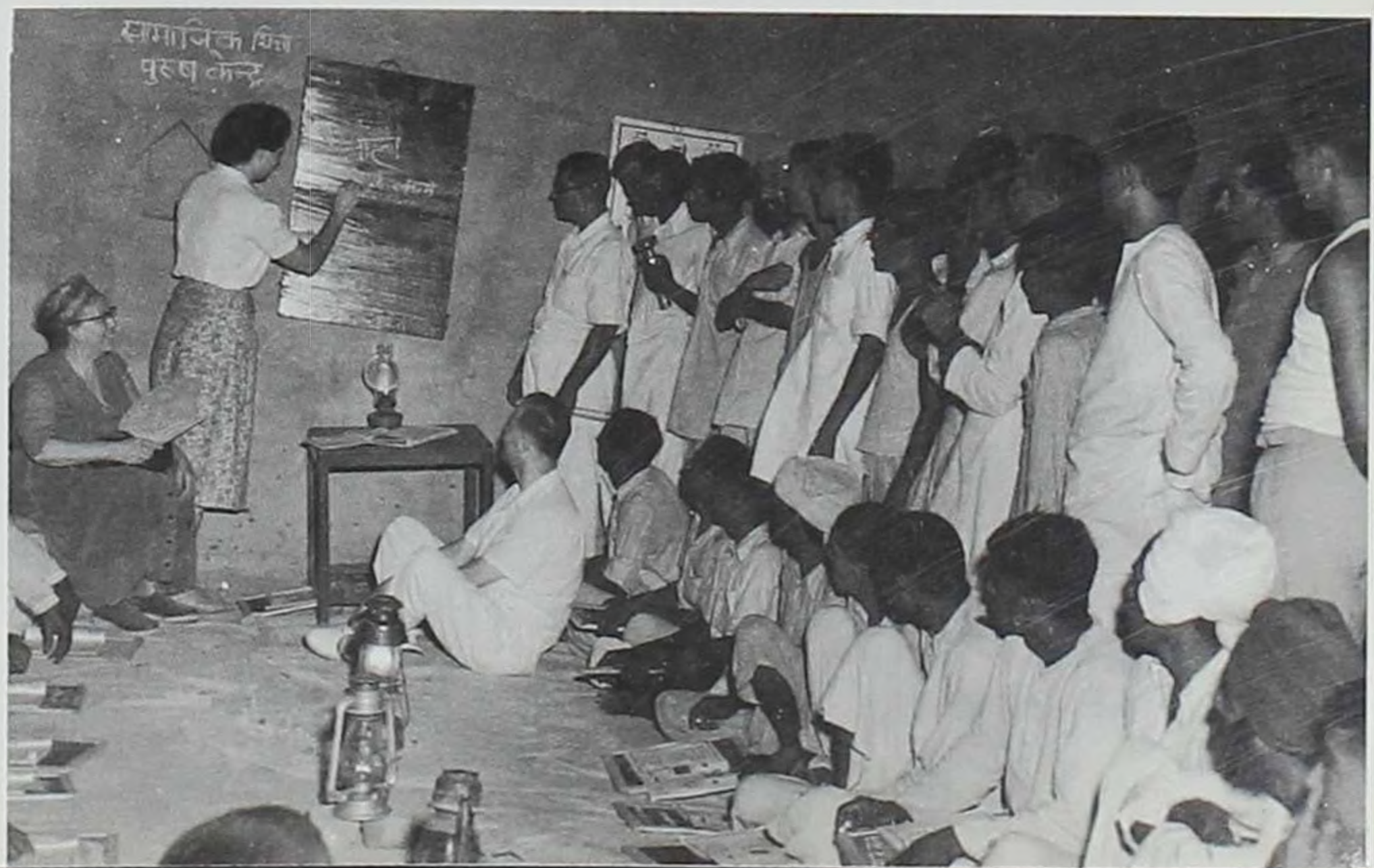
"INDIA, Monday Sept. 22, 1952.

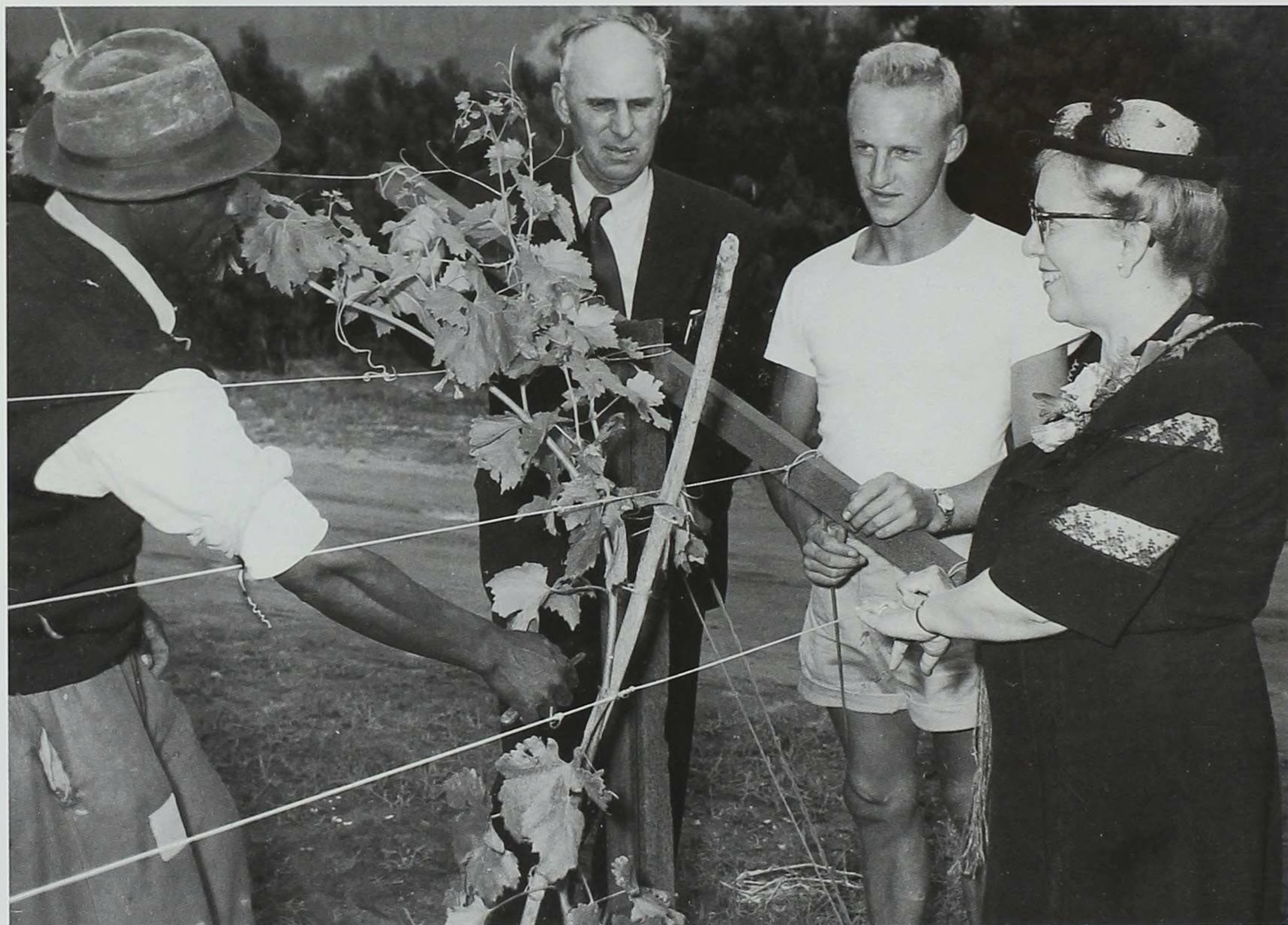
...Lunch at hotel & then to village part way in car & 2 miles in 'jeep.' 200 people in village - mud walls & huts with thatched roofs. Very small windows if any. Gate decorated with leaves & welcome signs. Scouts cross sticks & we march under. Village teacher explains how they have cleaned up the village streets & well. Have 3 literacy classes for men & 3 for women. Books slates. Gave garlands & gifts. Community house - lemonade. Women can go in now. Goddess of power - made of cow dung painted - use cow dung - no wood. Very poor land - rocky. Women & children working at gravel pit breaking it up by hand. Hindus do not eat meat. Rice - wheat - pulses - tea. Native women talking about food. Women do most work in fields. Bundles of hay on head. Water jugs etc. on head. Dust 4 inch deep. No grass anywhere. Visit part where Untouchables live. They are sweepers-scarvengers. Old man & woman - everyone squats to do everything.

Back to hotel for clean up & dinner & out to another village larger - 500 people. Some better off because houses bigger, better. No light - guided us by lantern to see classes (literacy) of men. 10 & up on roof of house to see women's class & eager young boys who tell me their philosophy about India's troubles. People all sleeping outside. Classes apparently have sanction of village elders. They keep the women & children in line. One village petitioned them not to send teachers. Back late to hotel & very tired & dirty."



Sayre (below, seated) visited women's and men's literacy classes in India in 1952. She described the three-month trip to Africa, India, and the Middle East in the May 1953 issue of *Farm Journal*. "From what I have seen in many lands," she wrote, "I am certain that the progress of a country can be measured largely by the level to which its women have been raised, and by the regard in which women are held."





Both farmer and world traveler, Sayre listens to a South African farmhand explain how grapevines are bound to trellises.

wider audiences. She attended national conventions and spoke out against farm radicalism of the early 1930s. Through her speeches, in person and over the radio, Sayre connected with farm women, who praised her for her plainspoken style. One wrote, "You can't know how you help those of us who haven't your vision and spirit." Another woman wrote, "I am so proud that we have a woman who can take her place along with any man." Still another, a resident of Des Moines who managed three farms of her own, commented, "I think you are making a valuable contribution to women of this state. Because of your efforts—very largely at least—I feel rural women as a whole, are becoming broader-minded and better informed on city problems than city women."

By 1937 Sayre was chairing Farm Bureau women's groups simultaneously at the county, district, and state levels. And as a member of the Iowa School Code Commission, she expanded her rural advocacy. She crusaded for a minimum of two years of college training for all

rural teachers, campaigned for more state aid to schools, and argued for rural school reorganization.

Sayre quickly made the transition from state to national leader. In 1934 she attended her first triennial meeting of the Associated Country Women of the World, an international farm women's organization based in London and organized in 1930. In 1938 she became the midwestern director for the Women of the American Farm Bureau. During the war years she was appointed, at Eleanor Roosevelt's suggestion, to Fiorello La Guardia's Civilian Defense Committee. Finally, in 1947, Sayre became president of the Associated Country Women of the World, with members in 34 countries. The position had been largely ceremonial, but Sayre changed that. She traveled to war-ravaged European countries to meet with ACWW members and to see the destruction firsthand.

In fact, Sayre traveled all over the world, visiting country women organizations as far afield as Africa and

Australia. Upon her arrival in London, one paper trumpeted, "Globe-trotting Grandma Wakes Up Women." Her feelings about international assistance intensified during a 1949 visit to Germany, a visit greatly facilitated by her college training in German. That same year, she became the president of the Associated Women of the American Farm Bureau, a post she held until 1952. During her tenure, she proposed and oversaw a reorganization of the Associated Women.

Thus, for a few years, Sayre was simultaneously the head of the 1.5 million women of the Farm Bureau and of the 6 million Associated Country Women of the World.

By the early 1950s, Ruth Sayre, like Dorothy Houghton, was one of the best-known and most respected women in the state of Iowa and had garnered national attention for political appointments. Like Houghton, Sayre was seen by some as having U.S. Senate potential. (Only Houghton gave this suggestion serious consideration; Raymond Sayre, for once, seems to have opposed the idea of his wife running for office.)

Believing that farm women deserved representation, Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson insisted that

Sayre be appointed to the new Farm Advisory Committee, which advised him on policy. Eisenhower agreed, appointing her as the only woman on the 18-member board. The media praised her appointment; one commentator noted the new committee would be "very capable, indeed" if the other appointees "come up to the level of Mrs. Raymond Sayre, of Iowa." Though she had at first hesitated—her husband had received a federal appointment as well, to the National Farm Credit Board, and she was concerned about Eisenhower's personal grasp of the farm situation—she served until 1957, traveling monthly to Washington for committee meetings and then hurrying back home to the farm.

In 1954 Raymond Sayre died suddenly. His death struck Ruth to the core. After seven long years of mourning, she shared her thoughts on widowhood in a widely praised article, "How I Face Being Left Alone," for *Farm Journal*. In this way, she turned even personal grief into practical assistance for other women.

Following Raymond's death, the Sayres' oldest son, Bill, assumed management of the farm while Ruth handled the bookkeeping. Entering into a period of retirement, she now spent most of her time close to home, renewing local ties, taking part in a business and professional women's group, and promoting the new Des Moines Art Center. She now kept a more limited profile in national farm affairs, though still writing articles for

Farm Journal and leading a tour of farm families to the Middle East. She believed the United States was trying to do "too much too fast" in some countries, and trying to make these countries over in its own image, against the will of their citizens. Instead, she argued that such programs and improvements should be introduced gradually and sympathetically.

In the early 1960s, Sayre resumed a degree of her former activity, as rural chair of the Iowa Heart Association, chair of Women for Nixon-Lodge in 1960, and Simpson College trustee, one of only two women on a 30-member board. Testimonial dinners

Sayre spoke for farm women on the Farm Advisory Committee, under Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson (left of Eisenhower).





Speaking to the Women's Agricultural Association in South Africa, Sayre relates her experiences in organizing Iowa women: "I crank up my car and off I go." Whether in her own neighborhood or overseas, she understood the challenges of effective communication. "Issues must be defined & redefined," she once jotted down in a travel notebook, "clarified & reclarified. Must have patience."

and awards honored her, including election to the Iowa Women's Hall of Fame in 1976 (an honor that Dorothy Houghton received, posthumously, in 1978). In these final years, Sayre was praised as a woman who never forgot her roots, a "real farm woman" who remained a "homey kind of person" despite world travels and acquaintance with presidents and royalty. It was her "common touch" and "plain speaking" that had both endeared Sayre to other farm women and fueled her advancement in their ranks.

In 1974 Sayre, then almost 80, left her farm home of over four decades for a small house in Indianola directly across from the park her grandfather had given to the city. Surrounded by her antique collection, she lived there until, in failing health, she moved to a nursing facility. She died on November 23, 1980.

The roads to power for Ruth Buxton Sayre and Dorothy Deemer Houghton followed strikingly similar courses. Both women were born in the 1890s and thus became adults during the period when the American women's club movement was strongest, and when barriers were beginning to fall. Both were born to a certain upper middle-class privilege and local prominence and were exposed by their families to the idea of civic participation.

Historian Anne Firor Scott, the leading scholar on women's organizations, notes that leaders of women's groups tended to have better-than-average educations, and this certainly holds true for Houghton and Sayre. Although there appears to have been no doubt that either would continue her education, their college environments differed. Houghton attended one of the "Seven Sisters," the prestigious Wellesley College, where she associated with the East Coast elite. As the recipient of a "gentlewoman's education," she probably never considered gainful employment. Sayre, by contrast, attended a small midwestern college and then taught, but only as a temporary step before starting a family.

Scott also notes that American clubwomen promoted and idealized the roles of wife and mother: "It was always emphasized," Scott writes, "that no neglect of home was involved in carrying even the most weighty administrative responsibilities." Her comments are especially true for Houghton and Sayre; both emphasized their roles as wife and mother and the importance of their traditional responsibilities.

Ruth Sayre always had a child at home through most of her years in public life, and she acknowledged a sense of guilt for her absences. Family members often cared for the children of both women, although Sayre often took her infant children to meetings. In later life, she viewed her time away from home as part of her duty as a world citizen: "In my case, [this] meant I must leave the easier comfort and family life of my home, sometimes for weeks at a time, because I am needed for work that's to be done elsewhere in the world."

For Dorothy Houghton, "the children came fast and it just meant that I had to be well organized to carry on my work." Absent from home for months at a time, she acknowledged, "It is a great sacrifice being away from one's family." By the time she assumed national club office, her children were grown and she kept in touch by mailing them copies of her daily diary.

Both Sayre and Houghton had married men who supported and understood their wives' nontraditional roles as well. Raymond Sayre willingly assumed household duties from his wife; the Houghtons had a maid, though Hiram made time for his children that his wife

did not. Both men had public careers of their own, but neither attained the visibility or prominence achieved by their wives—nor seem to have resented that. Houghton, the president of his family's bank and the Iowa State Bankers Association, also served as Red Oak city treasurer and school board treasurer, president of the airport commission and the Red Oak Savings and Building Association, and member of the Masons, Elks, Rotary Club, and Chamber of Commerce. In short, he fulfilled the image of a small-town Iowa banker in the mid-20th century. Despite his public role, Houghton was retiring, content, as a journalist noted, to "fade quietly into the background" if forced to share the spotlight with his wife. Did he resent his wife's role? "No," he once explained, "I knew it would be like this when I married Dorothy." It seems that the Houghtons allowed each other to pursue individual interests without interference. Their children's memories, however, indicate that Hiram's support of his wife's activities was not always as overwhelming as she portrayed it.

Raymond and Ruth Sayre seem to have viewed each other as equal partners. Perhaps the partnership was forged by operating a farm together, where the support of both spouses was critical to success. "Economic problems on the farm had no gender," she once said. Because Ruth's public career started in the Farm Bureau, an organization with both male and female members, she and her husband could work more in concert, and he often accompanied his wife on speaking trips.

Like Hiram Houghton, Raymond Sayre was a successful businessman (he owned six farms). Unlike Houghton, he held several positions on a par with his wife's. Sayre headed the Farm Credit Board of Omaha, the Iowa Pure Sheep Breeders Association, the Warren County Farm Bureau, and the Iowa Livestock Council. He was a member of the State Advisory Committee of the Farm Home Administration, a trustee of Simpson College, and a director of the People's Trust and Savings Bank in Indianola. When Eisenhower appointed Raymond Sayre to the National Farm Credit Board, he and Ruth were declared the "first family of American Agriculture," but when he died, the *Des Moines Register* lauded his efforts for Iowa farmers with no mention of his wife. Yet for all his success, Raymond Sayre seems to have been proudest of his wife's accomplishments, and he likely agreed with the writer who applauded his "good judgment to pick out a wife like Mrs. Sayre."

Historian Anne Firor Scott also notes that the ambition of leaders of women's groups was often reflected in a love for public speaking. Effective communicators, in turn, were more likely to advance in organizational hierarchies. This, too, applies to Houghton and Sayre.

Although both were avid writers and won awards for their articles, they won renown for their speaking ability. Sayre was equally at ease among the women of rural Australia, Germany, and India as she was with her local Farm Bureau members. Her direct, personal style struck a chord with rural women. "It always gives me such a sense of pride when a woman speaks as you did," a Grinnell, Iowa, correspondent told her. "Your choice of words and your vigorous sincerity . . . impressed me very much. You have a real gift." Near the end of her life, she adapted to a new medium, appearing on Iowa Public Television to discuss farming changes during her lifetime.

Houghton was Sayre's equal on the platform. She admitted that she enjoyed this function more than any other: "For me, public speaking is like liquor to a drinking man." She delivered hundreds of impromptu speeches, often several a day, developing them as she was being introduced. She effectively addressed small groups of women in private homes, large national gatherings, radio listeners (for the Voice of America), and television viewers (to whom she promoted her refugee work, on *The Ed Sullivan Show*).

Despite the women's national prominence, the media generally cast Sayre and Houghton in the traditional role of wife and mother and frequently described their physical appearance. An entry for Sayre in *Current Biography* (1949) notes that "the agricultural leader has blue eyes and gray-brown hair, is five feet five inches tall, and weighs 180 pounds." Houghton was described as "a sweet, plump, grandmotherly type" and as "red-headed Mrs. Houghton." Journalists generally mentioned how each balanced home and family with career. (It is doubtful if similar descriptions or statements were made about their husbands.) Commentators also tended to focus on Sayre's offhand comments about laundry or cleaning the attic before departing for an international conference, or how one of the first things Houghton did as a presidential appointee was to clean her office windows. Precisely what this information had to do with their qualifications for service is unknown.

Certainly those individuals who resented women's expanded role in public life scorned Houghton and Sayre, but apparently few voiced their anger publicly or through letters. Some residents of Red Oak looked askance at Dorothy Houghton's globe-trotting, but Hiram was known to dismiss such comments because he valued his wife's contributions. Ruth Sayre preserved several negative letters in her papers. One derided her for betraying farm women who still faced the drudgery

of farm life and lacked the conveniences Sayre eventually enjoyed. An Iowa man, writing when Sayre was being promoted for the Senate, bitterly told her on a postcard: "A woman's place is in the home—a billion times. No, we don't want a woman senator."

Both Sayre and Houghton assumed that women should first provide a solid home environment for their families, and then expand this role into a larger involvement in the community. But this meant more than joining a local club. Houghton believed that there ought to be more to clubs than social activities, and Sayre charged that women should "do more than serve refreshments at school board meetings—women must serve on the school board."

Sayre and Houghton pushed local involvement to a higher level, extending the principles of home and hearth to the world stage. Houghton railed against waste in the Kennedy administration and urged American women to participate in international exchange programs; Sayre reminded women that "we could spend as much time in our club meetings studying world trade and European recovery programs as we do in discussing flower arrangements and the planning of kitchens!" Houghton urged women to work in political campaigns and to exercise their right to vote; Sayre chided rural women for "never even [trying] to use our political power unitedly." Houghton cautioned women to view the actions of government officials critically; Sayre asked, "Who's been doing your thinking lately?"

Although both were ardent Republicans who campaigned for Eisenhower and Nixon, neither woman's partisanship obstructed her admiration and support of the United Nations, the Marshall Plan, or Eleanor Roosevelt. While both women adhered to traditional conservative beliefs of fiscal responsibility and limited government aid, neither was an isolationist. For both, an American presence overseas and international exchange programs were crucial for world peace.

Both women had entered local club work for self-fulfillment, quickly rising to leadership, traveling widely for their organizations, achieving statewide office in the 1930s, and working for many of the same

reform issues. Although their paths often crossed in the public arena, little evidence exists that the two women had anything beyond the most casual personal contact or exchanged any more than a few business letters.

Sayre and Houghton repeatedly expressed affection for the small Iowa communities from which they came, and to which they returned. Resigning from the International Cooperation Administration, Houghton spoke warmly of Red Oak: "I love that little town and I shall love to work for it and the welfare of our people like I did for so many years." Sayre, likewise, remained steadfastly loyal to Indianola and tiny Ackworth, and regretted that because of work outside of Iowa she had lost "contact with [my] friends at home . . . that's another price [I paid]." Translating her love for her rural home into praise for country living in general, Sayre called "the farm home . . . the great stabilizing force in American life."

Born into a changing social and political climate, Dorothy Deemer Houghton and Ruth Buxton Sayre had come of age in the Progressive Era, at the height of local organizational activity, when small county seats like Red Oak and Indianola were the centers of their respective universes, and it seemed possible that the seeds for an ideal world could be nurtured in the soil of Middle America. From these backgrounds, the women took with them the support of family and friends and the value of hard work and public service. They not only participated in traditional organized women's activities, but transformed their work into political office. In an age when a premium was still placed on home and family life, Houghton and Sayre were willing to add to their roles as wives and mothers in order to work for important causes facing the modern world. ♦

Peter Hoehnle is a Ph.D. candidate in the agricultural history and rural studies program at Iowa State University. His article on artists Carl Flick and Grant Wood (Spring 2001) is only one of several he has written on the Amanas for Iowa Heritage Illustrated and The Annals of Iowa.



NOTE ON SOURCES

For major studies of women's clubs, see Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), and the double issue of *The Annals of Iowa* 56 (Winter/Spring 1997) on women's clubs in Iowa history, 1890–1940, especially the introduction by Karen M. Mason.

The 10 boxes of the Dorothy Deemer Houghton Collection and the 32 boxes of the Ruth Buxton Sayre Collection (both in Special Collections, State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City center) contain correspondence, scrapbooks, speeches, clippings, audiovisual material, published articles, and interviews. A smaller Sayre collection at Iowa State University archives includes the radio script for a 1960 talk between Sayre

and R. K. Bliss. Julie McDonald's *Ruth Buxton Sayre: First Lady of the Farm* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1980) was helpful, as were newspapers and local histories for Red Oak, Indianola, and Montgomery and Warren Counties. Other sources include D. B. Groves and Kenneth Thatcher, *The First Fifty: History of the Farm Bureau in Iowa* (Lake Mills: Graphic Publishing, 1968); Joseph W. Walt, *Beneath the Whispering Maples: The History of Simpson College* (Indianola: Simpson College Press, 1995); and Herb Plambeck, *The Way It Was* (Ames: Sigler, 1993).

Complete annotations are held in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files (SHSI-Iowa City).

Cranking up and flapping off

by Ruth Buxton Sayre

The way you got things done in the early day was to find a woman who'd be a leader. . . . I was a township chairman in Virginia Township, Warren County, and they told me I had to get nine school district cooperators. So—I always tried to do what I was told to do—and I said to my husband one morning, "Well, I'm going out today and get these, these nine leaders." And I said, "You won't mind eating cold dinner, will you?"

And he said, "No."

But he didn't know how many cold dinners he was going to eat before this was over.

So I cleaned up the children—I had two babies then, one a little older than the other, but only 18 months apart—and got out in my Ford. Now those Fords in those days were not like these comfortable cars today—all glassed in with heaters and windshield wipers and so on, and starters!—because I had curtains on the car and you never could put 'em down right, they were always flapping, you know. And so then you had to crank the blame thing, too.

So I put the babies in the car and cranked up and off I went to a neighbor's house, just sure I could get a leader. There wasn't any question about it. So I went in and talked to her about it, and about the Farm Bureau and what the women were going to do.

"Oh," she said, "Mrs. Sayre, I'm—I'm just too busy. I—I couldn't do that," she said. "Well," she said, "you know, I raise an awful lot of chickens and I make a

big garden and I've got my housecleaning to do."

And she went on and on and on, until I was just all worn out thinking about all she had to do, and so I said, "Well, I'm sure I can get somebody else."

So I left, put the babies in the car, and cranked up and went on to another neighbor's. And I got over there, and so I finally got to the place where I said, "Well, won't you be one of our leaders?"

And she said, "Oh, Mrs. Sayre," she said, "I don't feel very well, you know, I'm not very well. I have a lot of trouble with my back and I go to the doctor's every week and I'm sure you can get someone that's better off than I am."

And by that time I was feeling sick, too. And so I said, "Well, I'm sure I can get somebody else."

So I put the babies back in the car, cranked up the car and flapped off to another neighbor's. And when I got over there . . . I was getting a little reluctant of saying anything about "Will you be a leader?" because it wasn't going to be as easy as I thought it was.

And so I finally had to come to the place where I said, "Will you be a leader?"

And she said, "Oh, Mrs. Sayre, I—I don't think I could do it." She said, "I know there's somebody that could do it better than I can." She said, "You know, I never had—I never went to high school and there's some people in this community who had home economics and could do a much better job than I can."

And so I started feeling sorry for her and thinking, Well, maybe there would be somebody else. So I said, "Well, no matter. I'll find somebody else."

So I put the babies back in the car, cranked up and flapped off again—and finally came to this neighbor that I thought would surely do it.

And so I get to the place where I say, "Won't you be a leader?" and she said, "Oh, Mrs. Sayre, I'd just love to—but I can't."

And I said, "Why can't you?"

She said, "You know John?"

I did know John. I knew that John had to have his hot biscuits at noon, and she had to be there to help with the chores and all those things, so that was impossible.

Well, the day was pretty well along by that time. The children were crying, they'd gotten dirty playing out in the yard, Raymond had been home eating his cold dinner, and so I finally gave up.

But I did get leaders after that. But it was not an easy job, because farm women were not used to doing that sort of thing in those days. They had to be, well, as you say, motivated. They had to feel that they could make a contribution. And this whole idea of developing leadership, of getting women to come out of their shells and take a part in community life, was one of the greatest contributions I think the Farm Bureau in Iowa has made to this day. ❖

(Excerpt of an interview of Ruth Buxton Sayre by Booth Wallentine, taped on October 25, 1968. Ruth Buxton Sayre Collection, SHSI-Iowa City.)

Reading the Past

ONE OF THE MOST ENJOYABLE and satisfying ways to read history is through biographies. In biographies we get to know a person intimately: we read their mail, learn their likes and dislikes, discover their strengths and weaknesses, share their ideas, revel in their accomplishments, and empathize with their failures. Biography is one historical genre where straightforward storytelling is still the norm. And stories that biographies tell, unlike many historical tales, have clearly defined beginnings and endings. Furthermore, the best biographies reveal as much about the subject's "times" as they do about his or her life.

All of these strengths characterize the best biography of an Iowan to come out in recent years, John C. Culver and John Hyde's *American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace*. It helps that Culver and Hyde chose as their subject one of the most fascinating and significant figures in Iowa history. And unlike

those of many "famous Iowans," Wallace's ties to Iowa were deep and lasting, so his biography tells readers a lot about Iowa history as well as the history of the nation.

The authors are thorough in dealing with the various aspects of Wallace's remarkably wide-ranging career. They account for his years as a farm editor, when he and his family had an immense impact on Iowa farmers. They also make a fascinating story out of his role in the development and marketing of hybrid seed corn, which transformed Iowa agriculture in the 20th century. In both roles,

Wallace was, the authors

argue, "the prophet and evangelist, the teacher and preacher of agricultural scientific advancement." The authors also uncover Wallace's vast intellectual curiosity, which led to religious experimentation that many Americans found bizarre. Other than that, however, there is little in this biography about his private, family life, the one significant gap in the authors' coverage.

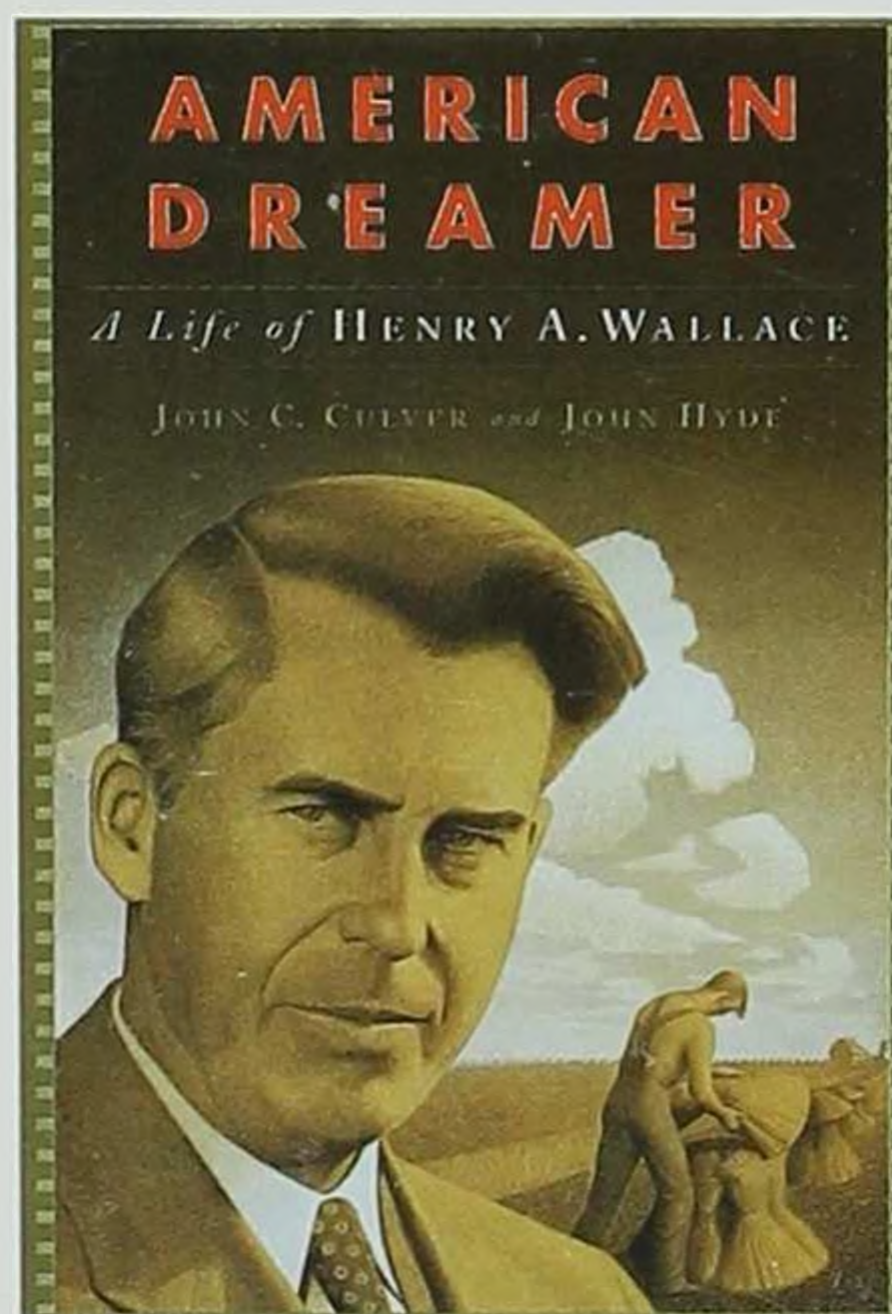
Although the authors offer a comprehensive account of Wallace's life, it's clearly his political life

that they find most interesting. There, the narrative really comes to life. This should not be surprising given the authors' backgrounds—Culver as a former U.S. representative and senator from Iowa; Hyde as a reporter in the *Des Moines Register's* Washington bureau. And there are great stories to tell here: Wallace's leading role—as Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary of Commerce, and Vice-President—in the development of President Roosevelt's New Deal policies; his replacement on the ticket in 1944 by Harry Truman; his tragic run for the presidency in 1948 on the Progressive Party ticket.

Wallace, most readers will know before they begin this book, was no typical politician. Culver and Hyde confirm that perception. In their account, Wallace was first and foremost a man of ideas, an "American dreamer." Wallace's opponents did not hesitate to use that characterization against him. For Culver and Hyde, however, it is a compliment. They insist that he was a dreamer in the best of a long tradition of American dreamers stretching back to Thomas Jefferson. They repeatedly defend Wallace against charges of political naiveté. Over and over they show instances when he was an effective bureaucratic infighter when necessary, but he was unwilling to obfuscate or be duplicitous. At times when he appeared naive, such as during the 1944 Democratic Convention that denied him the vice-presidency, he knew the potential consequences of his actions and chose to pursue them anyway. The authors' repeated efforts to make this point give their biography an ironic twist: in a book dedicated to the proposition that their subject was a man of ideas, an American dreamer in the best sense of the word, one dedicated to bringing his dreams to life, their account of his political life devotes more space to bureaucratic infighting than to ideology.

Whatever his dream, whatever the battles he engages in to pursue that dream, Wallace always appears in this book as a heroic figure, at times nearly alone in his heroism, and all his enemies are backroom wheelers and dealers with impure motives. Some readers may wish for a more subtle treatment, but many others will finish this book convinced that this heroic Iowan whose remarkable life was unfairly tarnished at the end of his career deserves the resuscitation that John Culver and John Hyde's impressive biography performs so admirably.

—by Marvin Bergman,
editor, *Annals of Iowa*



American Dreamer: The Life and Times of Henry A. Wallace, by John C. Culver and John Hyde. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2000. xi, 608 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 cloth.

Journey back
through time with
Iowa Heritage Illustrated
— your tour guide to
Iowa's amazing past.

Subscribe

with this card or by phone
(319-335-3916). →

Give a gift

subscription to a friend,
relative, colleague, or
your favorite student,
school, or library. →

Join the State
Historical Society of Iowa.
Enjoy these benefits and
help preserve Iowa's
heritage! →

Individual Membership \$40

- *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*
- *Iowa Historian* newsletter
- 10% off in the Museum Store
- 10% off in Terrace Café
- Exclusive, members-only events
- Time Travelers Society discounts at museums across the country

For information on **Family and
Heritage Circle** memberships,
call 515-242-5217.

YES!

Start me on my journey back through time. Please enter
my **subscription** to *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* today
at the terms I have indicated below.

- ☐ 1 year: \$19.95 ☐ 2 years: \$35.90 (I save \$4.00) ☐ 3 years: \$52.85 (I save \$7.00)
☐ New subscriber ☐ Renewal

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State/Zip _____ Phone _____

☐ Payment enclosed. (Check payable to "State Historical Society of Iowa")

☐ Bill me later ☐ Bill my (circle one): Visa Mastercard

Credit card # _____

Signature _____ Exp. date _____

GIFTS!

Please start a **Gift Subscription** to *Iowa
Heritage Illustrated* and send a card announcing my gift.

- ☐ 1 year: \$19.95 ☐ 2 years: \$35.90 (I save \$4.00)
☐ New gift order ☐ Renewal

Gift for _____

Address _____

City _____

State/Zip _____ Phone _____

Gift from _____

Address _____

City _____

State/Zip _____ Phone _____

☐ Payment enclosed. (Check payable to "State Historical Society of Iowa")

☐ Bill me later. Bill my (circle one): Visa Mastercard

Credit card # _____

Signature _____ Exp. date _____

JOIN!

Sign me up today as an **Individual Member** of the
State Historical Society of Iowa. I'll enjoy the Individual benefits
listed at left (including *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*) while helping
to preserve Iowa's history and heritage.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State/Zip _____ Phone _____

E-mail _____

I enclose payment of \$40. ☐ Check payable to "State Historical Society of Iowa"

☐ Bill my (circle one): Visa Mastercard

Credit card # _____

Signature _____ Exp. date _____

Place
Stamp

Iowa Heritage Illustrated
State Historical Society of Iowa
402 Iowa Avenue
Iowa City, IA 52240-1806

Place
Stamp

Iowa Heritage Illustrated
State Historical Society of Iowa
402 Iowa Avenue
Iowa City, IA 52240-1806

Place
Stamp

Membership Coordinator
State Historical Society of Iowa
600 East Locust Street
Des Moines, IA 50319-0290

Iowa Heritage

ILLUSTRATED

One in a Million

THE ALLURE and formality of fraternal societies are represented by these colorful convention badges of the Ancient Order of United Workmen (AOUW) and Modern Woodmen of America (MWA), from the collections of the State Historical Society of Iowa.

Incorporating the ceremonial activities of the Freemasons, whose secret rituals and language catered to Victorian men's desire for peacetime male bonding and camaraderie, many of these labor fellowships also functioned as financial institutions. They provided life insurance to members at a time when coverage had been primarily available to the privileged. Organizations like the AOUIW and MWA became "a source of identity" and security for men as the nation's economy shifted from agrarian to urban-industrial, according to historian Brian J. Glenn. Such voluntary associations, some of which exist today as mutual insurance companies, created "a sense of kinship between brother members. In times of need, members took care of each other much in the way extended families did."

The associations proliferated after the Civil War—on average a new order developed yearly. The fast-developing industrial economy had strengthened the development of separate spheres—women associated with the home, and men the workplace—a private/public split that significantly affected Americans' understanding of gender roles. Whereas women functioned in a domestic haven that scripted them as nurturers and moral exemplars, men principally operated in an aggressive, cutthroat world of business. As Mark C. Carnes argues in *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*, these groups' rituals and ceremonies—their "ersatz mysticism" of curious oaths and fancifully named offices—created a patriar-

chal but close brotherhood that offered men an outlet for emotional connection with one another, which America's market economy had denied them.

One of the MWA's early 20th-century role-playing ceremonies, the "Street Scene," imaginatively expressed these concerns. Two men, an "escort" and a "stranger" (or recruit), dressed as beggars, walk along a busy city street. They enter a banking house and appeal to a banker and other professionals there to aid a recently widowed woman and her family. After all refuse them, an "adviser" directs them to the Woodmen. Entering a forest scene, the escort reassures his friend that they "are no longer in the busy world. We are now in the primeval forest. . . . Here humanity has scope and breathing space. Here the uncrowded individual grows in strength and grandeur as the sturdy oak. Among the Neighbors of this forest we will find true brotherly love." By creating such "fictive fraternal bonds," members imaginatively circumvented restrictions of an impersonal, corporate society, and created their own male havens, if only for the length of a meeting. Costumes and scripts, as well as official ranks and colorful badges, created a ceremonial atmosphere.

The organizations originally drew workingmen (though female members did exist in small numbers), but groups like the Masons, Shriners, Odd Fellows, MWA, and AOUIW soon attracted men from the professional classes. While their involvement helped to create fraternalism's "golden age," it also encouraged the application of corporate strategies—whose influence and impact ironically many men were trying to escape by joining these organizations in the first place.

Indeed, because many of these associations offered life insurance,



their success largely depended on sensible founding principles and aggressive promotional tactics. Most suffered from inept management and insufficient funds. The Modern Woodmen of America was a significant exception. Originating in the early 1880s in Lyons, Iowa (near Clinton), the MWA was the brainchild of Joseph Cullen Root, whose family ran a prominent Lyons insurance business. A member of several fraternal organizations, Root made a career out of developing fraternal insurance enterprises. MWA was his first, and he shrewdly restricted its charter to the non-industrialized sections of the Midwest, omitting cities like Chicago and St. Louis on the grounds that high health risks in cities and industrialized areas would jeopardize financial solvency. He also excluded applicants in high-risk occupations and those over 45. Employing agents to establish new satellites and recruit members, Modern Woodmen became one of the most successful fraternal organizations, quintupling its membership in its first seven years. Outliving the powerhouse AOUIW, which in 1869 was the first national brotherhood to provide life insurance, the MWA—with its badges symbolizing a rigid, hierarchical, yet fanciful military bearing—is a lasting example of the contradiction that lay at the heart of many of these organizations.

—by Lori Vermaas,
editorial intern (2001)

SHSI (IOWA CITY)



Iowa artist Irma Young Paul (1910–1970) painted this oil portrait of Dorothy Deemer Houghton, who rose to prominence through women's organizations. Paul's painting (circa 1950) reminds us of the genteel, socializing image of many women's clubs. A broader understanding of the club movement recognizes that women acquired important leadership skills through clubs, and used those skills to help bring about change in American society.

STATE
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY of
IOWA