

# THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

VOL. LII

ISSUED IN MARCH 1971

No. 3

*Copyright 1971 by The State Historical Society of Iowa*



## The Iowa BPW—1919-1970

During its first fourteen years of development and growth, the Iowa Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs was too preoccupied with making history to think about writing it. It was not until 1933 that Mrs. Elizabeth Kenney of Waterloo, past state president, was appointed chairman of a committee to complete a history of the Iowa BPW during the year and see that copies were presented to each club. Mrs. Kenney fulfilled her assignment promptly, and at the Fifteenth Annual Convention of the Iowa Federation, held in Mason City in 1934, she presented the history for the years 1919 to 1934.

In her Prologue, Mrs. Kenney wrote: "The responsibility of a pioneer is tremendous. The way of a pioneer is rough. To be a pioneer requires a vision followed by a never-ending courage and faith." The Iowa pioneers were a small group of businesswomen from Waterloo, Fort Dodge, Cedar Falls, Des Moines, and Seymour who gathered at the Y.W.C.A. building in Des Moines,

May 31, 1919. Miss Florence King, Chicago, president of the Women's Association of the Chamber of Commerce of the U.S.A., addressed the group. She told of a proposed meeting to be held in St. Louis in July, where it was hoped that the foundation for a National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs could be worked out. Since Iowa wished to be eligible for formal representation, a tentative organization was formed with the following officers:

Miss Emma Wilson, Des Moines, president  
Miss Ada Pence, Des Moines, vice president  
Miss Florence Harsh, Des Moines, secretary  
Miss Pearl Harnish, Des Moines, treasurer

A Board of Directors was also named, and the women present were urged to attend the St. Louis meeting. When the invitation came, four women from Iowa responded: Miss Wilson, Miss Lynn Malmquist, Sioux City; Mrs. W. D. Ives, Waterloo; and Miss Ruby N. Byers, Cedar Rapids. They returned filled with enthusiasm and the determination that the business and professional women of Iowa would do their part in this national organization of women. Mrs. Kenney continued in her Prologue:

The pioneers of our Iowa Federation were equipped with pickaxe and spade; the vision they carried home from St. Louis was a vision of growth and of friendship for our Iowa women. They came home with these tools ready to clear the way, and to build roads and bridges so that

you and I could follow. How discouraging it must have been then to them. How epoch-making it seems to us now. That they builded well, that they developed carefully, has resulted in an influence, a progress, a prestige which is ours because of their choice—their courage and their vision.

The First Annual Convention, repeatedly postponed "because of heavy snows, a fuel famine, and epidemics," was finally held April 5, 1920, at the Hotel Savery in Des Moines, with twelve accredited delegates representing seven clubs in Clinton, Cedar Rapids, Mason City, Des Moines, Boone, Waterloo, and Sioux City. A constitution was adopted. The first elected officers of the Iowa Federation were:

President—Mrs. W. D. Ives, Waterloo  
Vice President—Mrs. Alice Slocum, Cedar Rapids  
Corresponding Secretary—Lynn Malmquist, Sioux City  
Recording Secretary—Miss Mayme Stanley, Boone  
Treasurer—Miss Ethel D. Henry, Clinton

Throughout the 20's the Federation continued its growth. The Fourth Annual Convention, held in Mason City in May, 1923, marked an interesting milestone in its history. A motion was adopted that the Federation take immediate steps to incorporate and Miss Helena M. Mitchell of Davenport was named chairman of the committee which prepared the articles of incorporation and by-laws. Waterloo, site of the 1924 convention and home of the first club to complete its affiliation with State and National Federations, became

headquarters of the Iowa Federation. The articles of incorporation and by-laws, after adoption, were recorded in Black Hawk County, May 14, 1924. At this time there were twenty-one clubs with a membership of 1,253 women.

One of the more unusual conventions of the Iowa Federation was the one held in Des Moines in July, 1926, with Miss Frances E. Plath of Davenport presiding. The meeting adjourned after only one day and was followed immediately by the national convention, with Iowa club members as hostesses. A distinct honor was conferred upon the state by the election of Miss Plath as National Recording Secretary. Prior to this, she had had the distinction of being the first person to be twice elected to the Iowa Federation's highest office. Further honors came in 1931, when she was named to the Finance Committee of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, organized in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1930.

In 1928 the first National Business Women's Week, as outlined by the National Federation, was inaugurated in Iowa. The observance of this special week has continued to the present, often with proclamations issued by the Governor endorsing the contributions and goals of the BPW.

The years 1929-1930 marked great strides in organization and membership. Not only was Iowa's first district organization meeting held, but the Federation entered into a plan for regional

conferences to be convened in years when there were no national conventions. The North Central Region, comprised of Minnesota, Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Iowa, met in Gary, Indiana. Mrs. Rosa E. Cunningham of Des Moines was elected chairman of this first conference.

The year 1930 also saw the largest membership gain in the history of the Iowa Federation, thanks to the untiring efforts of Mrs. Elizabeth Kenney, State Membership Chairman. The year closed with a total membership of 2,453 women in forty-one clubs. The 1930 convention marked the end of a decade of progress toward the goal of "Better Business Women for a Better Business World."

Mrs. Kenney closed her history of Iowa Business and Professional Women's Clubs with a roster of the 50 clubs in the Federation. An Epilogue summed up the accomplishments:

The stage is set, the scenery arranged, the actors prompted and the rehearsals criticized; all the result of our early pioneers. The workers of our Federation are behind the scenes watching the play from the wings . . . . Our stage is not artificial, it is life itself, full of ideals for the future of our women. This setting is ours during the coming years, because of the vision and courage of our pioneer women and because of the splendid loyalty and cooperation of our members who year after year have done their share and more to develop and carry on for the business and professional women of tomorrow.

When Miss E. Persis Sheldon of Iowa City became a member-at-large of the Iowa BPW in

1928, the office of State Historian had not been established. Mrs. Kenney's appointment in 1933 was not formalized as a state office and it was not until 1937 that Miss Sheldon was unanimously elected State Historian for a period of five years. A former State Finance Chairman who had headed state nominating committees several times, Miss Sheldon was well versed in the organizational and functional aspects of the Iowa Federation.

Miss Sheldon's devotion to the ideals of the BPW and her loyalty to her country were demonstrated when she presented an American flag to the Federation at the Twentieth Annual Convention in Waterloo in 1939. The flag was accepted by President Helen G. Irwin on behalf of the Iowa Federation as a symbol of their loyalty as American citizens living in a democracy.

At the 1942 post-convention Board meeting, Miss Sheldon was appointed to another five-year term as Historian. She continued in this capacity three years beyond the expiration of her second term, finally resigning in 1950.

What were the factors influencing the Clubs in this period of their history? The economic plight of the country was of continuing concern. The keynote for 1934-1935 was "stability." The convention theme for 1935 was "Economic Power Through Right Thinking." The North Central Regional Conference theme was "Economic Security for All." Perhaps the exigencies of the de-

pression hardened the resolve of the women to stand firm for their beliefs. The resolutions adopted by the convention that year showed that BPW members had clarified their principles and were ready to state their goals unequivocally:

That we stand squarely against all discrimination based upon sex, and insist that aptitude, training and efficiency should be the qualifications by which business and professional women are measured.

That the principle of equal pay for equal work be maintained.

That we believe that women should participate in politics to the end that we may aid in the election to public office of men and women who will further those principles upon which good government is based.

National honors came to the Iowa Clubs. In 1937 Mrs. Cunningham was elected as First Vice President of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs. The Atlantic Club won both state and national first prizes for the best editorial in a 1936-1937 nationwide contest sponsored by the National Federation.

As early as the 1940 convention Dr. Lena M. Phillips of New York, President of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs and Honorary President of the National Federation, warned that "the United States is on the precipice of war, and there is little hope of our keeping out of it." She urged women to "cease being 'armchair crusaders,' stop wishful thinking and face the facts courageously."

The time foreseen by Dr. Phillips came all too soon. The District and Winter Board meetings of the Iowa Federation in February, 1942, were concerned almost exclusively with what part the Federation could play in the all-out war effort. Such topics as "civilian defense," "war budgets," and "national health" were pursued. Discussions were held on women's stake in the war and on the question of whether women would be drafted. The more forward-looking members were urged to consider whether women should sit at the peace conference; also to prepare for unemployment after the war.

The 1943 convention called itself the Twenty-fourth Annual Convention and War Conference of the Iowa Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Inc. The Clubs set as their 1943-1944 goal the sale of over \$525,000 worth of War Bonds and Stamps. Midway in this effort, Mrs. Stella Barker, War Service Chairman, reported that the Federation had purchased enough bonds and stamps to have the Federation's name on an ambulance plane carrying help to battlefield wounded.

The Silver Anniversary of the Iowa Federation (1944) found Clubs turning to the part women were playing in various branches of the Armed Services. Emergency situations were anticipated in empowering the Executive Committee to act without the presence of the entire Board. The

February, 1945, meeting of the Executive Board was limited in attendance by a ruling of the United States Office of Defense Transportation. The Twenty-sixth Annual Convention (1945) had to be canceled because of this ruling. Thus the 1946 meeting became the Twenty-sixth Annual Convention, embodying the theme "Living and Working for the Peace Building Years."

In her Epilogue to *A History of the Iowa Federation*, E. Persis Sheldon wrote in 1946:

The problems of the post-war period are great and must be met with foresight and vision. The part that women are to play in these troubled times is of vital concern to us all. All of our past achievements and accomplishments, as a women's organization, should serve as an added incentive for our demonstrating what we can do to serve.

The emphasis of the post-war years became an international one. A resolution adopted by the 1947 convention read:

That each club, if possible, adopt a foreign club or family for this year, thereby fostering better international relations, and bring our clubs in closer contact with clubs of other countries. This is to be done through the medium of our National and International Federations.

Mrs. Stella Barker, Federation President, said, "We are vitally concerned with building a peaceful world within the Charter of the United Nations."

The 1948 convention made recommendations on "recognizing and attempting to alleviate distress

abroad and fostering better understanding between the different peoples of the world." Delegates were urged to contribute as much as possible to the "Appeal for Children," a project offering a chance to help needy children everywhere with food, clothing, and medical care.

As the BPW entered the 50's, one name stands out in bold relief—that of Miss Helen G. Irwin of Des Moines, Iowa's brightest star. Her name first appeared in the *History* in 1933 when she was appointed State Publicity Chairman. She was successively State Treasurer (1934), First Vice President (1936), and President of the Iowa Federation for two terms (1937-1939). After completing her terms as President she became State Legislation Chairman. During her tenure in this office, the Federation, through her efforts, became increasingly aware of the importance of sponsoring and working for legislation furthering their goals on state and national levels.

At the 1948 State Convention a signal honor was accorded Miss Irwin. The Federation President, Stella Barker, recommended "... because of her unremitting loyalty to us all, her very great ability in whatever higher office she may attain, because of her humble spirit and just because we have only our love and gratitude to lay at her feet, I recommend that Miss Helen G. Irwin be accorded the title of Honorary President of the Iowa Federation." The delegates also continued

their efforts to secure her election to national office.

Success crowned their efforts. In 1952 Miss Irwin was elected President of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs at its Convention in Boston. Mrs. Alice S. Warsaw, State Historian at the time, wrote:

The Iowa Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs has reason to believe that "Coming events cast their shadow before." Like a very pleasant and protective shadow, the personality and person of Helen Irwin has hovered over us for many years. . . . Her friendliness, her belief in the importance of the individual, her gracious, unaffected manner and sterling character were recognized beyond the limits of our state and so it is no wonder that at the Boston Convention, June 29-July 3, Helen was elected National President.

During her term as National President, Miss Irwin became known internationally for her work for business and professional women. Not only did she head a delegation of 148 American women attending the Sixth Congress of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women in Stockholm, Sweden, but she also made a trip to Germany as a guest of the German State. Here the West German Government awarded her the Commander's Cross of Merit in recognition of the Federation's work in the interest of German women.

Miss Irwin's business associates of the Equitable Life Insurance Company of Iowa honored her, devoting almost an entire issue of one of their

magazines, *Dividend*, to an article about "Equitable of Iowa's Cinderella Girl." The national publication of the BPW, *The Independent Woman* of December, 1953, summarized this article. Her term as National President was crowned when she presided at the National Convention in St. Louis in July, 1954. Some 100 Iowa members attended the meeting in St. Louis.

Work on committees of the National Federation, attendance at meetings of the International Federation in Berne and Paris, other trips abroad, as well as assignments to important boards and committees resulted in Equitable of Iowa's nomination of Helen Irwin as "World Citizen." In 1962, at the Convention of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women in Oslo, Norway, she was elected International President. Miss Irwin's three-year term was a distinguished one, marked by extensive travel in behalf of working women the world over. She presided at the International Congress held in 1965 in Washington, D.C. In her honor Iowa entertained 800 women at the Congress, a feat made possible through the three-year efforts of an International Expansion and Promotion Fund Committee, headed by Mrs. Helen Weinruch of Bettendorf. In the years since, Miss Irwin has continued as the Honorary President and valued adviser of the Iowa Clubs.

The activities of the Iowa Federation during

the last years of its first half century included the initiation of the Iowa Small Business Clinic. Mrs. Helen Vanderburg, called the "mother" of the Clinic, worked for a program providing information and "know how" on initiating and conducting a small business enterprise. Consultants came from the University of Iowa, Iowa State University, and Drake University, as well as from various organizations and small businesses in Iowa. So successful was this project that Iowa was able to help five neighboring states plan similar clinics. Another project was the annual sponsorship of Leadership Clinics.

The international interests of the Iowa BPW continued and broadened. A "Books for the Virgin Islands" project was successfully concluded with the donation of literally tons of books for use by the first and only college in the Islands. Iowa contributed liberally to the Minnie Maffett Chinese Nurses' Home Fund—the dedication of this Home was attended by Helen Irwin along with Dr. Maffett, for whom it was named. Prior to her state presidency, Alline Staveley represented the Federation on the Board of Directors of the Iowa Partners of the Alliance for Progress, when she visited Yucatan, Iowa's sister country in the Alliance.

Individual members represented Iowa with distinction in varied activities. Helen Vanderburg, former Iowa Federation President and President

of the National Federation of Press Women, was invited by the Belgian Government to join a group of leading newspaper publishers in a study of the European Common Market. Mrs. Enid Robinson of Hampton was one of four appointed by the State Department to represent consumers at a Tariff and Trade Conference held in Geneva, Switzerland. The first national convention of the American Associations for the United Nations was attended by a former Iowa Federation President, Orlean Schroeder. And Helen G. Irwin was instrumental in raising funds to enable a Nairobi student from East Africa to claim a BPW scholarship to Iowa Wesleyan College in Mount Pleasant. The significance of these activities was caught by a *Des Moines Register* editorial in May, 1960:

Three cheers and a hurrah for the Iowa Federation of Business and Professional Clubs, Inc. The Iowa women do not favor a "know nothing" stand on international affairs. . . . We are happy to report that they voted unanimously in favor of including a plank on foreign affairs in the organization's national program.

The Iowa Federation rounded out its Fifty Golden Years with 5,368 members in 91 clubs. In a transition from the Model T to the Space Age, the Federation grew from a modest beginning of seven clubs to its present number and from a parochial orientation to an international one.

HENRIETTA ZAGEL