

No Boys Allowed  
A History of the Whiting Woman's Club  
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It is never too late to do a little spring cleaning. Over the last few weeks the Whiting Public Library staff has been doing a thorough cleaning of its storage areas. During this time, a staff member discovered boxes of material belonging to the now defunct Whiting Woman's Club. Among the various boxes were lists of all of the women who were members of this association. A roster list of the Whiting Woman's Club reads like a Who's Who of the city's elite.

In 1894 a group of women, many of whom were affiliated with the city's pillars of the community, organized the Whiting Fortnightly Club. The initial charter consisted of 19 members. According to Article II of the Fortnightly Constitution, "The object of this association shall be the mutual improvement of the individual and the community through educational lines." Mrs. Fifield, in a history of the club reminisces about the early days of the club, "In looking back over the years the social part of the club has been most helpful. It made newcomers acquainted, as with the ever-shifting population change was inevitable."

Originally meetings were held on the first Monday of each month at Mrs. A. D. Davidson's house on 119<sup>th</sup> Street. The house was little more than a cottage. The club's original members hoped to get an opportunity to read and discuss biographical sketches and other classical works instead of just the ordinary newspaper. Providing enough books for the members was a problem. At this time, the only places to get books were from residents' private libraries. So, membership was limited to twenty-five women and a waiting list was established.

The Fortnightly Club's banquets were a source of pleasure and labor. The members did all of the work, from volunteering their homes for the event to cooking all of the food. Dishes, linens, tables and oftentimes a gasoline stove had to be transported to the hostess' residence. The location of the banquet was reserved for the member's home, whose accommodations were the best. On several occasions the club would throw an elegant dinner for one of Whiting's more prominent bachelors who did not have a wife to cook him a "home cooked meal."

According to the Whiting Democrat, after successfully completing the first year of the club's existence one of these popular banquets were held at the home of Mrs. George France. During President Davidson's opening remarks, she congratulated the twenty ladies present for "their ability to establish and maintain a high standard of culture, literary, social and artistic which alone is the criterion advancement in any social center in any town."

During the course of the banquet, several women took the stage to lecture on various topics including art and music. One of these women was Mrs. J. R. Harvey, who had the distinction of being the only woman in Whiting to have cast her vote. The State of Indiana did not give the right to vote to women until 1913. Mrs. Harvey, wife of one of Whiting's first doctors, cast her vote in the State of Wyoming, her home prior to relocating to Whiting. Wyoming in 1869 became the first state to grant full voting privileges to women.

Decades before the term "Women's Lib" was even coined Fortnightly members were doing their part towards female liberation and equality. According to a history of the club by

Mrs. George Burman, Mrs. C. D. Davidson describes her strong desire to attend meetings. "I remember trudging to the meeting from my old home on John Street where I went as a bride. There were no electric lights or any other light, except that of the moon to illuminate the way. But being young I had no fears and being much interested in the club and its activities nothing could have detained me not even an infant son. When we adjourned we did as club women always do, stood around and visited with one another, then I would walk home through the sand to the little house where my husband was carefully attending the wants of my little Jamie."

In 1906 the club voted to bring in a critic who could correct the mispronunciation of words and proper names. Mary Stoerlein served as the Fortnightly Club's first pronunciation critic. A year later the club asked Standard Oil to allow them to undertake the beautification of various corners throughout the city. The Fortnightly Club, during this time, contributed much to the culture of Whiting as well as taking part in many charitable and civic projects. The club established four departments: Literature and History, Music and Art, Civics, and Home Economics.

In 1913 the Fortnightly Club was federated with the Indiana Federation of Clubs. Mrs. G. H. Fifield served as president during this time. That same year the organization became a member of the 10<sup>th</sup> District Federation. The first women's club in Indiana on record is the New Harmony Female Social Society, which was founded in 1825.

As I poured over the early news stories of that day, I discovered some interesting programs that the club sponsored. In 1915 the Fortnightly Club had a program titled the "Use of Brains in Housework." During this lecture it was devised that there are four reasons why women "wear out" while housekeeping. "(1) No plan for work is used (2) Poor tools with which to work (3) Standardized methods not known (4) See no joy in the work."

During the First World War, the Fortnightly Club did their part for the war effort. That year instead of having their annual banquet, membership decided to donate these funds to the Red Cross. In addition, members met regularly to prepare surgical dressings and discarded clothing was donated to War Relief Organization.

In 1918 a fifty-cent fine for failure to prepare for a meeting was instituted to encourage attendance. In addition, a five-cent fine was established for members who were absent from a meeting with an excuse. However, if you missed three meetings in succession it was grounds to forfeit membership. Over time the membership restrictions were lifted and the club's membership soared.

In 1922 the Fortnightly Club became affiliated with the General Federation of Women's Clubs. The GFWC's roots can be traced back to 1868 when Jane Cunningham Croly, a professional New York journalist who wrote under the pen name of Jennie June, attempted to attend a dinner at an all-male press club that was honoring British novelist Charles Dickens. Croly was ridiculed and denied admittance based upon her gender. In response to this atrocity, she formed her own club for women. By an amendment to the Club's Constitution on April 2, 1923 the name of the Fortnightly Club was changed to the Whiting Woman's Club. After the Community Center was built, the club moved its meeting from private residences to the Memorial Community House.

In 1930 Mildred Ahlgren took the first steps in her career as a club-woman by becoming club president. She eventually became the head of the General Federation of Woman's Clubs.

Ahlgren built her platform on Americanism and Patriotism. This organization's patriotic spirit was demonstrated during the Second World War. Members supported volunteer services, through the purchase of bonds, three casualty stations were established in Whiting, and \$100 was approved to help equip these stations.

Over the next several decades the Whiting Woman's Club continued to sponsor programs that were both educational, as well as, entertaining. There were a variety of sub committees: Literary Group, American Home Department, Music Group, Tea Hostess, Entertaining Committee, Work of the blind, Calling Committee, Scrap Book Committee, Membership Committee, War Service Committee, Publicity Committee, Public Service and Americanism Committee, Hospitality Committee, Art Chairman, and a History Committee. Whiting's ladies reviewed classic literature and music, they attended lectures on travel and national affairs, and they listened to speakers on a variety of topics. During this time, the organization continued to be a charitable association providing food and funds to needy individuals and institutions throughout the community.

In 1990 Mayor Robert Bercik and the Common Council of the City of Whiting declared April 22, 1990 – April 28, 1990 General Federation of Women's Clubs Centennial Week. In the official proclamation a history of the federation is outlined. It goes on to state: "Through the years, the General Federation of women's Clubs has been a leading advocate and proponent of such advances as freedom of women from legal and social constraints, conservation of natural resources, child labor laws, equal rights and responsibilities for women, consumer protection and education, world understanding and international cooperation, safety and health in the workplace, alcohol and drug abuse treatment, governmental reform and the safeguarding of worker rights to individual dignity and expression."

And Whiting's Woman's Club was no exception. For over 100 years the organization made positive and practical contributions through their many volunteer efforts. They contributed significantly to the civic, cultural, educational, and social betterment of the Whiting community. Although the names may have changed on the roster lists, the character of its membership never did. The women who served the Whiting Woman's Club "exemplified the highest standards of citizenship, concern for humankind, and spirit of renewal that has continued to build upon our nation's proud heritage and cultural legacy."

The following lyrics are from the Fortnightly Club's song and they pretty much describe the origin and purpose of the organization's founding:

If from Chicago a trail you will take, To the southwest edge of the Lake,  
You'll soon come to a place called Whiting town, It's a Standard Oil city of renown.  
'Tis wrongly named, for the dirt and smoke, Make housework far from a joke;  
But to take our minds away from our task, We have a club in our town that's growing fast.

And we're for music and art, Yes we're for music and art, And everybody tries to do her part. It's the way we have of learning, As the wheels of time keep turning,  
And fate writes us as a "has been" in his chart. We study music and art,  
We study music and art, For it holds a great big corner in our heart.  
Masters gain our affection, As we strive to reach perfection.  
So here's to our music and art.