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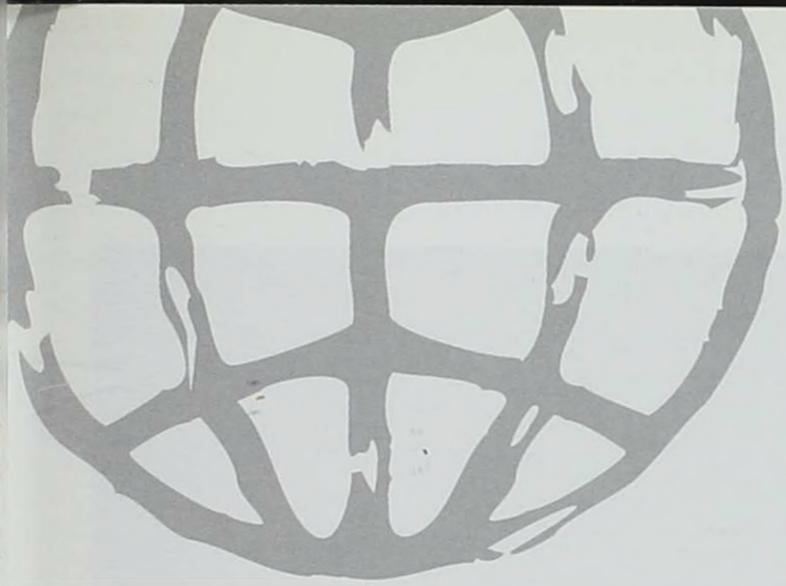
Iowa Clubwomen Rise to World Stage



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 parlays." 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-

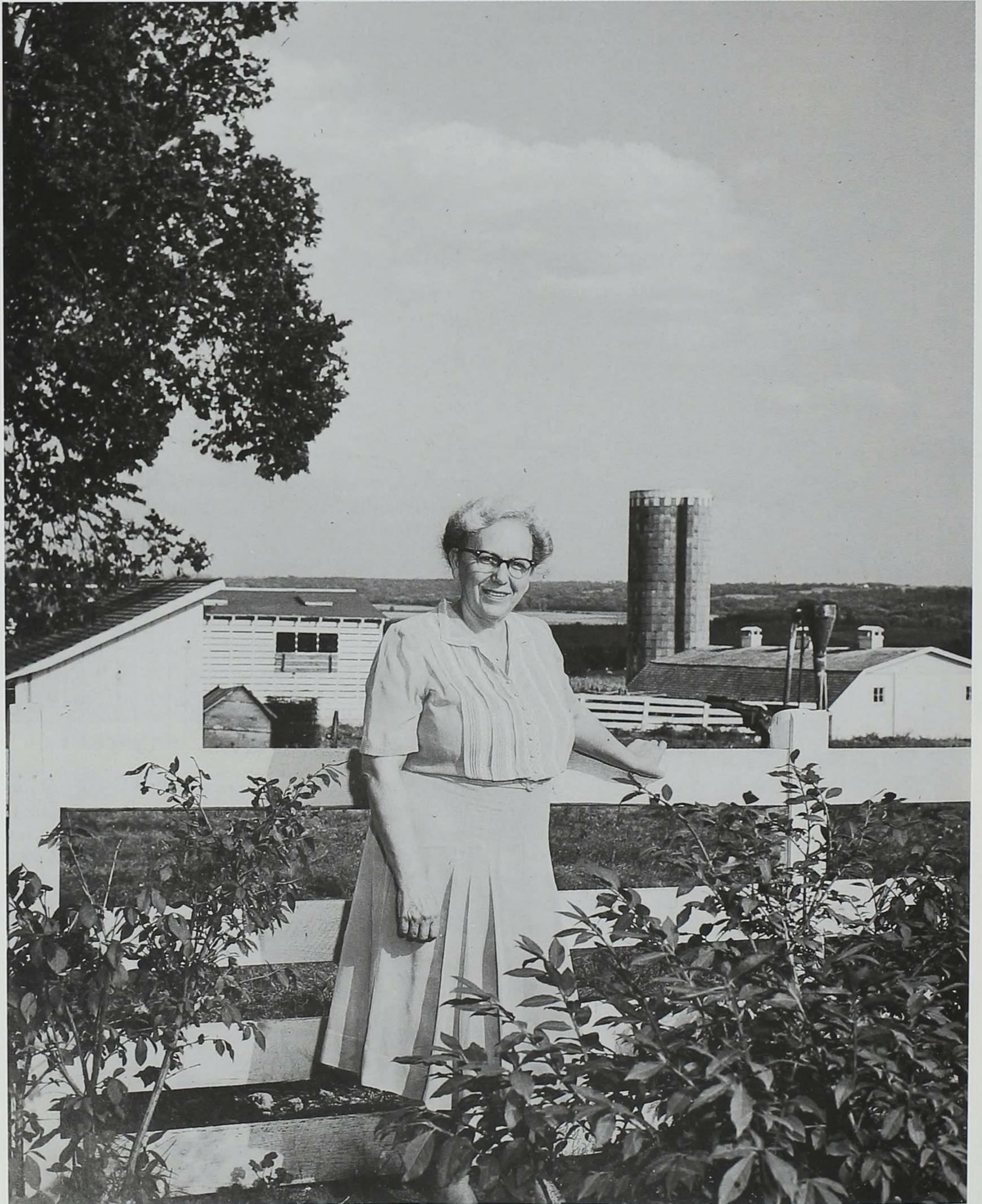
gets for communist aggression and that U.S. participation in international refugee programs would help contain communism. "A good American," she implied, was "a good internationalist." This view was not new with Houghton. Since her days at the helm of the General Federation she had espoused her international 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 Reelect 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:

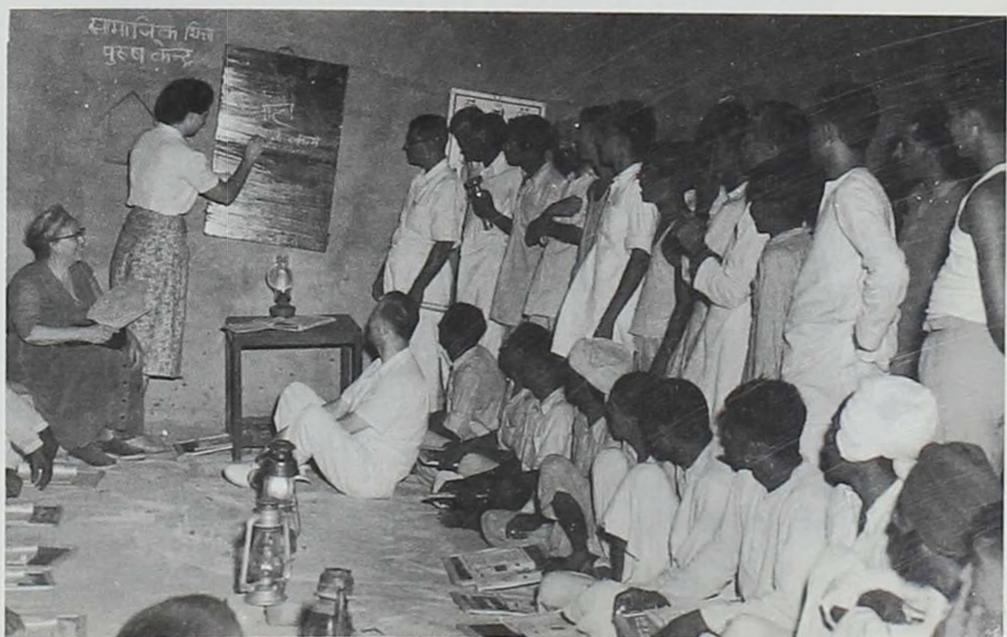
"INDIA, Monday Sept. 22, 1952.

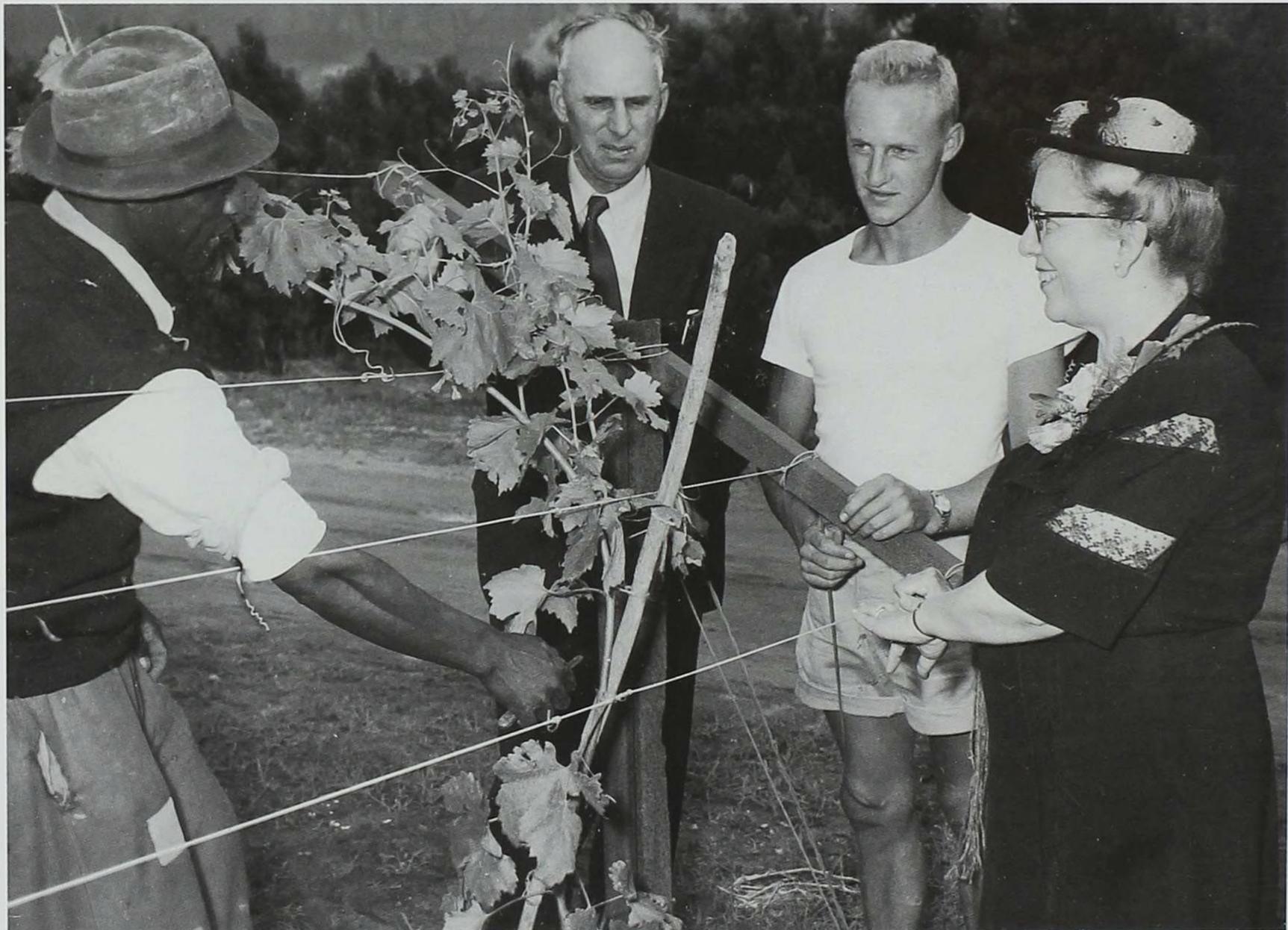
... Lunch at hotel & then to village part way in car & 2 miles in 'jeep.' 200 people in village - mud walls & huts with thatched roofs. Very small windows if any. Gate decorated with leaves & welcome signs. Scouts cross sticks & we march under. Village teacher explains how they have cleaned up the village 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. ❖

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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).