

An Intellectual Centennial for Iowa City

The No Name Club Reaches 100

Editor's Note: This article is based primarily upon a paper by Mary Louise Lawyer delivered to the members of the N.N. Club in 1961. The occasion was the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the club. The Lawyer paper was revised and updated by members of the State Historical Society of Iowa's publications staff with generous help and support from the club's current historian, Winifred Scott.

This year, 1986, marks the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the No Name Club, Iowa City's second oldest literary society. Only the Nineteenth Century Club has had a longer continuous existence. In its origins, the No Name Club might be said to have been a by-product of the Civil War, which produced great changes in the lives of many American women. Forced out of their "domestic tranquility" by manpower shortages during the war into fields and areas not previously entered by women, many women in the post-war era desired more out of life generally.

A woman's congress convened in New York City in 1868 had brought together leading educators and professional women from throughout the United States. They had urged systematic study for all women, suggesting joint efforts rather than individual study. Thus was the idea of women's clubs born.

After this congress, similar ones were held annually in various large cities of the United States and, in 1885, one took place in Des Moines. Attending this congress was a promi-

nent Iowa City woman, Mrs. Emma Haddock (the first woman ever admitted to practice in the United States courts). Upon her return from Des Moines, Mrs. Haddock was full of enthusiasm for the creation of a new club in Iowa City — the Nineteenth Century Club had been organized three years earlier.

Thus in February 1886, Mrs. Haddock and twelve of her friends organized a new club for "mutual improvement and the study of history and literature." That first year, under the presidency of Miss M. Murray, they met spasmodically, engaging in a study of early

N.N. CLUB

100th Anniversary
1886 - 1986



IOWA CITY, IOWA
1985 - 1986



Mrs. Thomas C. Carson, in whose home the N.N. Club was first proposed in 1886. (SHSI)

American women writers. A new president, Mrs. Gower, was elected in July 1886, and in December of that year there was much discussion over the naming of the club. Mrs. Haddock preferred the name "Sigourney Club" to honor a well-known woman poet of the mid-nineteenth century but her motion to that effect was defeated. Another motion called for the club to be named the "New Nineteenth Century," but that one lost as well. No decision was reached on the name at the January 1887 meeting but, on 1 February 1887, it was

decided unanimously to call it the "N.N. (No Name) Club," which was supposedly taken from Jules Verne's "Nemo."

The first printed program appeared in 1887. Its fly-leaf contained "Rules for guidance and help to new clubs," which had been laid down by the Chicago Browning Club. They appeared in the 1888 program as follows:

- 1 — Aim to *study*, not create, literature.
- 2 — Avoid red tape and parliamentary slang.
- 3 — Let but one talk at a time and that one, to the matter in hand.
- 4 — Start no side conferences; whispering is poor wisdom, and bad manners.
- 5 — Come prepared. Let the work be laid out systematically, in deliberate course of reading and study.
- 6 — Let papers be short. Beware of long quotations. "Brevity is the soul of wit."
- 7 — Be as willing to expose ignorance as to parade knowledge.
- 8 — Aim not to exhaust, but to open the theme. Incite curiosity. Provoke home reading.
- 9 — Begin and close to the minute.
- 10 — Meet all discouragements with grit and industry. Rise superior to numbers; for the kingdom of culture, like the kingdom of God, comes without observations.

Also in this 1888 document appeared the program order which was to be followed for many years:

History . . . Thirty minutes.
 Conversation . . . Fifteen minutes.
 Literary . . . Thirty minutes.



The Thomas C. Carson home, 906 East College Street, Iowa City, Iowa. It was built around 1870 and is now the Alpha Phi sorority house. (SHSI)

Quotations from Literary Subject of the Day

. . . Ten minutes.

Conversation . . . Fifteen minutes.

The history papers of the first year dealt with the United States presidential administrations beginning with Washington's and running through that of Cleveland. The literary papers took up the lives and works of English and American writers, including Helen Hunt Jackson, Bayard Taylor, Tennyson, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, the Brownings, Carlyle, and George Eliot. In addition, special papers were presented on the "Higher Education of Girls," the "History of Woman's Advancement in this Century," "Home Duties and Literary Culture," and "Edison, Contribution to Applied

Sciences."

Mrs. Chalfant, a charter member, presented the club with a gavel and she requested that the retiring president hand it over to her successor at the opening fall meeting of each year. She suggested that the "custom . . . be continued as long as the club exists." Apparently the club survived the gavel, for later club minutes frequently stated that "the *imaginary* gavel was handed to the new president by the former one." (Recently, Irving Weber, noted Iowa City columnist and historian, presented to the N.N. Club members a gavel which had a note attached indicating that it had been given to Mrs. Edward H. (Grace Burge) Weber when she was president of the club in 1925. It may well have been the "imaginary" gavel.)

Many rules were set up in those early days and some of them are still observed:

- 1 — Members shall draw for their papers at the annual business meeting.
- 2 — Only the hostess and program reader may invite guests.
- 3 — N.N. has precedence over any other engagement.
- 4 — Absences should be excused — only illness and absence from town constitute legitimate excuses.
- 5 — Rules and regulations shall be read at the first meeting of the year for the benefit of new members.



In the center is Mrs. Byron Lambert, a member of the N.N. Club, who became very involved in the "Bundles for Britain" program during the Second World War. (SHSI)

For a time a fine of \$.25 was levied for an unexcused absence and \$.05 was levied for tardiness. The minutes recorded names of absentees and their excuses, and sometimes stated that those with unexcused absences might well forfeit membership. During the 1890s, Miss Mira Troth was repeatedly elected secretary. Her minutes were invariably introduced in the same piquant fashion. She always wrote "*Pursuant to adjournment* N.N. Club met at the home of Mrs. ____." The designated "conversation" on each topic sometimes strayed from the subject, which led a Mrs. Barrett, wife of the Presbyterian minister, to suggest at one point that a set of questions pertaining to the subsequent program be handed to members for study and thus allow them to prepare for real discussion. A later innovation was the appointment of a referee as an authority on pronunciation. The term of appointment was for five meetings and the referee was actually required to give a report at the end of each meeting.

In 1893 three women were appointed to draw up a constitution. The document which they drew up has been seldom amended and basically remains in use to this day. The three members were Mrs. Haddock and Mrs. Barrett, founding spirits of the N.N. Club, and a Mrs. McGee. In that same year, 1893, the club joined the newly organized State Federation of Women's Clubs, having sent delegates to Des Moines for the federation's first meeting. The connection with the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs lasted until 6 October 1942 when the N.N. Club withdrew its membership in that organization.

By 1901 there was some talk of enlarging the membership which had been initially set at twenty-five. Since in the average home of the time one could not entertain more than that number, the group decided instead to sponsor a new club — the "Art Circle" which still exists and which recently celebrated its eighty-fifth anniversary.

While the literary programs continued in much the same form throughout the early years of the twentieth century, the historical papers dealt with a variety of topics such as civil service reform, conditions relating to child labor laws and to the wages of women workers, and to such statewide programs as "child saving, the care of the aged poor, [and] the care of defectives and tramps."

Over the years members of the N.N. Club took a decided interest in bettering local conditions. In the early years of the century they subscribed to scholarship and loan funds, passed resolutions approving the election of women to the school board, and established committees to be sent to Iowa City grade schools to investigate conveniences for the children. One committee was sent to the mayor of Iowa City to discuss the care of Oakland Cemetery. The mayor agreed that some organization should be created for maintaining the cemetery, so, with representatives from the N.N. Club and from other women's clubs, the Improvement League was formed which looked after the cemetery and took care of its needs until the city took over the responsibility for perpetual care.

The minutes of 1914 made first mention of an annual guest day with an outside speaker. Outside speakers for some years thereafter were drawn from the English or history departments of the State University.

The war years certainly changed things for the club. The program for 1917, for example, called for a study of Russian literature but in the midst of the war, members were asked to read from books on Russia rather than deliver papers and the listeners were urged to work on sewing or knitting for the Red Cross during the reading. Prior to that time, handwork had been frowned upon as diverting attention from the presentations.

By 1917 much was being done by the club to aid war work. At one point \$5.00 per member over and above dues were assessed for Near



Mary Louise Lawyer, whose paper entitled "Our Seventy-fifth" summed up the history and achievements of the N.N. Club through 1961. (SHSI)

East Relief. Similar assessments took care of an Armenian orphan or paid for soldiers' magazine subscriptions. Nor was local philanthropy forgotten. Frequently members answered roll call by reporting the number of towels hemmed by the Iowa blind which they wished to purchase. This was a statewide federation project.

By 1921 the hostess at each meeting was allowed to serve something in the way of simple refreshments. The question of light refreshments at the meetings had arisen as early as 1893 but had been apparently left unresolved. The added socializing added to the enjoyment of the club's membership which

was made up of faculty wives and townswomen from various parts of town and from different churches who seldom met together except at the N.N. Club.

A long continued custom was the annual spring dinner at which husbands of the members were guests. In 1929 such a dinner was held at the home of Professor and Mrs. Rollin Perkins. Since it was in May preceding the selection of presidential candidates, a straw vote was taken, which indicated rather clearly the political leanings of the members. Twenty votes were cast for Hoover, ten for Lowden, five for Dawes, two for Al Smith, and one for an unidentified husband. At the club meeting following the November election that year, the

roll call was answered by stating whether or not members had voted. One hundred percent of the members indicated they had been to the polls.

The job of the Program Committee had once been formidable. They had originally presented planned programs for approval which were often severely criticized by the club members and sometimes given back to the committee to be revised (often more than once). In 1935, when Mrs. Milford Barnes was chairman of the Program Committee, a program based on biographical study was approved, and that general pattern has been followed to the present day. It has proved to be a varied and well balanced approach for in the



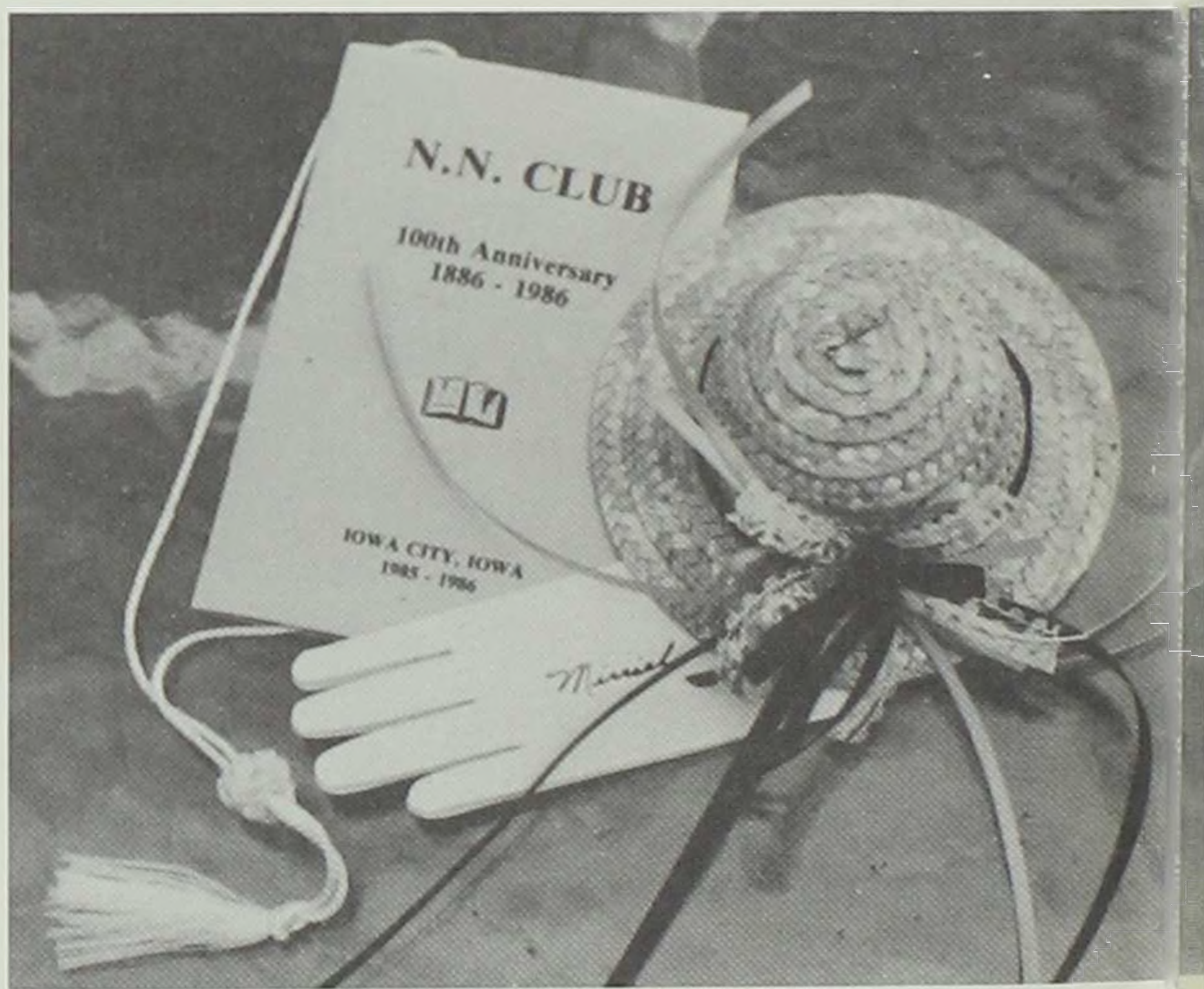
N.N. Club, 1985-1986: (top row) Jean Brown, Jackie Knapp, June Wurster, Edna Crawford, Beverly Blades, Mary Frances Ramsey, Ann Bagford, Leota Rice, Jean Ann Goff, Sue Rollins, Marilyn Osborne, Carol Lach; (middle row) Harriett Carpenter, Maude Rate, Margaret Erbe, Mary Top, Marcy Fisher, Joan Summerwill, Betty Fernandez, Velma Stuit, Mirriel Bedell; (front row) Merri Rowden, Dorie Schultheiss, Darlyne Neff, Donna Epley, Margaret Kennedy, Winnie Scott; (not pictured) Aileen Zopf, Sue Hancher, Mary Hale, Shirley Binney. (courtesy Winifred Scott)

biographies of great and sometimes not-so-great men and women the members have learned much of literature, art, history, music, science, medicine, religion, and diplomacy.

During the Second World War, as in the First World War, members were not just concerned with literary study. Minutes of wartime meetings show that the club served as a recruiting ground for members who could do Red Cross surgical dressings or serve as hostesses in the local U.S.O. The club was proud and gratified when one of its members, Mrs. Byron Lambert, received recognition from the British government for her work in the "Bundles for Britain" campaign.

The club over the years has included in its ranks a number of academic wives. The membership, however, has retained a surprising stability. Though occasionally wives accompanying their husbands on leave requested club leave and resignations came from women departing Iowa City for other climes, the turnover has not been great. The last new members (two) were taken into the club in 1983. Of the twenty-five current members of the club, seventeen became members between 1970 and 1980. The oldest active member became a member in 1954. Eight honorary members are included on the present membership rolls of the club. (Members of long standing are elevated to honorary membership, a status which exempts them from the formal presentation of papers. It should be noted, however, that the status exempts but does not prevent honorary members from active participation in the club. At least one paper was presented in the past year by an honorary member.)

The programs over the years have become more pointed as the biographical review has given more focus to the meetings. In recent years there has been perhaps a greater emphasis on contemporary figures but the spectrum of interests (business, literature, science, politics, history, etc.) has remained a broad one.



Anything one hundred years old might be considered an antique, yet age alone is not always a sufficient basis for a valid judgment. For an old piece of furniture to be classed as a true antique, it must have beauty of line and in addition should be of practical use. If clubs can be judged as chairs are judged, the N.N. Club is a real antique. Its history indicates it was built on good lines and that those lines have been maintained throughout the years. As to its practical use, in the early days it stimulated members to develop their minds by reading and study — and the goal of mental stimulation has been continuously present. For the women of the N.N. Club, "canned" amusements will never be a satisfactory substitute for the pleasures derived from an association of vibrant women devoted to "mutual improvement and the study of history and literature." □

Note on Sources

The sources for this article included the minute books of the N.N. Club, club programs, reports by club historians, and conversations with Winifred Scott, the club's current historian. The bulk of the N.N. Club materials are found in the manuscripts collection of the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City. The prime source for the first seventy-five years of the club remains the Mary Louise Lawyer paper delivered in 1961.