

IOWA CITY

The first local League in Iowa was founded in Iowa City in March 1920, and it was called the Johnson County League of Women Voters. It followed by one month the convention in Chicago at which the national women's suffrage association disbanded and the infant National League of Women Voters took over.

Prime mover in organizing the League in Iowa City was Dr. Zella White Stewart, a prominent physician and wife of a distinguished physicist. She was attending hospital clinics in Chicago in February 1920 when she met some friends who were attending the Suffrage-League convention. Urged by her friends she attended a session and become so absorbed that she stayed on; and she came back to Iowa City with the ambition to organize a League.

Dr. Stewart found willing cooperation in a group which already had organized a citizenship school here, and soon the Johnson County League was formed with Mrs. Frank Stromsten as its first president. Besides Mrs. Stromsten and Dr. Stewart some of the women who aided in forming the new League were Mrs. Carl E. Seashore, Mrs. Stephen Swisher, Mrs. Max Mayer, Mrs. John Reynolds, Mrs. Mabel Volland, and Mrs. Charles Baker. Another early leader, who moved to town shortly, was Mrs. George Martin.

The women continued the citizenship schools and extended them to various communities in the county for the purpose of showing women how to use their new voting rights and to give them courage to use them.

The quarterly Johnson County League Bulletin was started in October 1922. The bulletin was financed by advertising, and the early issues went into every home in Johnson County free. Beginning in 1924 the masthead carried, "Subscription rate, two cents a copy." Member's dues in the twenties were 25 cents a year.

Included in early bulletins are an explanatory article on the direct primary with a warning of a move in Iowa to repeal or harmfully amend it; an appeal for a yes vote on a constitutional amendment to allow women to serve in the state legislature; a list of changes in election laws; information on voter registration and absentee voting.

Abulletin carried a report on the percentage of registered voters in Iowa City who had voted in the previous two elections-64% compared with 55% for the nation. At this time the League aims were headlined; "Every voter an informed voter; every voter patriotically voting." In 1923 the League offered the services of a Speakers' Bureau and sent 16 Johnson County League members to the forth annual national League convention in Des Moines. In 1926 the League published its first Voter's Guide, based on interviews with candidates. It was the beginning of the "Know your Candidates" series which has continued today.

In the late twenties the Johnson County League changed its name to the League of women Voters of Iowa City. At that time the League campaigned for permanent registration in Iowa City, which was accomplished in 1930. It was an early example of the Voter Service, which has remained a prominent part of the Iowa City Leagues work.

During World War II Leaguers rang practically every doorbell in town to make a housing syrvey, a project in which the League was involved when it was repeated in the 1960's.

In 1947 the League wrote and distributed countrywide a community-financed voters' handbook. "That's Where Our Money Goes." A sequel is "Know Your Johnson County" handbook published in 1963, which will be updated and printed soon.

Also in 1947 the League began a study of forms of city government, later drawing community leaders into a consideration of the Council-Manager plan. It declared itself for this plan and took an active part in the campaign which ended with the adoption of Council-Manager government in 1950. In 1966 the League campaigned vigorously to help defeat a proposed measure to return the city to Mayor-Council government.

The 1950's saw the first of a series of election workers schools sponsored by the League. They had study and action programs on recreation, public health and other local matters.

The roster of League leaders is extensive and impressive. Five from Iowa City have served as state presidents; Mrs. Max Mayer, 1923-24; Mrs. Martin, 1926-30; Mrs. Stromsten, 1930-33; Mrs. Homer Cherrington, 1933-35; and Mrs. E.L. DeGowin, 1946-48.

Our growth is assured so we face without fears

The prospect of working for fifty more years.

By: Mae Hutchinson Carol Svec Mary McCray

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