

WOMEN'S EDUCATIONAL AND INDUSTRIAL UNION
1893-1943

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By
Jeannette W. Huntington
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Written for the Fiftieth anniversary celebration

1943

Woman's Educational and Industrial Union, 1893-1943*By Miss Jeannette W Huntington (1943)*

We are today celebrating a birthday, the fiftieth birthday of the Woman's Educational and Industrial Union. It is pleasant and profitable to look back over the records of these fifty years from the founding of this organization until now, when we have arrive at a hale and hearty middle age. Mrs. Barth has given you a picture of our present activities; I am going to ask you to delve with me into the annals of the past.

In April, 1893, the Ignorance Club held a meeting, with Dr. Sarah Dolley, the first woman of New York State to receive a medical degree, presiding. The meeting was called to consider the formation of a federation of women's clubs. We can be certain that among those present were Susan B. Anthony, her sister Mary, Mrs. Gannett, and Mrs. Jane Marsh Parker (who wrote the history of Rochester) -- all active members of the Ignorance Club. They invited some ladies from Buffalo to come down to describe the activities of their Woman's Union, and they gave such a vivid and interesting account of the part this organization was playing in the civic life of Buffalo that the meeting was filled with enthusiasm. Discarding their plan for women's clubs, the members of the Ignorance Club thereupon drew up an outline for our Woman's Educational and Industrial Union, and all was prepared to take up active work the following fall.

Among the charter members of the Board were Mrs. William A. Montgomery, Mrs. Joseph Alling, Mrs. M. T. L. Gannett, Mrs. William H. Perkins, Mrs. William Eastwood, Mrs. Horace Hooker, Mrs. F. F. Dow, Mrs. Henry G. Danforth, Mrs. S. H. Linn,

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Mrs. Forbes, Mrs. Porter Farley, Mrs. Oscar Craig, Mrs. Max Landsberg, Mrs. John Hopkins, and Mrs. Simon Stern. Shortly afterward, Mrs. Charles Dodge was included as a member of the Board. The first officers were president, Mrs. Montgomery; vice-president, Mrs. William H. Perkins, Mrs. William Eastwood, and Mrs. Max Landsberg; recording secretary, Mrs. Dow, who held that office for thirty years or more; corresponding secretary, Mrs. Joseph O'Connor; treasurer, Mrs. J. B. M. Warner. Mrs. Warner's granddaughter, Mrs. Long, was elected today, the newest member of our Board.

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During the next winter, Mrs. Don Alonzo Watson loaned the Board her large house on North Clinton Street. There the members held their meetings and gave their lectures. They also used the Chamber of Commerce, then situated in the Commerce Building on Main Street, as a meeting place. It was also in the Watson House that Miss Marian Wright, chairman of the Philanthropy Committee, opened a lunch room and noon rest for working girls. In those days lectures and visiting speakers were not so common in Rochester as they are today, and Mrs. Hooker and her Educational Committee of fifty, brought speakers from out of town to discourse on matters connected not only with the schools but also with a wide variety of subjects, ranging from talks on the need of kindergartens and diet kitchensto Dr. Strong's discourse on "The Philosophical and Religious views of Robert Browning."

During the winter of 1895-96, a most interesting course of lectures was provided. Mrs. Montgomery spoke on current topics at every other meeting, and eminent citizens gave lectures on their special interests without compensation. Among the speakers were

Dr. Landsberg, Mr. Gannett, Dr. Goler, Mr. Dodge of the University, Dr. Taylor of the Brick Church, Dr. Barbour, and many others.

These lectures were open to the public, but later on the Board sponsored a course of lectures for their members and sold series tickets to others. Also, many public meetings were held and subjects of moment were discussed, not only by the women, but also by many men present.

In the president's report for 1896, Mrs. Montgomery lamented that there was much criticism of the schools but little visiting to find out what was going on. The Union, through Mrs. Hooker's Education Committee, decided to find out what could be done to improve the situation. A sub-committee made it its duty to visit the schools regularly and report their findings. This work was continued until comparatively recent times, when it became unnecessary owing to the work of the Parent Teachers Association and other factors. Reluctantly and after much discussion, the Commissioners of Education took the bold venture of allowing the Union to introduce the teaching of sewing in four schools for a certain number of hours a week at their own expense. In due time, when it appeared that the entire school curriculum was not disrupted by such a dangerous innovation, the Union was allowed, again at their own expense, to introduce manual training. At the same time as the school rooms were painted in dull drab colors, the Union decorated one room in bright and cheerful colors as an example. Through the Union's Art Committee, with Mrs. Hall as chairman, they presented copies of good pictures, which adorn the school buildings today.

The Union felt that it was unfortunate during the long summer vacations for many children to have no other place to play than on the streets, so they established one playground and provided seeds for gardens at home and in the school yards. In the fall,

exhibitions were held and prizes presented. With the financial assistance of the Jewish women, Columbia School, and private subscriptions, the Union opened a vacation school with Mrs. Porter Farley, the active head, providing a six-weeks course, which included a weekly excursion to the lake. In 1905 this activity was taken over by the Board of Education. The cost to the Union of carrying on these vacation schools in two schools had amounted to a little less than one thousand dollars. The necessity for school nurses was clear, so the Union provided two nurses until that provision was also taken over by the Board of Education.

Before the Dow law went into effect in 1900, the school board was composed of a member from every ward in the city, numbering twenty, all elected on a purely political basis, riddled with politics, not free from corruption, and unwieldy at best. Eventually some members of the board itself felt that there should be a radical reform in the whole situation; hence, a committee was formed, with Dr. F. F. Dow, husband of Mrs. Dow, who has been our secretary for so many years, as chairman. It can be imagined the bitter struggle put up by the wards threatened with loss of place and patronage. There was a Men's good Government organization, which backed the committee, and the Woman's Union entered vigorously into the fray and worked and talked and exerted every effort in support of the committee. The bill was finally drawn, and with the approval of Mr. Aldridge, the legislature passed it in 1898, authorizing the change in the city charter, a necessary preliminary. In 1899 the first amendment reduced the number of the board to five, which is the present number, to be elected for a term of four years by the entire city. In 1901, a second amendment was passed, which stated that each member

receive a salary of twelve thousand dollars a year.

The first Board of Education under the new law took office in 1900. Mrs. Montgomery was one of the five members of the Board, the first woman school commissioner. Mr. Forbes served as president part of that term and then Mr. Andrew Townson. He confessed that when Mrs. Montgomery talked too long, he stepped on her toes. Mrs. Gregory succeeded Mrs. Montgomery, and when she resigned before the expiration of her term, Mr. Aldridge asked all the women's organizations in town whom they would recommend as her successor. The Woman's Union recommended their president, Mrs. Danforth, and she was appointed and elected at the end of the term. Mrs. Danforth held the position of school commissioner for twelve years, during six of which she served as president. Mrs. Rachel Lee, present commissioner, was a member of our board and our secretary until comparatively recently. With three members of our board serving, we can feel we have been well represented.

The Legal Protection Committee, the forerunner of the present Legal Aid, with Mrs. Oscar Craig chairman, was established primarily to assist women and girls who might need help and advice about such matters as collection of wages due them, chattel mortgages, or any other small matter. The Committee met twice a month and heard the troubles of their clients. They were often able to compose matters themselves, as in the case of the washer woman who was unable to collect two dollars due her for two days work. If they needed actual legal advice, they had some of the best legal ability of the city at their service, such as Elbridge Adams, Isaac Adler, J. Warrant Castleman, B. B. Chase, Nelson Spencer, James S. Havens, and Frank Macomber. They also had an Advisory Board, consisting of The Hon. Theodore Bacon, The Hon. Thomas Raines,

Judge George F. Danforth, and the Hon. William A. Butherland. Later on, Frederick W. Oliver and George Van Schaik (afterward superintendent of insurance in New York State and current president of the New York Life Insurance Company) did much work for them. The legal profession has always been good to the Union. When we were buying our present building on North Street, Mr. Ernest Whitbeck guided us through our legal problems.

The work of the Committee grew and increased until they were obliged to hire desk space and employ a part-time attorney. They carried on until they became the Legal Aid Society, when it was taken over by the Community Chest. It now has well-equipped offices and employs several attorneys under the able executive secretary, Mr. Brownell. Each year they present a report of thousands of cases. It is their policy that a member of the Women's Union should be one of their Board.

During the depression years, 1915-1916, the Union opened a shop on St. Paul Street, where women could sew. Although they were paid a small wage, they made all kinds of garments, which they might buy themselves for a small price or were sold to people sent by the social agencies. Being run on a business basis, there were a few paid employees: a cutter and a forewoman to oversee the sewing. Each member of the Committee had a day at the shop. Many people gave generous sums of money. Kodak contributed one thousand dollars. The shop bought all their supplies wholesale from various department stores, Mrs. Miner being the buyer. Once when there was an emergency and cloth was needed immediately, she went across to Sibley's to buy some, and was just starting back with several large bolts of cloth under her arms when she met Mr. Townson, who said, "Mrs. Miner, where in the world are you going?" She must have looked quite small to carry such a heavy bundle. After a small

he said, "I'll take them from you. I started as a bundle boy you know."

The shop was not very well ventilated, but Dr. Goler told them moving bad air was better than stagnant air, so they procured a fan and kept it stirring. They instituted and supported Theodora House, a home for problem girls, under the chairmanship of Mrs. H(?) , until it was taken over by the Children's Service Bureau. The industrial work shops were originally connected with the "Little House" and dealt solely with victims of tuberculosis. When the shops wished to broaden their work to provide occupational therapy and rehabilitation for those incapacitated by all varieties of troubles, the Union contributed eight hundred dollars a year until they, too, were taken over by the Community Chest. Through the shop we also paid for a part-time therapist at the County Hospital and Home.

The County Buildings Committee was established under the chairmanship of Mrs. J. B. M. Warner, with Mrs. Fish, an able and active member. They visited the jail, penitentiary, County Home, and other institutions. Early in their career, they found that the accommodations for women and girls in the jail, where the prisoners sometimes spent six months waiting to be called for trial, consisted of one room where they slept, as well as spent their days in idleness. Next door to the women's room was the so-called murderers' row, which was the habitation of any one accused of murder and awaiting trial. Fortunately, this room was rarely occupied. It seemed to the Committee that that space could^{be}/much more profitably employed as a dormitory for the women. Mrs. Warner and Mrs. John Steol called upon Mr. Aldridge and explained the situation to him, and in a few days the cells were pulled out, the murderers, if any, removed, and the women had their dormitory. The Committee saw that they were provided with a ping

pong table, articles of sewing, and a victrola. The latter came to an unfortunate and violent end, when one of the inmates, possibly overcome by sheer boredom, smashed it against the wall.

Earlier, the Union, in connection with another organization, brought about the appointment of a police woman, Mrs. Nellie MacElroy; and when it was felt a second police woman was needed, the County Institutions Committee, by hard work was able to prevent the appointment of a thoroughly unsuitable political appointment and see that their own candidate, Miss Rose Knobles the present incumbent, take the place. A successful employment bureau under the chairmanship of Mrs. Rachel Lee continued until taken over intact by the State Employment Bureau.

The Children's Memorial Scholarship Fund, in memory of the public school boys who served in the First World War, was established in 1919 on the first anniversary of Armistice Day. This fund provides scholarships for able students who could not otherwise continue their education and to help others who would be obliged to leave school and go to work. The school children bring their gifts each year. During a period of years the Union contributed a sum amounting to thirteen hundred dollars to this fund, a portion of which was in memory of Mrs. Porter Farley, who had labored so hard and ably for the schools.

One hundred dollars was given to the endowment fund of the Community Chest, in memory of Mrs. John Hopkins. We contributed one thousand dollars to the Bureau of Municipal Research.

The sum of one thousand dollars was appropriated to found the Danforth Eyeglass Fund in recognition of Mrs. Danforth's services on the Board of Education. This was to be divided proportionately between the public and parochial schools to provide borderline cases with glasses. It was administered by the school re-

ferral bureau. The schools have now taken over the providing of glasses on a loan basis, but the Danforth Fund still carries on with a small budget. It provides glasses for unusual cases which are outside of the school's possibility to help. One of the last cases reported was the unlucky boy who broke so many glasses that his family could provide no more. Since he could not see without them, the Danforth Fund stepped in and made it possible for him to continue with his education.

Voluntary Defender

In the county court a defendant without means to employ a lawyer is assigned one by the judge, but not in the city court, nor in the police court. The Union felt that here was a need, so they established the office of Voluntary Defender, paid a lawyer to attend to the needs of those in police court, and to extend his services to occupants of the jail or the penitentiary. The defender proved his usefulness and was later turned over to the Legal Aid to be administered by them. Mr. Brownell tells me that when the judge finds a case in need of a lawyer he applies to him, and the Legal Aid assigns one of several lawyers they have on call to fulfill that duty. They have on an average about one case a week.

The Shop

Mrs. Fanny Bigelow was the originator of our Opportunity Shop and its presiding genius until her death. She has had our admiration and our love. Generous, open-minded, and just, Mrs. Bigelow has never allowed her zeal for good works to cloud her judgment. Any committee wishing money for a just and adequate cause could always count on Mrs. Bigelow to favor their request. When business was bad at the shop and the exchequer low, she was never discouraged. "It will be all right," she would say, and it always was.

The members of the Board were not all fired with enthusiasm immediately when she suggested that the shop deal in cast offs, waste paper, and scraps. Possibly they had a picture of themselves driving a horse and cart about town to collect their stock in trade. Her idea was accepted, however, but the question of the needed capital arose.

So Mrs. Bigelow and Mrs. Leonard Bacon made an appointment with Mr. George Eastman. They were to see him at six o'clock at his house. He was detained by business, and there they waited, their courage oozing out as time went on, leaving them more and more depressed. An hour later, he appeared, and Mrs. Bigelow, in five minutes without an unnecessary word, outlined their plan for the shop. He listened, not uttering a word or question, and then he said, "How much do you want, a thousand dollars? And where shall I send the check? To Anna Hubbell?" She was our treasurer at that time, as well as of every other organization in town. "I would do anything for Anna Hubbell," he declared. So the matter being closed, they thanked and assured him that the money would be repaid. Both Mrs. Bigelow and Mrs. Bacon thought he looked a little dubious as they said goodbye; but the money was repaid, every cent of it.

The articles that have been presented to the shop are various and amazing. We have had a full-grown steel safe, some beautiful and valuable Japanese prints, a large old Bible, which is supposed to have belonged to one of George Washington's circle, and a beautiful large ivory elephant. Our last acquisition comprises a complete Punch and Judy Show. We had all the prerequisites of other shops, shop lifters included. One man doffed his own coat, substituted a better one of ours, and when Mr. Andrews pounced

upon him as he was leaving, he dropped the new coat and escaped with none.

During the time we were situated on Andrews Street, we often had to cope with broken windows. We were at a strategic point for a weary gentleman wending his way to the rescue mission, just across the river, to lean for support too heavily against our windows and break through with disastrous results; or a neighbor might be tempted by our window display and smash it, helping himself to the article inside.

The shop has had to move several times. When we found it was necessary for us to leave the Andrews Street building, we were quite reluctant to do so, since it was situated in the midst of the shopping district and since we realized how difficult it was to find a place suitable for our business; but we bought the building where we now are located. And when the dream came true of owning a home of our own, what could have been more appropriate than to name it The Bigelow Memorial Building. Our many friends contributed freely to the building fund in memory of Mrs. Bigelow, and Mrs. Katz has been very generous to us.

My wish and hope for the future of the Union is that it may always be a force to be reckoned with in the community; that it may have imagination and clear-sightedness to see what needs to be done and energy and determination to attack the problem and put it through; and that it may have the clear understanding and common sense to keep its feet well upon the ground.



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