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Historical Beginnings

During the early part of May, 1900, Des Moines was told in almost every issue of the press that it must push back its pompadour, shine its button shoes, and get ready to put its best foot forward for the distinguished visitors it was about to entertain. These visitors were the officers and delegates to the Fourth National Congress of Mothers, which in 1924 became the National Congress of Parents and Teachers.

As the nineteenth century was waning, such women's organizations as the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Association for the Advancement of Women, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union were reaching the stage of national organization. The strength and popularity of these movements is attested by the fact that in 1895 the National Council of Women of the United States, a federation of eighteen such national groups numbering over 4,000,000 women, held their second triennial session at Washington, D. C.

It was in August of 1895 that Mrs. Theodore W. Birney launched her idea of a National Congress of Mothers before a group of kindergarten teachers assembled at Chautauqua, New York. With Mrs. Birney, to plan was to act. On February 17, 1897, she had the pleasure of seeing the National Congress of Mothers hold their first session at Washington.

In organizing American mothers and fathers, Alice McClellan Birney was serving not only her own but all American children. Born in Georgia in 1858, Mrs. Birney was the mother of three daughters, two of whom were born of her marriage to Theodore Weld Birney, grandson of James Gillespie Birney, the abolitionist leader.

In Washington, Alice Birney met a kindred spirit in Mrs. Phoebe Apperson Hearst, the mother of William Randolph Hearst. A woman of means, Mrs. Hearst founded the National Cathedral School for Girls and gladly helped Mrs. Birney finance the First National Congress of Mothers.

In 1899, the National Congress of Mothers held its third annual convention in Washington. Mrs. Birney, in her address of welcome, recalled for the delegates present the "spiritual fervor and enthusiasm" which had pervaded the first convention two years before, and declared the National Congress had "striven to reach the mothers of our land, and, through them, the fathers." Taking as

her theme the importance of character building, Mrs. Birney emphasized "cooperation" as the "watch word" of the times.

Citing the many clubs devoted to child study in America, Mrs. Birney declared: "No cause is greater than that in which we are enlisted. No misrepresentations, no criticisms can daunt us; for we are working for the weak, the helpless, the innocent, trusting ones of earth, the little children." In closing, Mrs. Birney pictured the endeavors of the National Congress as a "glad triumphal march to those who come after us," and likened the work to "warfare as glorious as any man ever waged on a field of battle." It was a "warfare in which the old and feeble as well as the young, may enlist."

The sessions were reported by Mrs. Isaac Lea Hillis of Des Moines, Iowa, a staff contributor of the *Iowa Homestead*, who had been assigned to compile a supplement on the National Congress. Perhaps no one was more thrilled by these words than Mrs. Hillis. A member of the Des Moines Women's Club, she came as a delegate from the Iowa Child Study Society. Four things had drawn her to Washington. Her father lived there, the Congress of Mothers was to be in session, the Daughters of the American Revolution (of which she was a new member) and the National Council of Women were both holding national meetings.

Soon after her arrival in Washington, Mrs. Hillis met Mrs. Birney, the national president,

whom she overheard discussing the advisability of holding the next Congress somewhere else than in Washington. Kansas City, Omaha, Denver, and San Francisco were mentioned. As Mrs. Hillis said later, "That conversation made me think, and I quickly figured out how it could be entertained in Des Moines." She went out at once and, without authority of any kind, dictated the following letter of invitation: "The Des Moines Women's Club extends their most cordial invitation to the National Congress of Mothers to meet in Des Moines in the spring of 1900, and pledges hospitality to 500 delegates."

Born in Bloomfield, Iowa, on August 8, 1858, Cora Bussey Hillis was the daughter of Cyrus and Ellen Kiser Bussey. At the outbreak of the Civil War, her father resigned from the Iowa Senate to become Colonel of the Third Iowa Cavalry. At the close of the war, with the rank of Brevet Major General, he removed his family to New Orleans where it was prominently identified with the business and civic activities of the city. The Bussey home on beautiful St. Charles Avenue was noted for its hospitality.

In 1875 young Cora was graduated from Sylvester Larned Institute in New Orleans. In 1880 she was married to Isaac Lea Hillis, a graduate of the law school of the University of Michigan. To this union were born three children: Isaac, now deceased, and Ellen Hillis Miller and Cyrus B.

Hillis, both residents of Des Moines. In 1884 the Hillis family moved from New Orleans to Des Moines, a thriving city of about 40,000 with a Walnut Street which was often a lake of mud. The city was alive to church and club work, and the Hillis family soon became an important part of it.

No sooner had Mrs. Hillis returned home from Washington than she was informed that the National Congress would come to Des Moines in 1900. The choice of Iowa for the National Congress meeting was unique, there being no state branch of the Congress in the Hawkeye State. Time was short, but luckily all joined to make the meeting a success. Newspapers and businessmen cooperated, mothers' clubs were organized, receptions were held, and programs published. The Savery Hotel was chosen as the convention headquarters; the Grant Club offered its facilities. The Women's Club canvassed Des Moines for families willing to entertain convention guests. Every county in Iowa was now eligible for representation at the Congress, and word of expected delegates was received in every mail.

Finally, the great day arrived. On May 21, 1900, Mrs. Theodore W. Birney opened the Fourth National Congress of Mothers before a large audience in the Des Moines Auditorium. Featuring the meeting was the presentation by Mrs. Hillis of a bouquet of ninety-nine pink roses

to Mrs. Birney — one for each county in the state. The bouquet was tied with blue ribbon, the rose-pink being symbolic of childhood, and the blue signifying motherhood.

So many attended the second-day sessions that policemen had to keep the doors closed, and overflow meetings were held at the adjacent Y.M.C.A. where addresses were repeated. The highlight of the second evening was the reception given by Governor and Mrs. Leslie M. Shaw, said to have been attended by 5,000 Iowans.

On Saturday, May 26, the State Congress of Iowa Women was organized, and Mrs. Hillis was elected president. The constitution was drafted, submitted, and adopted by the seventy-five Iowa women present for the organization meeting. Thus, May 26, 1900, became the birthday of the Iowa Congress of Mothers.

MRS. RAY MILLS