



Learning a Women's Politics: Women's Voluntary Organizations In Vermont

by Karen Madden

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, some women in Vermont were working in formal suffrage associations toward the goals of political enfranchisement, while other women were attempting to influence the political process through the formation of local, state, and national volunteer organizations centered on improving the lives of women and children. Anne Scott summarized women's entry into this public world of politics through their work in voluntary organizations by noting that women formed voluntary associations to help shape their communities because they were constrained by law and custom from entering the formal political system. She argued that these networks served as political training grounds. Other scholars have also used this network to explore how women learned to conduct business, carry on meetings, speak in public and manage money, skills that helped prepare them for politics,

first indirectly, then directly as they gained the vote. These women's organizations thus served not only as political training grounds for women but, in the post-suffrage era, shaped political opinion and mobilized women to vote.

In Vermont, particularly rural areas, women's voluntary organizations originated as early as the 1810s with religious and charitable groups organized through churches. Other women were involved in maternal societies, temperance, and antislavery groups. During the Civil War, women's organizations were shaped around soldiers' aid societies and with the growth of small cities, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, Women's Relief Corps, and women's clubs focusing on beautification, schools, and self-improvement.

In Burlington in 1861, women joined together in support of Vermonters fighting in the Civil War. The women provided items such as shirts, underwear, towels, sewing kits, and bibles for youth serving in Vermont units. Further, the women organized sewing bees and collected food for soldiers' picnics.

A number of women in Vermont were part of a nationwide effort to control alcohol manufacture, sale, and consumption through involvement in the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Women marched through the streets of their towns and visited saloons, they organized crusades declaring to their promise to remove the temptation of alcohol, and they attended national conferences such as the one in Cleveland, Ohio in 1874. Although their efforts did not result in a significant reduction in alcohol use, they did develop effective field work skills and learned how to speak in public.

An example of a women's club originally organized around self-improvement was the Athena Club which began in Burlington, Vermont in 1906. However, by 1907, emulating women nationwide, the women of the club soon decided to expand their concern into community affairs. In 1913, club members organized and

maintained a new service in the city of Burlington, the first public restroom for women in the downtown area. Their idea was to provide women open access to the downtown business area.

In another example, in 1917, club members established a new community organization, the Women's Protective League, to provide children with a better education and to support changes in labor laws regarding women and children. The women of the club also were instrumental in the 1918 decision to hire the first female police officer in the Burlington Police Department.

Women throughout Vermont, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were working in their communities to not only improve the lives of women and children, but to shape the development of community efforts. Through their work in voluntary associations, they were able to shape community policy, aid in war efforts, as well as shape policy on issues such as alcohol, education, and social policy.