



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

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SHS (DES WOMEN) GEORGE SHANE COLLECTION



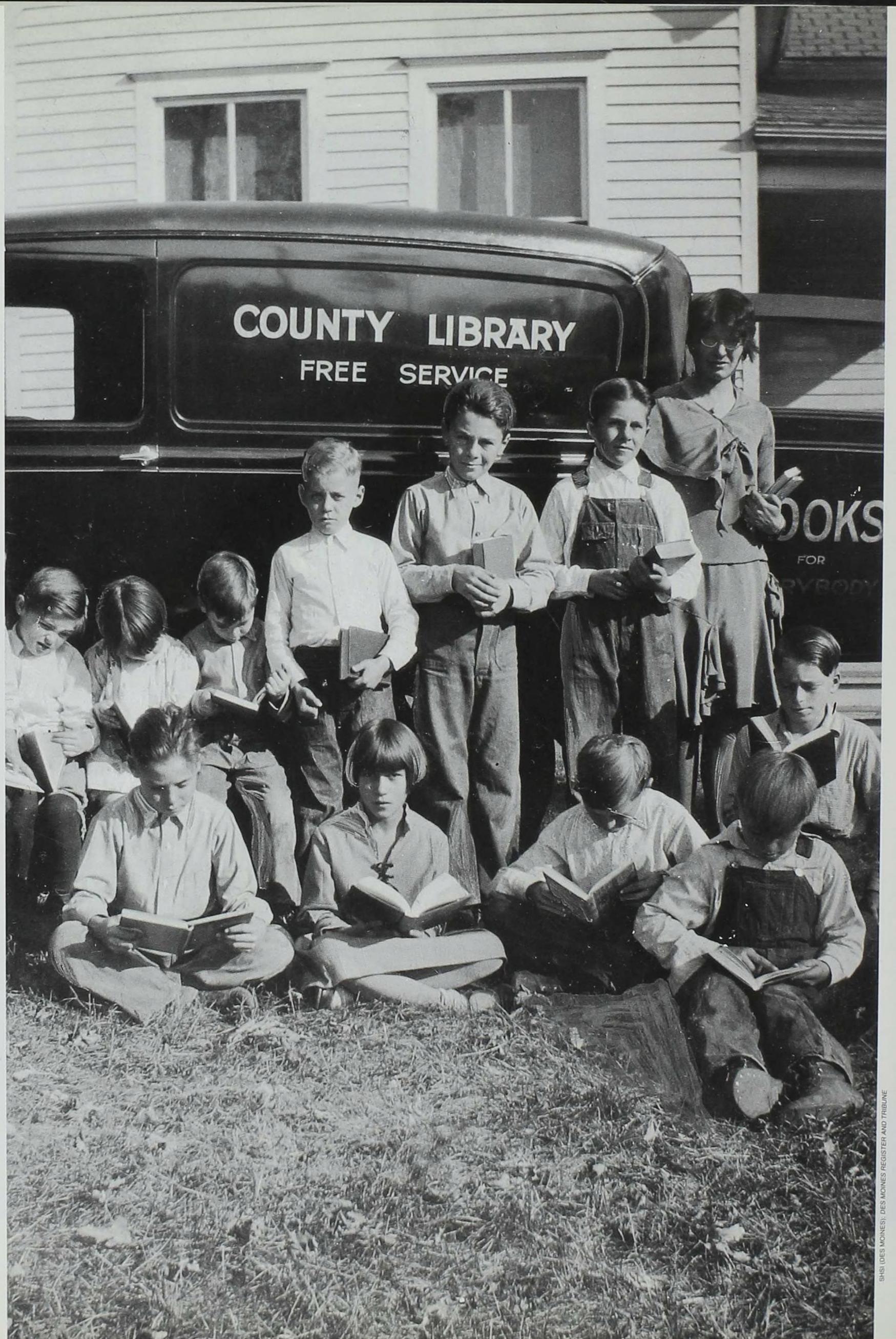
A public health nurse provides home demonstrations for women and children in 1924. Women's clubs clamored for improvements in public health service, including county and school nurses, as well as extension agents who educated women on child and infant care, household bacteriology, food preparation, and 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.



SHSI (IOWA CITY)



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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.





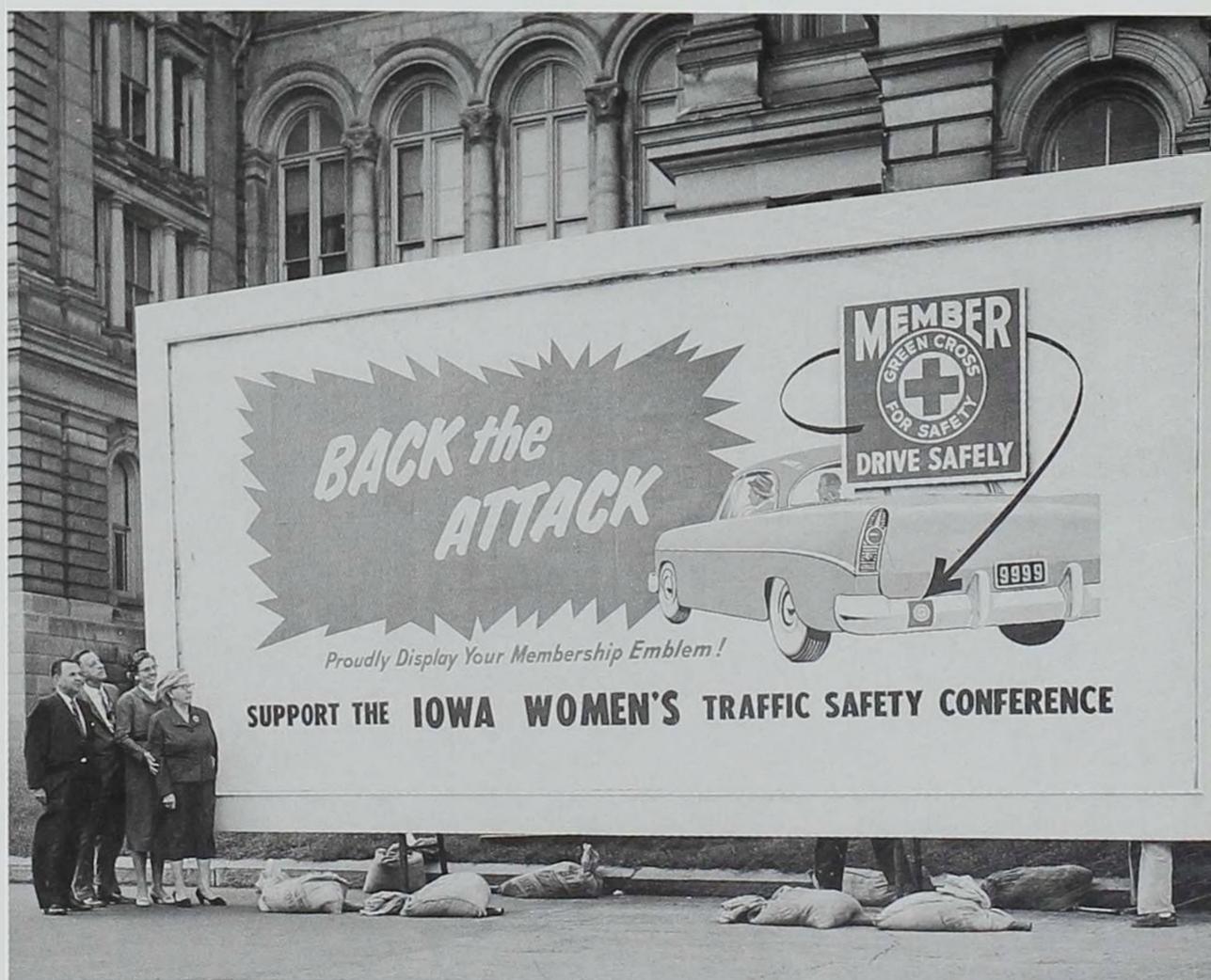
SHSI (DES MOINES); DES MOINES REGISTER AND TRIBUNE

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. ❖



SHS (IOWA CITY); A. M. "PETE" WETTACH COLLECTION, SHS NEG. #2886