

Excerpts from the History of the Woman's Club of Washington University

As written for the 90th Anniversary Celebration, May 4th, 2001, by Magdalin M. Szabo

Founded 1910

1910-1919 was a decade that saw the sinking of an “unsinkable” ocean liner, an uprising in Ireland, a world war, the race to the south pole, the fight for female suffrage, the Russian Revolution...and the organization of the Woman's Club of Washington University.

The Woman's Club of Washington University was organized on December 5, 1910, due indirectly to the reorganization of the Medical School, which was made after Abraham Flexner surveyed it and suggested changes. Part of the change was to invite men with already proven reputations to add to the prestige of the Medical School. Hence, the first invited five men were: Dr. George Dock, Dr. Joseph Erlanger, Dr. Philip Shaffer, Dr. Eugene Opie and Dr. Howland. The faculty was growing rapidly and soon the wives of Medical School professors felt something must be done for the newcomers. Previously, faculty had been small enough for everyone to know everyone, as new members were entertained at numerous small dinner parties. Hence, the idea of a club evolved. Mrs. Erlanger, Mrs. Shaffer and Mrs. Houston met with a committee in the British Pavilion, which was built for the 1904 World's Fair, approximately where the Fine Arts building stands today. The Club was hence organized with Mrs. D.F. Houston as temporary chairman and Mrs. George Dock, wife of the Dean of the Medical School as the first president. A Nominating Committee of 5 members presented the following names for officers: Mrs. W.W. Keysore for Vice Chairman (School of Law), Mrs. W.E. McCourt for Secretary (Department of Geology) and Mrs. T.J. Riley for Treasurer. There were 108 charter members.

Washington University at that time displayed none of its regal oaks and shrubbery, but was surrounded by farmland and pastures. The large Ames Farm bordered the campus on its north side between Melville and Big Bend.

The first meeting was held on Monday, January 9th, 1911 in the gymnasium of McMillan Hall, with an attendance of 50 women, some arriving by carriage, but most arriving by streetcar to a campus where the view was not obstructed by houses anywhere on Forsyth or Skinker.

The constitution stated that the purpose of the Club was solely for social intercourse. Dues were set at one dollar.

Jump to 1918...war time...

In April, 1918 the annual meeting was not held. Instead, the Club donated \$25 to the St Louis Chapter of the American Red Cross. On August 8th, the Club presented the stationed soldiers

with a flag at ceremonies held at Francis Field, followed by a dance with financial support for the entertainment by the members of the Washington University Executive Board.

In October 1918, The Club voted to continue efforts to help the soldiers stationed at Washington University, and to use the entertainment funds for these soldiers and wounded soldiers in area hospitals. With the cooperation of the University's Community Services Department, Chancellor Hall designated a room on campus to be used as a recreation room under the auspices of the Woman's Club. The Club decided to start a sewing/mending group to replace the regular meetings as a show of support for the soldiers and attend to their needs during this period. Morning and afternoon sewing units were formed, which met for Monday sessions, to sew for the Society for French Wounded.

Jump to 1960-69...the decade saw mini-skirts, flower power, pop music, the Civil Rights movement, and China's Cultural Revolution.

1960-61 was the Golden Anniversary Year of the Club. The event to celebrate this milestone was held in the Lounge of the Woman's Building on November 4th with a Dessert Tea where charter members and newcomers were honored. Betty Hinchey's Club History was read by Elsie Langsdorf and brought back many memories and made for a nostalgic afternoon. The Club enjoyed the largest membership to date that year, with 388 paying members. The special project for the year was compiling and publishing favorite recipes, ready for a December publication. Mrs. John Enloe, Financial Secretary for the Cookbook project, reported that 675 books were sold at the initial offering.

... On October 7th, 1963 the Garden Section of the Woman's Club was organized by Mrs. Pierre Honnell, then First Vice President. The meetings were well attended by hopeful gardeners eager to receive advice from local landscape artists, the Missouri Botanical Garden and the Westover Nursery.

At the close of 1963, the membership was 458, with the Executive Board numbering 25. Annual contributions to the Olin Library were started in memory of former members.

At the final executive board meeting of the fiscal year 1964-65, it was decided that women who have been members for 50 years, automatically become Honorary Life Members and not be required to pay dues. Membership was now at 429, with 45 honorary members.

International Neighbors section came into being in November 1964 with the help of Mrs. Eliot, with Pamela Stewart as chairman. It was the goal to call upon and visit as many of the wives from overseas as possible, with an offer of friendship, language help and anything else necessary.

Jump to the 1980's...the yuppies appeared, AID's began, superpowers ruled, the green movement began, and the Cold War came to an end.

In general 1984-85 was spent almost entirely preparing for the Club's 75th Anniversary Celebration. The primary emphasis was to honor the Woman's Club for its long presence on the campus. Since the Board directed the Celebration Committee to raise funds for a gift to the University, three main fund-raising activities were proposed: a) an historical house tour, co-chaired by Emilie Brandhorst and Ruth Selfridge, b) a Bazaar coordinated by Glenda Finnie and Lily Schwarzschild and c) a Dinner-Auction in Elizabeth Danforth's honor, chaired by Magdalin Szabo. The main event was held March 16th, 1985 at the new Sports Complex with 400 people attending. Marcia Bernstein, as chairman of the 75th Year Celebration Committee, coordinated the event which honored Elizabeth Danforth for her devotion and service to the Woman's Club. Over 75 women worked on the Auction which offered 115 items, donated by local vendors and Club members. A 75th anniversary quilt was designed by Fannie Marie Batt and Anne Nussbaum. Many women worked on this quilt throughout the year, which was the highlight at the raffle.

Following the close of the Silent Auction, a buffet dinner was served, after which Dina Feldman, Club President, gave the welcoming speech for Mrs. Danforth, followed by a slide show featuring highlights from Mrs. Danforth's life. Dancing in the new gym to the Galaxy Band was enjoyed by a sell-out crowd.

The Celebration netted over \$11,000 from the house tours, the bazaar, the Dinner Auction, the sale of food at the tour, the sale of tote bags and aprons, which bore the garland of flowers logo, designed by Mary Harford. The proceeds were deposited in a special university account from which the Club annually releases an amount as its donation to the Graham Chapel Assembly Series Lecture Fund.

In 1990-91 the Executive Board approved two new changes. The first, that it was to allow membership to women not affiliated with Washington University, who would be sponsored by active Club members in good standing, and second, that a Scholarship would be established.

On October 10th, 1996 the Butterfly Garden was formally dedicated when Ibby Danforth unveiled a plaque which read "Ibby's Garden." Ninety-nine people attended the reception, chaired by Millie Kaufman, in the McDowell home, with Sue Taylor and student Elizabeth McDouell providing harp and cello music.